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Foot-binding in Neo-Confucian China and the Appropriation of Female Labor

C. Fred Blake

THIS ARTICLE interprets foot-binding in Neo-Confucian China as a voluntary ordeal undertaken by mothers to inform their daughters of how to succeed in a world authored by men. The ordeal entailed an exchange between mothers and daughters on many levels. Outwardly, it informed a daughter of the necessity of sacrificing the products of her body in service to the Neo-Confucian family system. Inwardly, the ordeal embodied for a woman—at the deepest level of her being—the lived memory of her mother. In foot-binding women both supported and subverted the Neo-Confucian way of being civilized.

Most of the writing on foot-binding in China highlights its erotic aspect. The only comprehensive work in English, *Chinese Footbinding: The History of a Curious Erotic Custom* by Howard Levy (1966), follows and reaffirms the traditional notion that foot-binding was a feminine mystique designed to please men.¹ This notion provided grist for theories of human behavior, notably those of Thorstein Veblen and Sigmund Freud. Veblen ([1899] 1934) cited foot-binding as an example of conspicuous waste in which women surrendered their usefulness as a gesture to signify status in a male world. Freud ([1927] 1961) held that by mutilating their feet, women allayed the castration anxieties of men. Among more recent interpreters, Mary Daly (1978) cites foot-binding as an example of female victimhood in the grip of patriarchy, while Patricia Ebrey (1990) seeks an explanation in the Song dynasty reconstruction of

¹ Howard Levy's book (1966) remains the principal English-language source of historical materials on foot-binding. Levy's work draws on translations from Yao Ling-hsi's edited work, *Cai Fei Lu* (1936). This work contains a wide range of writings on foot-binding that Yao collected and published during the period of anti-foot-binding campaigns. Many of these materials are presented without an explicit historical or regional context. Most of the data on foot-binding that I have found come from uncontextualized observations or materials collected during the period when the custom was under strong attack and in rapid decline.

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gender, which aimed to accentuate the contrast between the genteel Chinese and their uncouth northern rivals. In Ebrey's view, foot-binding made women even more delicate, reticent, and stationary than they already were to allow men to refine themselves without seeming too "effeminate."

Each of these interpretations offers insight into the nature of foot-binding, but they also beg some crucial questions. For instance, how was this custom enforced in the everyday lives of women? Foot-binding was, after all, a discipline that required a constant vigilance not only during the initial stages of a little girl's coming of age but also through the better part of her adulthood. Also, what was the intended object of this discipline? The traditional interpretations beg the question of how these economies of male desire (for sexual diversion, domination, and social status) related to the economies of female work. Foot-binding was not simply a fashion marking the leisured life of "upper-class" women. Foot-bound women labored in biological reproduction; depending on historical, regional, and family circumstance, many labored also in economic production. The physical labor women provided requires us to rethink the relationship between the more or less systematic mutilation of women's feet during the past millennium and the recruitment of their bodies into a particular system of economic production and reproductive activity.

In seeking answers to these questions I adopt the three-dimensional model of the "mindful body" suggested by medical anthropologists Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock (1987). This model urges us to begin with the "mindful" nature of our lived bodies—in the case at hand, to comprehend foot-binding as the advent of a "feminine" self-consciousness. From this initial angle, we see foot-binding as a protracted discipline that mothers brought to bear upon their daughters in the name of a mother's love and a daughter's virtue. Both mother and daughter turned the brute resistance of a little girl's body into a body mindful of its fate in a world of sacrifice and duty and mindful as well of its ability to exercise control over itself and others. The embodiment of a self-consciousness also presupposes a discourse community in which the body is objectified, in this case as a thing of feminine mystery. As a rhetoric of gender, foot-binding became the critical moment in the historical domination of women's bodies by "man made language" (to borrow from Spender [1980]). Foot-binding entailed intense, protracted physical pain, and, according to Elaine Scarry (1985, 4), "whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language." If this painful discipline between mothers and daughters became a "tradition," it was represented and recorded almost entirely in the male voice. I will argue that foot-binding was the muted voice of women in contention with the dominant discourse

of Neo-Confucian values and definitions of reality. Or, to paraphrase Karl Marx ([1885] 1968, 97), foot-binding was a world that women made, but they did not make it under circumstances they themselves chose.

This suggests in the final analysis that the mindful body, an object of discourse, is also an object of incorporation or, in the words of Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987), a "body politic." The body politic of foot-binding was its relationship to the historical system of production and reproduction during the late imperial period from the tenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century. Foot-binding was a mechanism for recruiting women's bodies into a labor-intensive economy by capturing their "uterine power" to reproduce biological units of labor but also by commandeering their "labor power" to produce economic goods. It facilitated what Hill Gates (1989) calls the "commoditization of Chinese women" in which the products of women's labor were appropriated by male kinsmen in the patriarchal family system. Foot-binding was an integral part of that family system, and although it was a symbol of the leisured classes to which people in all walks of life generally aspired, it did not necessarily exempt women from participation in the system of economic production. Foot-binding simply changed the terms of that participation such that the labor women contributed was veiled by a mystique of women as sexual and maternal but otherwise worthless.

The embodied self and the management of space

Gender differences are not only biologically determined, culturally constructed, or politically imposed, but also ways of living in a body and thus of being in the world. The existential condition of living in a body mediates our perceptual experience of the world (see Merleau-Ponty 1986). Perceptual experience is fundamentally spatial in nature if for no other reason than that our bodies are situated in space. This sense of space in which we feel and perceive our bodies to be located, extending into, and moving through is fundamental to our ability to perceive a world and embody a self. The spatial underpinning of our existence is simply taken for granted until our bodies are impaired and we are forced to reorganize our senses and the way we perceive the world. Foot-binding radically modified the bodily means by which a person perceived, experienced, and extended herself into the world. Radical and painful reduction in the size of the foot just as the foot was growing and extending a little girl's body into space brought the girl face-to-face with the spatial underpinning of her world.

For little girls whose feet were bound, the ground of perceptual experience was radically restructured beginning between the ages of five and seven. The period of trauma and enforced discipline generally lasted until

she was between thirteen and fifteen. In Western terms this is the period of latency when the child, having experienced a sense of finality in its libidinal attachment to mother, begins the transition into the discipline of the social world (Erikson 1963, 258). Chinese do not, however, conceptualize discreet stages of development linked to any one particular organic or cognitive agency.² Also, the domestic discipline of little girls could begin earlier than five or six depending on the material disposition of the family or the whim of particular parents. Chinese, nevertheless, recognize that around the age of five or six, the child's ability "to understand things" (*dongshi*) is sufficient for the child to begin in earnest the discipline of the mindful body. The Confucian tradition refers to this discipline as *xiushen*, literally "to cultivate the body," or, in the words of Tu Wei-Ming (1990), "to become one's body."

The Confucian body is not a discrete somatic object. It does not pose a world in terms of a radical or epistemological otherness. The Confucian body is rather a focal point of relationships centered around the primary relationship between parents and child. The child's ability "to understand things" presupposes a "body" that is inherently "mindful" of others beginning with its parents. In recognizing the moral significance of its most intimate others, however, the child begins to cultivate its "mindful body" as the basis of its relationship to less intimate others and the world at large. (In Chinese this innate capacity to be mindful of others is referred to as *ren*.) Both little girls and little boys experienced the awakening consciousness to the moral significance of others as a definite transition into the discipline of becoming their mindful bodies. The discipline of the mindful body facilitated a serious program of instruction in the Neo-Confucian fundamentals of industry and virtue.

For a little boy between the ages of five and seven, the discipline required that he relinquish the indulgence of his mother's world in order to embody the world of his father. Where the material means of the family allowed separate living quarters, this often entailed the physical removal of a boy from the interior rooms of his mother to the outer rooms of his father (Levy 1968, 75; Ko 1992). His father's world was anchored in the power of Neo-Confucian texts and genealogy that, with state sanction, formed the foundation of the family, the ancestral hall,

² Although the body is not controlled by a discrete organic or cognitive mechanism, it is nonetheless composed of functions that are centered in certain "organs," the most central of which is "heart." According to Thomas Ots, "The dominant philosophical traditions of Confucianism, Neo-Confucianism, and Daoism view the heart (*xin*) as the governing organ and the seat of the mind, and that is supposed to control the organs and the emotions" (1990, 26). Ots quickly adds, however, that the Chinese notion of *xin* does not separate the somatic function of the organ from its emotional feelings. In Mark Elvin's view, *xin* is best translated as "heart-mind" (Elvin 1989). I prefer "heart-edness" or, even more precisely, the "mindful heart."

and the school. This outer world invested power in mastery of the word, first the spoken word, later the written word. Resistance to the power of the word could be answered with a sound beating, usually the first and most memorable beating in a little boy's life (Yang 1945, 203–4; Lin 1947, 52). "Fathers who used to be affectionate become distant, with a tendency to lecture" (Wolf 1972, 67). "The father assumes a more dignified attitude toward [his son] and is frequently severe" (Yang 1945, 58). Mothers were torn between their need to support the discipline of their sons and their desire to provide a refuge from the harshness of that discipline.³ The boy's experience at this age is described with such words as "abrupt," "bewildering," "drastic," "radical and painful" (Wolf 1970; Solomon 1972, 47). In these terms the boy's experience with his father was not unlike the little girl's experience with her mother.

Yet the experiences of little boys and little girls were fundamentally different. While little boys, having begun to discover their bodies in their mother's world, were suddenly constrained to rediscover their bodies from inside their father's world, little girls, sharing their mother's sense of embodied space, learned to embody a culturally defined orientation toward the relative otherness of the male world.⁴ Neo-Confucian thought was long on its demand that females become virtuous and industrious while bending to the will of male authority, but it was short on how this process of "becoming her body" should be accomplished.⁵ The process was left to the people, and by default to women, to figure out and act upon. Given the culturally exaggerated sense of a woman's body as me-

³ The large body of research on the Chinese family has emphasized the lifelong commitment and interdependency between mothers and sons. The special intensity of this relationship is clearly reflected in *The Twenty-Four Parables of Filial Piety*, in which more than a third of the parables tell how the son endured hardships to feed his mother and to nurture her in sickness (Solomon 1972, 33).

⁴ This is a modified version of Carol Gilligan's thesis on the ontology of gender identity in which she describes the female identity as rooted in ontological connection and the male identity as ontologically "separated" (Gilligan 1982). As I have already noted, however, the Confucian (and Neo-Confucian) culture does not posit masculine identity as ontologically unconnected. Neo-Confucian culture recognizes the ontological interconnectedness of all duality in the pervasive cosmic principle of *yinyang*. This includes "femaleness" and "maleness." It is entirely possible that because the act of foot-binding signified a significant degree of bodily separation and objectification it thereby called into question this cultural assumption of ontological connectedness and raised the problem of relationship to the world in its "otherness." Whether or not we posit this possibility, we need to respect the cultural basis for interpreting "otherness," and in China "otherness" was (and is) relative. Chinese culture does not assume a radical separation of substance or epistemological otherness.

⁵ The Neo-Confucian requirement that youngsters learn industry and virtue in the process of self-realization was conveyed in the words *cai* (talent) and *de* (virtue). Each informed and depended for its realization on the other. But the formula was much more attuned to the world of male education in that *cai* implied self-realization based on a morally informed ability to exercise power. The sense of industry that was supposed to inform the self-realization of women is best expressed in the word "skillful" (*qiao*). This word implies cleverness in the practical skills of manipulating the environment. The

diating space and given the cultural necessity that a woman properly orient her body—that is, bend it to the will of male authority—it is reasonable that a girl’s way of signifying her womanhood should be conceptualized in bending the organs that control space, spatial extension, and motion. Through the bending, twisting, and compressing of the feet, a girl’s sense of managing space was radically modified and a mother delivered her daughter into a world where “becoming one’s body” led to moral and spiritual self-improvement.

Entry into the social world required little girls and boys to develop a sense of industry aimed at some level of morally informed self-realization. But this is where the similarity between their experiences ended. Boys’ and girls’ modes of self-realization, of becoming their respective bodies in relationship to others, differed completely. The boy’s self-realization focused on the locutionary and literary power of the word. The girl’s self-realization required her not merely to become, but to “overcome her body” by restricting the space it filled. The difference was spelled out in proverbs like “Teng er bu teng xue, teng nu bu teng jiao” (If you care for your son, care not if he suffers in his studies; if you care for your daughter, care not if she suffers in her feet). The difference was dramatized in innumerable little ways. In the western part of Henan, for instance, a daughter having her feet bound might receive a writing brush from her mother. The writing brush was a powerful symbol of masculinity and the world of civil affairs. But unlike her brother, the little girl did not receive the brush with the hope that she might learn how to shape literary discourse. Instead, she grasped the “point” of the brush in the hope that her feet might acquire its “pointed” shape (Yao 1936, 2:61). Once her feet acquired the shape of the brush, she might give the pattern of her small shoe (now invested with the mystical power of her self-sacrifice) to the man in her life to use as a bookmark and an antidote against bookworms (Yao 1936, 1:65–66).

For purposes of binding, five to seven were the optimum years in a girl’s physical, mental, and social maturation. Her prepubescent bones were still flexible. She was at the age of understanding (*dongshi*) and could be made to appreciate the necessity of a bodily discipline that

“virtue” of women was coupled with admonishments to learn the practical skills needed for domestic life. Based on the ancient *Book of Rites*, these admonitions were elaborated and widely communicated in moral instruction books such as the *Nuer Jing* (Classic for girls), *Nu Jie* (Admonitions for women), and the *Lienu Juan* (Biographies of model women). See Ayscough 1937. By binding their feet, women far surpassed the insipid Neo-Confucian formula that restricted women’s “virtue” to learning practical domestic skills. Foot-binding put women’s embodiment of virtue (*de*) on par with the “power of virtue” implied in male “talent” (*cai*)—and, most important, it made the “power of virtue” entirely feminine! I believe this point is congruent with Dorothy Ko’s findings that among high elite families of the Ming-Qing period, some women were able to realize their talent in the world of literary discourse (Ko 1992).

entailed severe and protracted pain. Although largely filtered through male voices during the period when foot-binding was under attack, testimonies of foot-bound women attempted to find words for the kind of pain experienced in binding—burning, throbbing feet swallowing the body in fire—from severe traumas that created months, even years, of oozing sores, bandages stiff with dried pus and blood, and sloughed-off gobs of flesh.⁶ These accounts tell of girls losing appetites and sleep, running away, hiding, surreptitiously attempting to loosen their bandages, and enduring beatings while trying to comply with their mother's demands. But the girls were still at a tender enough age to retain the basic trust in the implicit goodness of their mother's intentions. The "tradition" could not have passed from mothers to daughters if not for mothers' credibility as "caring." The conundrum of a mother's care consciously causing her daughter excruciating pain is contained in a single word, *teng*, which in the proverb cited above refers to "hurting," "caring," or a conflation of both in the same breath. Chinese sometimes say of a parent beating a child, "Da shi teng, ma shi ai" (Beating is caring, scolding is loving). In the ordeal of foot-binding, the exchange of *teng* between a mother and daughter was highly reflexive. In his novel about a late nineteenth-century family of antique dealers, Feng Jicai (1986, 9) uses the word *teng* to describe the physical "pain" little Xiang Lian felt when her grandmother began binding her feet. Later in the same paragraph, he uses *teng* to refer to the conflation of "care" with "pain" that Xiang Lian began to perceive behind her grandmother's grim countenance.

Howard Levy (1966, 249–51) asked each of his elderly informants how she thought her mother felt when she first began binding her daughter's feet. Most recalled that their mothers showed no pity, but some recited the old refrain that a mother could not love both her daughter and her daughter's feet at the same time. By separating the mother's care for her daughter from the vessel of her daughter's worldly existence, the mother and daughter shifted their cares to a different order of conscious-

⁶ Levy 1966, 26–28, 210–41, cites a number of extended testimonies mostly from letters to the editor written by women or close male relatives during the anti-foot-binding campaigns; Yao Ling-hsi (1936) quotes published sources that describe the gruesome effects of foot-binding in graphic detail. One source describes how "some Beijing people," in an effort to shorten the process, "use roof tiles to cut the feet. . . . This induces softening, rotting, and sloughing of the flesh, a level of cruelty which few people can stand to watch" (Yao 1936, 1:9). In another case (Yao 1936, 2:59–63), a man tells the story of his wife's maid, a woman from western Henan, who began binding under her mother's direction at the age of seven but who at nine was sent to a neighboring village as a *tongyangxi* (adopted daughter-in-law) where her soon-to-be sister-in-law wrapped sharp fragments of roof tile in the bandages, tightened the bindings, and beat her. In the process one of her toes fell off. At fourteen she was married to her adopted "brother;" at which point she began to bind her own feet. Stories of binding under the supervision of female in-laws are generally remarkable for the cruelty they express.

ness. In the struggle with her mother over the painful, bloody, and terrifying labor of making the brute nature of her feet materialize into an object of beauty, mystery, and discipline, the daughter formed a new self-consciousness based outwardly on a sense of dependency and attachment to a male-dominated world and inwardly on an ability to exercise some control over her own destiny and that of the persons to whom she was attached.

Mothers constantly informed their daughters that binding was necessary in order to find a good family into which to marry. Mothers impressed upon their daughters that the mark of a woman's attraction resided more in her character as revealed in the bind of her feet than in the face or physique with which nature had endowed her. Her selection in marriage was the task of her prospective mother-in-law, whose criterion for a good daughter-in-law was the discipline that the bound foot represented (Pruitt 1967, 22). Concomitantly, binding was a matter of both families' reputations—or "face" in the Neo-Confucian contest for social status, which I will discuss. A daughter learned that she carried her family's reputation or face in the bind of her feet, and that her family's face, whether that of her own family or the one into which she married, belonged to the male heads.

A woman's dependency on her family was made manifest in her disabled feet. A popular saying was that in her lifetime, a woman leaned on three men, her father, her husband, and her son. But if a woman's bound feet made her appear weak and vulnerable and thus dependent on men, it also veiled her inner sense of managing those appearances and thus being able to exercise considerable control over herself and those to whom she was attached. The microcosm of her mindful body thus learned to mirror the organization of the family in which women (as *neiren* or "inside persons") managed the "internal" (*nei*) and "secret" (*si*) affairs of the domicile while men managed the "external" (*wai*) and "public" (*gong*) affairs of society. This separation of spheres, originally formulated in the ancient *Book of Rites*, was embedded in Neo-Confucian doctrine and the organization of daily life (Ko 1992).

Before she reached puberty, at around fourteen, the girl's severe bouts with pain subsided and she began to bind her feet without help from her mother. Her feet having achieved the desired proportion and shape, the young woman concentrated her attention on maintaining or even refining the bind of her feet in preparation for the ultimate payoff, marriage. The sexual design of the compressed foot, to which most of the literature on the subject is devoted, however, veils other aspects of its meaning. The years of pain and suffering—or, in the words of an old refrain, "the two cisterns of tears" a young woman shed around attempts to win control of her bodily space—ended as she entered the world of menstruation and

birthing. Foot-binding was a prelude to, even a preparation for, the sexual maturation of her body. In this sense, foot-binding helped her to “overcome her body” in two important ways.

First, in mastering her embodiment of space the young woman with bound feet became acutely attuned to the significance of exercising control over reproductive functions, which were both a threat to and highly valued by the male-dominated family system. Emily Ahern (1975) points out that because of their reproductive activities, Chinese women are constituted as a threat to social and cosmic order and therefore “powerful” and “dangerous.” In realizing her primary function of reproduction, the young woman transgressed critical social boundaries by the taint of uterine discharge and the introduction of her and her babies’ unfamiliar, unsocialized bodies into the family to which she was married. The products of her body—especially male infants—were highly valued. Even her menstrual blood was positively valued as a sign of regularity and fertility (Furth 1986). But because these bodily products tend to “disrupt” and thus to “defile” the established sense of familial order, they were also “dangerous” and subject to rigorous self-control.

Second, foot-binding prepared the young woman for the aggravation, pain, and dread associated with menstruation, sexual consummation, pregnancy, and birthing. The act of sexual consummation, which by custom took place on the marriage night, could be attended with considerable anxiety, especially by the bride. Although we know very little about sexuality in Neo-Confucian China, I think it is fair to assume that the anxiety surrounding the initial experience, given the necessity of proving female virginity, was not altogether different from what we can glean from modern studies of “traditional” village women and marriage rites.⁷ Some of these reports are especially graphic. In Margery Wolf’s report from a Taiwan village of the late 1950s, “every woman our assistants could pry information out of insisted, and often with bitterness, that their mothers had told them nothing to prepare them for their first

⁷ Ethnographic reports that depict attitudes toward sex and marriage as “traditional” describe sex as “puritanical” and marriage as a “traumatic” and “inevitable ordeal” that village women approach with “genuine aversion” (Potter and Potter 1990, 199–200). In these situations the bride’s anxiety may be expressed in a ritualistic curse of the groom (and his mother) prior to the bride’s departure from her mother (Blake 1978). There are many customs in the marriage ceremony that point to the bride’s anxiety, such as when she slips her foot into the groom’s shoe as an appeal that he be gentle in consummating their vows. However, reports that take note of “change” describe village attitudes as unconcerned about extramarital affairs as long as the people involved do not make an issue of it in public (Huang 1989, 121). In a recent large survey on sexuality, the majority of rural villagers reported that their first sexual experience was on the marriage night. But significantly fewer males answered the question, and, of three hundred who did, 7.3 percent indicated premarital sex with their future wives, compared with 17.3 percent of 1,086 rural females who indicated premarital sex with future husbands (Liu et al. 1992, 438).

sexual experience. [Mothers] wish to spare [their daughters] any knowledge of what is at least by custom an unpleasant act" (Wolf 1972, 139).

But if mothers failed to verbally instruct their daughters in how to deal with the "unpleasant customs" of married life, which included the necessity of submitting her body to a man's will, foot-binding obviated the need to verbalize these matters with any specificity. Foot-binding provided mothers with an effective means for instructing their daughters in how to handle all kinds of bodily insult. Foot-binding at least informed the mindful body of its fate in patriarchal society and armed it with an effective discipline, not only—as the conventional wisdom taught—to maintain the strict rule of chastity, but also to deal with the travails of becoming a wife, daughter-in-law, and mother.

We will probably never know what kinds of verbal instructions mothers gave daughters in the actual ordeal of binding. My point is that the *teng* exchanged between mothers and daughters in the ordeal of binding was itself a lesson about language. I think foot-binding pointed to the notion of women as "muted" (Ardener 1975). That women were muted does not refer to women's incapacity to make utterances, to be clever or entertaining with words, or even to be aggressive with words, but rather to their incapacity to give their words the weight of authority, to have their words taken seriously, or to make decisive statements worthy of public credibility. References to "women's talk" assumed that women were naturally inclined to "talk too much" (*duoyin*). Every little girl stood warned against developing a "fast mouth and sharp tongue" (*kuai-zui lishè*), as this was grounds for a husband to divorce a wife ("The Shrew" 1973). While village women typically engaged in "loud and gossipy talk" (Wolf 1972, 40), those who aspired to be women "with class" were taught to refine their natural instincts for "chatter" in ways that compared to the "pleasing sounds" (*tinghaudi*) of "swallows twittering" (*yanyu*).⁸ Conversely, a man's speech act, which presumed the weight of authority and substance, could be ridiculed by comparing it to the "the endless chatter" of old women (*yanyu xuxu*) or worse, by comparing it to an "old lady's footbinding cloth, smelly as it is long." This common

⁸ There were pockets of women, indeed foot-bound women, who at various times and places developed serious literary talent. One recently discovered and widely hailed example is the *nushu* (women's literature), a unique literary script in which the foot-bound peasant women of Jiangyong county, Hunan, expressed their thoughts and feelings exclusively among one another. Indeed, the strange and secretive "mosquito script," as it was dubbed, along with its remarkable literary productions in the form of letters and poems, were dismissed, scorned, and denounced in the dominant discourse even as late as the Cultural Revolution of 1966–76 (Zhao 1990; Zhou 1990). That this body of women's literature was restricted to women and scorned in public points to the theory that these women were also muted. On the other hand, recent research shows that some foot-bound women in elite urban families of the Ming-Qing dynastic period were able to surmount the cultural impediments to their literary productions (Ko 1992).

idiom, which ridiculed a man's speech act by linking it to women's foot-bindings, can be found embedded in political discourse as well as everyday talk: "Some of our comrades love to write long articles with no substance very much like the 'footbindings of a slattern, long as well as smelly'" (Mao [1942] 1965, 56, 57).

Becoming a mother was of course the critical event of a woman's life as it entailed the act of birthing. Although no conclusive evidence exists about the relative risks to a woman's health in birthing and foot-binding, I think it is fair to suggest that birthing must have been by far the graver risk.⁹ It is unlikely in my opinion that Neo-Confucian society would have committed so much of its resources to a rite of passage that would entail a significant risk of mortality to its adolescent population. If female infants were expendable, those who were raised to adolescence became important to the reproductive and productive capacity of a labor-intensive economy, a point I will discuss. Still, the pain of reproductive labor, often agonizing, was not as protracted as the agony of twisting and compressing the lower extremities. Of course, the pain associated with birthing was considered entirely natural, while the protraction of pain and suffering associated with foot-binding was altogether an intentional act of the human will.

The suggestion that foot-binding was a prelude to menstruation and birthing posits a phenomenological connection between the foot and the womb, or "seed chamber" (*zigong*), that anchored femininity in motherhood.¹⁰ The ostensible theory of binding focused attention on the physiological benefits of constricting the lower limbs to concentrate the blood in the upper parts of the legs and groin where sexual sensitivity was increased and the fertility of the "seed chamber" was enhanced (Yao 1936, 2:343). Binding was compared to pruning trees to quicken and concentrate the sap in bearing fruit. I will interpret this theory as a mystification that hid the labor power of women. But a deeper connec-

⁹ The morbid effects of binding were medicalized during the movement to ban foot-binding in the late nineteenth century. The process of constricting the foot, once thought to have beneficial effects, now was seen by Chinese reformers and traditional medical practitioners as a serious risk to health and even life itself (Yao 1936, 2:1). The great Confucian reformer Kang Youwei's impassioned "Memorial against Footbinding" presented a litany of the ill effects of foot-binding on women's bodies and on the national body politic as a whole (Yao 1936, 1:248). While many European observers recited the alleged medical maladies in gruesome detail, others such as Justus Doolittle ([1865] 1966, 202-3) demurred with the observation that compared to tight lacing in Europe, foot-binding was "much less destructive of health and life." The famous missionary physician, John Lockhart, dispassionately observed that the risk of ill effects of foot-binding had to do with the status of the individual's overall health (Fortune 1857, 250).

¹⁰ A phenomenology of reproduction fits easily into traditional Chinese thinking (Ots 1990). Although her approach to the study of Chinese medicine is not strictly phenomenological, Judith Farquhar points out that reproductive organs "are simply local and contingent phenomena in a medicine in which fetuses are conceived and nurtured by global processes" (1991, 383).

tion existed between the foot and the womb. Essentially, by controlling that which the culture invested in her feet, a woman controlled that which the culture invested in her womb and defined as the key to her femininity—her ability to bear children.

We can take this one step further: by controlling that which the culture invested in her feet, a woman might mediate at some level of intentionality the reproduction of male sexual characteristics. In other words, while the womb is an exclusively female organ, it has the power to obtrude and extrude male bodies. Feet, on the other hand, are possessed equally by females and males, but the obtrusive and intrusive nature of feet allows them to represent the male organ. (In China this representation was realized when a bride intruded her foot into the groom's shoe as a ritual prelude to the act of sexual consummation or when she left her small shoes in the Guan Yin temple to betoken her most earnest desire to become pregnant [Fortune 1857, 39–40].) Thus the obtrusive and extrusive nature of the womb and the obtrusive and intrusive nature of the feet each possess androgenic properties: Female gender therefore represents an essential androgynous ambiguity, one internal, the other external. In bending and compressing her external obtrusion, the female manipulated and rearranged the external features of her sex and won control over the reproduction of sexual characteristics. In the process, she made a world in which males intrude as husbands and obtrude and extrude as sons. If the rewards for bearing sons were basic to a woman's position in the family and her own sense of fulfillment, then foot-binding, insofar as it increased a woman's sense of control over her body, also contributed to her sense of reproductive competence.

Past the age of puberty and for the better part of her adult life, a woman remained vigilantly focused on the state of her feet to maintain the desired effect. The reduction of the foot was not accomplished in a onetime operation, which a radical excision of the toes would have made possible.¹¹ Some Chinese writers recognized, at least for rhetorical purposes, that if "chopping off the foot" to make it "smaller" and "weaker" was feasible, it was not what binding actually intended (Yao 1936, 1:63). Although these writers were never so specific, simple amputation would have defeated the whole point of binding as a "voluntary," protracted, and disciplined self-sacrifice.

The question of volition brings us finally to the historical tensions between feminine and masculine consciousness. Foot-binding provided the means by which men appropriated custody over uterine property by

¹¹ Excision of toes is not inconceivable in view of the practices that can be found in other cultures. For example, among the Dani of New Guinea, little girls had successive joints of each finger amputated to mourn the death of a loved one. Older women who are missing most of their fingers are still productive laborers, according to Karl Heider 1970, 23, 239.

distancing themselves from the toil of production. "Production" is used here in its widest possible sense, from production of the small feet to other forms of labor, including the labor of biological reproduction. The key to this process of appropriation was in the mystification of the sexual object. While they fawned over the appearance and disappearance of the tiny feet in an erotic context, men contorted themselves in combinations and permutations of disgust, contempt, anger, rage, and pity for anything that associated them with the actual production of tiny feet. As we shall see, the taboo against male contact with the binding process also helped to preserve the integrity of Neo-Confucian teaching that opposed self-mutilation.

For their part, women attended to their feet in the strictest privacy. They often washed their feet separately from other parts of their bodies. Separate washing also shielded other parts of their bodies and other persons' bodies from possible contamination. In recalling the bathing customs in his village in southern Jiangsu, a modern writer tells how his happiest memories were of bathing with his grandmother, who "had a pair of small pointed feet like rice dumplings. Without removing her binders or her shoes, she propped her feet on the edge of the tub while immersing the rest of her body in the water. In this position she splashed water on her grandson and rubbed his back" (Ding 1989, 6). Even in the artistic depiction of an erotic bathing scene, a woman is depicted stepping from her bath with the help of her paramour clad only in her little red shoes (*Erotic Art of China* 1977, pl. 21). While "erotic representations depict(ed) women stark naked," according to one authority, "I have never seen or read about a picture that showed a woman's uncovered bound foot" (Van Gulik 1961, 218). In reciting the story of her life, Lao Ning tells of a man who cursed his daughters for disturbing his peace of mind with their crying while having their feet bound. His wife carried the basin of water with its bandages into the presence of her husband and threw the basin at his feet. "The water splashed and strips of foot-binding cloth flew in all directions. Because he was an official and because there were so many of us around he dared not to beat her nor to revile her. But his anger was too great for him to bear. He jumped up, seized his whip, and began to thrash and beat the dogs" (Pruitt 1967, 79). Other women were not so lucky: when a woman in San Francisco accidentally splashed water on a man while washing her feet, the man flew into a rage. She tried to assuage his anger with offers of sweets as a prophylactic against the contamination, but his rage was too great and he shot her to death (*St. Louis Globe-Democrat* 1881, 11). A common curse was to accuse a man of "carrying his old lady's foot water," thus suggesting his abject devotion to his wife. (The same phrase could be framed as a compliment.)

There were of course exceptions to the prohibition of male contact with the sacraments of the deformed foot. These exceptions were in situations that were outside the routines of everyday life, such as illness and sexual arousal. These occurred in highly restricted settings in which social conventions are generally suspended and taboos may be overturned (see Turner 1969; Douglas 1970). In the process, that which is normally considered dangerous and polluting may become a powerful healing agent. A variety of male impairments were treatable by various female body fluids including menstrual blood (Furth 1986, 47; see also Seaman 1981), while illnesses such as cholera, malaria, strep throat, and faint were treated with various paraphernalia of the bound foot. Similarly, rigorous restrictions on male contact with the uncovered foot facilitated a reversal of the gender hierarchy when men abandoned all their normal pretensions, debased themselves, handled the wash, drank from the tiny shoe, fondled, sniffed, and mouthed the deformity itself.¹²

The dread of contamination and the lengths to which women went to control the threat of defilement from their hidden deformity was, as I have suggested, linked to their fecundity and childbearing activities. A woman presented the products of her labor (her tiny feet and male infants) to be re-presented as precious objects in the world of male discourse. As we shall see in the next section, men made up all kinds of names for the tiny feet. And it was the male heads of households who by ancient custom named and entitled the newborn males (Chai and Chai 1967, 476). Whether female infants received a name was less important, and in some village traditions, at least, they remained unnamed (Watson 1986b). The act of naming and entitling is a distancing device as it empowers the namer to endow the named with an objective social existence. By naming the products of women's bodies, men distanced themselves from the production process and appropriated, among other assets, the male members of their descent lines, which in turn provided them their sense of immortality.

Men lived in a world mediated not by the weapons of oppression, which remained ominously in the background, but by the civil functions and power of language. The distance a man bore from the practical act of oppression and degradation of the other was his measure of civilization. In Neo-Confucian China the ideal of masculinity did not counte-

¹² Levy 1966 cites many descriptions of sexual acts involving male contact with the small feet. Other exceptions of male contact were men who took an active hand in the binding process. This includes the case of a widower who, dissatisfied with the size of his daughter-in-law's feet, forcefully rebound her feet himself (Yao 1936, 1:285), and cases in which men in disguise as women had their feet bound. These included heterosexual and homosexual cross-dressers, transgenders, and male actors (for examples see Yao 1936, 1:216-220).

nance, indeed found disreputable, attributes of direct confrontation, bravado, machismo, or aggressiveness. These traits were ascribed to “the uneducated” and “barbarians” such as the Mongols and Manchus, who, it so happened, rejected foot-binding.¹³ The ideal masculine image among Neo-Confucian Chinese was modeled on the dignified bearing of the scholar-gentleman. It was the disposing of the word—rational and careful management of the communicative act, made manifest in the concern for “face” and in verbal and literary competence—that was the measure of manliness. Foot-binding allowed men to appear genteel, but not simply to cover the threat of appearing too effeminate as Ebrey (1990, 221) argues. Foot-binding, in my opinion, exempted men from direct responsibility for dominating and degrading women. It allowed women to deflect the brutality and threat of direct male domination by taking that domination into their own bodies and making it their own.

The social body and the rhetoric of foot-binding

The embodied self is also a “social body” in that it is an organic object of discourse. It mirrors, reflects, projects, and represents the language-based categories that society takes to be the “natural” order of things (Douglas 1973; Needham 1973). In China the (male-dominated) discourse invested the sexual and reproductive functions of the female body with special cosmic significance and in the process defined its place in the gender hierarchy. But foot-binding dramatically altered and in some ways subverted this “natural” order of things in a way that revealed the willful and artificial aspects of the feminized body. The symbolic contradictions, the tensions between representations of “nature” and “culture,” and the contest of words around the mysteries of gender and the feminized body constituted what I, paraphrasing Kenneth Burke ([1950] 1969), would call a “rhetoric of foot-binding.”

There are many terms, trite terms and spontaneous expressions, descriptive and euphemistic, metaphoric and metonymic, vulgar and literary, for the small bound foot and its sartorial aspects. These myriad terms

¹³ After the Manchus established the Qing dynasty in 1644, they issued an imperial edict to prohibit foot-binding under pain of severe punishment. Responsibility for ending the practice was placed on male officials and household heads. The harshness of the punishments, however, were appealed and the force of the edicts became ineffectual (Yao 1936, 1:62). Although the Qing court was unable to enforce the ban on foot-binding among Han women, they were more successful in preventing Manchu women from engaging in the practice. Nevertheless, some Manchu women went to great pains to bind their feet surreptitiously but without bending the toes under (Yao 1936, 1:278). And one young man from a minority region in northwestern China told me that the non-Han people there engaged in foot-binding with as much tenacity as their Han neighbors and were among the last to give up the practice.

were used to depict the bound foot under different conditions from subtle changes in lighting and mood as well as with historical and regional differences in style.¹⁴ The term that packed in the most symbolic meaning across time and space was *jinlian*, usually translated as “golden lotus.” The *lian* is the central symbol of Buddhism (Ch’en 1972, 445). The life structure of the *lian* evoked the life world of women, even more so the life world of foot-bound women. The flower floating on the surface of the water, a symbol of purity, was sustained by an umbilical cord rooted in the mud and slime of pond and lake bottoms. Just as the lily appeared to float, the woman was supposed to evoke an illusion of floating by ambulating in short, mincing steps, a style referred to as “Bu bu sheng lian hua” (Each step bears a lotus blossom). The bound feet supposedly forced a woman to walk in this manner. This style of ambulating, according to Chinese writers, also made the sexual anatomy and physiology more voluptuous and sensitive. The *lian* suggested both spiritual detachment and carnal desire. In other contexts the *lian* was directly associated with its hidden connection to reproductive functions. Not only was its seed-filled pod emblematic of the womb (*zigong* or “seed chamber”) and thus of childbearing (Williams 1974, 258), but other parts of the plant, including the flower and the root, provided a rich pharmacopoeia for disorders associated with childbearing. In one particular remedy, the petal of the lotus flower eased a difficult birth when inscribed with a man’s “literary style” and swallowed by his wife during labor (Smith and Stuart [1911] 1969, 280).

Although *lian* was modified with any number of prefixes, the most popular prefix was *jin*. Translated as “golden,” “precious,” or “gilded,” *jin* reinforced the worldly aspect of bound feet as objects of commodity value: “Such small and delicate feet as these are worth a thousand ounces of gold” was a common adage. The symbol of the *jinlian* thus combined the transcendental motif of Buddhist metaphysics with the worldly symbol of material value.

The rhetoric of the bound (and unbound) foot played on and mystified the tensions and contradictions between the mundane things of this

¹⁴ One connoisseur of the small foot noted at the end of the nineteenth century how different styles of feet varied with the dialect areas of the various provinces. He describes at some length the comparative advantage and disadvantage of the various regional styles of women’s small feet. “Among those who evaluate small feet the world-over, the feet of lyang women (in Hunan province) are considered the best. . . . My pen can not describe even one-ten thousandth of their charm” (Yao 1936, 1:130). The male fascination with the regional and national variations in the shape and size of women’s feet was not unique with the Chinese. A New York shoe salesman gave a long and detailed discourse on women’s feet in different sections of the United States, concluding with the observation that “the blue-blooded Jersey woman” had the prettiest feet (*St. Louis Globe-Democrat* 1879, 11).

world and the spiritual essences of cosmic order. Much of the rhetoric found expression in folk songs collected by Chinese folklorists during the early part of the twentieth century (see Liu [1925] 1971). Songs about bound-footed women could point to the irony and hypocrisy of living in a world of appearances, deception, and manipulation that finally showed itself as a pitiful state of uselessness. In a song from Henan (Liu [1925] 1971, 204–5), a “madam big feet” jealously scorns another woman with bound feet: “You’ve never eaten rice or noodles, how can you put on such airs? You are like two trowels that can’t mix the mud; you are like two threshing boards that can’t thresh the grain; you are like two pieces of dried meat that can’t be sacrificed at the temple; you are like two soft-shell turtle lamps that set upon the stage cannot shine brightly!”

The theme of deception, mystification, and realization (as “useless”) is expressed in a song from Suzhou described in the novel *Sancun Jinlian* (Feng 1986, 21). The song describes a woman who is seen binding her feet by her doting paramour. As he strolls about the room, the man describes her tiny delicacies with poetic hyperbole as “bamboo shoots in winter,” “like three-cornered rice dumplings in May, so fragrant so sweet,” “the fragrant chestnuts of June,” “so delicate, so pointed.” The woman blushes and says, “Your cheap talk only betrays how horny you are. Tonight we will sleep end-to-end so my golden lotus is next to your mouth. Then I’ll ask you how sweet it is and how you like the taste of the winter bamboo shoots!” In this case, the self-deception and mystification is revealed in the man’s talk and it is the woman binding her feet who suddenly throws a cold light on his effort to mystify her feet. Although this song is recited in a modern novel in which the author places its performance in a small-foot contest around the turn of the twentieth century, it reflects two interesting aspects of foot-binding. The lyrics give some idea of the kinds of allusions used and the way they were used to mystify the bound foot, but they also suggest how women exercised control over the whole process.

The cosmic consequences of not binding the feet were told in another folk song from Henan province (Liu [1925] 1971, 205–7). The song recounts how a “madam big feet” orders a new pair of shoes to go to the temple, tries to stuff her oversized feet in the shoes, knocks down walls, and desecrates temples and engulfs six towns when she stops to urinate before returning home “with big strides.” The “big-footed” woman was not simply clumsy; everything about her body was gross and it threatened the cosmic order. Her body represented the unstrung forces of nature that in earthquake and flood bring ruin, engulfment, contamination, and death. Social life on the scale envisioned by the Neo-Confucian imperial order was possible only if these elemental forces were re-

strained and mediated by human effort and individual initiative (see Weber 1968, 28).

The relationship between the size of women's feet and the cosmic order as mediated in the rhetoric of foot-binding can be enlarged upon by observing that natural-sized feet were attributed to two distinct classes of women. One was the ordinary woman (as depicted in the previous song) who lived in the carnal world and whose "big feet" were compared to "lotus ships." As we have seen, the "big feet" of ordinary women were demeaned as clumsy and crude and as a disaster to the natural foundation—the productivity—of the civilized world. The other kind of woman with natural-sized unbound feet was extraordinary in her power to confer benefit on the world. These women took a variety of extraordinary forms. They included legendary paragons of filial devotion (e.g., Meng Jiangnu), women warriors (e.g., Hua Mulan), goddesses of mercy (e.g., Tian Hou), and the Buddhist redeemer of humankind (Guan Yin). These women were extraordinary because each in her own way freely chose, or successfully resisted, or, in the last instance, transcended the ordinary world of marriage and reproduction. Tian Hou and Guan Yin were models of maternity and sacrifice. They were powerful deities to whom women especially appealed for help to become pregnant. The Buddhist Guan Yin provided her worldly supplicants with the karma of reproductivity and bore constant witness to their agony.¹⁵ Guan Yin was sometimes depicted bending forward as if to offer her supplicant the infant in her arms (Fortune 1857, 39–40), but when she and the other female members of her extraordinary class were depicted with exposed feet, they were always "natural feet" (*tianjiao*). It was inconceivable that these legendary and powerful women would be seen in bound feet. Bound feet were artificial things invented by ordinary people. Indeed, during the era of foot-binding, women with "big feet" could be damned with faint praise by comparing their feet with the natural feet of Guan Yin (see Levy 1966, 118).

Foot-binding thus mediated these images of femininity. The refined woman with bound feet was obviously like the common woman with "big feet." Both were ordinary and worldly and caught in the karma of reproductive activity. But the woman with bound feet also possessed

¹⁵ Guan Yin is the Chinese Buddhist redeemer of humankind to whom women appealed for help to become pregnant. Stepping from her world of absolute purity to hear the suffering of common mortals caught in a defiled world, Guan Yin mediated the karma (the transcendental fate) of human souls with extraordinary mercy. Tian Hou, although not a Buddhist figure, was ascribed with similar concerns and powers. She was accorded a canonized position in the national pantheon of deities, but her reputation remained limited to southern China (see Sangren 1983; Watson 1985).

something of the power and the virtue of the extraordinary woman. The two images of femininity were mediated in the act of self-mutilation. The woman with bound feet was crude, carnal, and potentially defiling, and yet she was true, pure, loyal, and compassionate. In the first instance, foot-binding was a vulgar act of self-exaltation. It intended self-beautification, aimed at mystification and manipulation. In the second instance, foot-binding was an act of self-mortification. It aimed to transcend carnal desire through self-mutilation. In her state of exaltation, the woman with small feet was moved by cunning, avarice, envy, and jealousy, the excesses of which were especially lamented in women (Furth 1986, 58). These motives were glossed as “narrow heartedness” (*shao-xinyen*), a word widely used to describe the common vice of women.¹⁶ But in mortifying her feet, the ordinary woman of the world revealed a capacity for self-sacrifice that surpassed the maternal instinct observable in nature. The self-conscious sacrifice of her body to redeem her world in its otherness (i.e., to bear the progeny and thus sustain the male ancestral line of the family into which she married) raised her feminine instincts to the level of compassionate being that is intended in the figure of Guan Yin or ideal “motherhood.” Thus binding the feet created a feminine mystique that enabled an ordinary woman to exalt her carnal body in the quest for spiritual perfection!

Although Buddhist symbols were culturally and historically associated with women and foot-binding, I am not aware of any references to foot-binding in formal Buddhist doctrines. The same holds true in reference to other formal doctrines of imperial law and Neo-Confucian philosophy. Neo-Confucianism was institutionalized as the dominant discourse from around the tenth century to the end of the nineteenth century, the period within which foot-binding was more or less popular. That we cannot cite Neo-Confucian doctrine on the virtue of foot-binding has enabled such modern-day Confucian scholars as Tu Wei-Ming (1985, 143) to claim that “no convincing evidence has been found to establish a causal relationship between the rise of Neo-Confucian culture in the tenth century and the prevalence of such appalling social customs as footbinding” (1985, 143).¹⁷ But this way of dismissing a relationship because it fails

¹⁶ The association of women with the vicious and depraved motives of humankind is reinforced in the written word with the use of the female radical. Thus, in the examples given here, *jiao* (cunning), *lan* (avarice), *tu* (envy), and *ji* (jealous) are all written with the female radical, *nu*.

¹⁷ One of the few direct links between the Neo-Confucian doctrine and the enforcement of foot-binding is the story of how the great Neo-Confucian philosopher Qu Wengong (Chu Hsi) forcefully introduced foot-binding into Fujian province. While serving there as a Song dynasty official he sought to reform the immoral sexual conduct of the people by “advocating footbinding with all his heart.” Fujian tradition holds that Qu advocated a particular style of small shoe that became known as the *Wengong* style. As

the test of simple causality not only obfuscates the genius of Chinese civilization, it begs the obvious question: How do we describe what was indeed a complex relationship? Although foot-binding was not “caused” by Neo-Confucian doctrine, foot-binding was women’s way of participating in the community of Neo-Confucian discourse. Foot-binding affirmed the Neo-Confucian claim on moral superiority, but not without also contradicting it and in some ways subverting that claim. This “affirmation” can be seen in the way foot-binding was embedded in the most cherished institution of Neo-Confucian culture, the family.

Neo-Confucianism was “pro-family,” to put it mildly. The doctrine of Neo-Confucianism anchored the interests of the state in the affairs of the family. The distinctions of gender and generation that shaped the family were given legal sanction and backed by the threat of draconian punishments. Parricide (the killing of a parent) was a crime of treason punishable by the “slow and painful death” of a thousand cuts; striking a parent was also a capital crime, punishable by beheading (Staunton [1810] 1966). The severe and arbitrary application of imperial law, however, was mediated to the extent that the power to enforce its moral code was transferred to local kinship organizations (Hsiao 1972, 342; Potter and Potter 1990, 10). But local sanctions could also be harsh and were especially brutal in punishing the “sexual misconduct” blamed on women. With foot-binding, women extended the logic of self-regulation and self-control to themselves and thus obviated the dreadful consequences of regulation through external sanctions.

But in obviating the threat of severe external sanctions, foot-binding violated an ironclad dogma that pervaded the whole of the Confucian (and Neo-Confucian) doctrine—the rule that prohibits physical abuse of the body. This prohibition was conveyed in dicta of Confucian-inspired texts that every child memorized in the course of learning the language. At my request, one young Chinese woman (reared for most of her life in the United States) wrote the apothegm with only a moment’s hesitation: “Dare not injure even the hair and skin of the body received from mother and father.” Its reasoning was a fundamental precept of Confucian ethical thought. “Our bodies . . . are not our own possessions pure and simple; they are sacred gifts from our parents and thus laden with deep ethicallyreligious significance” (Tu 1985, 118). Confucians recognized that this was the genesis of a system of ethics and that its logic required little more than an awareness of and appreciation for the facts of life that are realized by the simplest reflection: This body in which I locate my being

tradition would have it, Qu’s reforms were very successful, and adultery was suppressed (Yao 1936, 1:133). Even if the story was true, it would not suffice to account for the widespread popularity of foot-binding.

is not mine entirely. It also belongs to those who brought it, and thereby me, into existence; and as those others (my mother and father) gave me life by giving me part of themselves, I will in turn give them life (as ancestral beings) by giving up part of myself to yet another generation (my children). This ethic is taught to youngsters on a daily basis and in no uncertain terms.¹⁸ “A link in a chain” has been used to describe this sense of being in the world (Wolf 1979, viii). As a “link” in a chain of being, the individual’s purpose in life was to reproduce himself or herself on behalf of his or her forebears. Not to bear progeny was a sacrilege that violated the first principle of filial piety. One’s body belonged to the chain of being, to one’s parents and to their parents. Any kind of physical abuse that posed a threat or that was even extraneous to the well-being of the temporal linkage (e.g., excising pieces of flesh or marking the flesh with tattoos) was forbidden as a desecration. There were occasions, however, when people violated the rule against self-mutilation in order to dramatize the rule of filial piety. Gestures as grand as boiling a piece of flesh excised from one’s own body to cure a morbidly ill parent received popular acclaim and dramatized the meaning of self-sacrifice in service to one’s parents until it was discountenanced by imperial edict in 1729 (deGroot [1892] 1972, 458–59, 793). Of course the most widely acclaimed exception to the rule against self-mutilation was foot-binding.

But the rule against self-mutilation applied less to women because they did not constitute, in the dominant discourse, a formal link in the agnatic chain of descent through fathers and sons. They constituted instead a formal “break” in that linkage. Women as a custom did not remain in the domicile where they were born. They did not, as a rule, reproduce their parents’ progeny.¹⁹ If a woman’s purpose in life was to reproduce herself, it was on behalf of her husband’s forebears, not her own. Women were,

¹⁸ The following exchange to which I was privy between a woman from China and her eight-year-old son is not atypical: In this case the woman scolded her son for vigorously rubbing his nose. “Don’t you want to look handsome? If you keep rubbing your nose like that you will make it ugly!” The son replied in a lighthearted mood as if to tease his mother: “But this is my nose!” The mother took the bait and responded in an angry tone: “How dare you say that is your nose! It does not belong only to you! Your nose came from me—in fact every part of your body came from my body—blood, bone, flesh, hands and feet!” The son did not argue the point, but he stopped rubbing his nose.

¹⁹ The exception to this rule was a *de facto* marriage strategy in which a woman took in a husband and bore sons for her father’s and husband’s lines (see Watson 1986a, 284–85). This strategy, however, would not have exempted a woman from binding because the decision to bind in many circumstances would have preceded the decision on the daughter’s postmarital residence. This strategy generally presupposed male hypergamy and thus the necessity of the bride’s household to offer material and symbolic incentives, which a daughter’s bound feet represented. Finally, bearing male progeny for her father’s and her husband’s descent lines, she was caught in the kind of structural liminality that foot-binding coped with on a symbolic level. Based on one study of a

strictly speaking, not allowed to fulfill the highest ideal of filial piety, an ideal that was ironically grounded in the virtue attributed to ideal womanhood—the maternal instinct to care and be cared for. Foot-binding ostensibly separated a daughter from her parents to serve and to immortalize a stranger's parents. The stigma of separation was the wound to her feet, which Richard Solomon (1972, 36) compares to the tragic Greek figure Oedipus ("wounded foot"), whose separation from parents was similarly marked. But in my opinion the likeness extends no further than the symbol of separation implied in the "wounded foot." The foot-bound daughter was more like a Chinese Persephone in that the bind of her feet bonded her to her mother in the process of wedding her reproductive powers to a strange man. Although the daughter's "wounded foot" marked her separation from her mother in marriage it did not mark her as having forgotten who her mother was. Indeed, it was the embodiment of her mother's memory and all the "knowledge that is subliminal, subversive, and preverbal . . . between two alike bodies" in the long ordeal of binding (to borrow from Adrienne Rich [1976, 220]).²⁰

With marriage the bride carried the mark of her mother with the painfully acquired knowledge embodied therein into the custody of a mother-in-law and her son. As preparation for, and coupled with, the rites of marriage, foot-binding mystified the bride's movement through space from one domicile to another to become the link between families in order to bear the (male) link between generations. If she herself was not a "link" in the formal sense, it was she who "made" the formal links (between fathers and sons) that constituted Chinese society. Her role was like Guan Yin's. She sacrificed her body to help others (in this case, men) procreate themselves. As she embodied the cosmic order of things, she stretched, bent, rent, and mended and thus rendered the sinews of the social order much as she did the sinews of her body in binding and birthing. The marriage ritual was enveloped from start to finish in symbols of fecundity and childbearing. Through her reproductive labor, she would make what was otherwise a mere abstraction, a list of men's

1905 Taiwanese village register, the incidence of foot-binding was not significantly correlated with the different forms of marriage or postmarital residence (Wolf and Huang 1980, 265).

²⁰ Writing from her American cultural perspective, Rich makes an observation that I think is entirely pertinent for understanding the communication between mothers and daughters in the act of foot-binding: "Mothers and daughters have always exchanged with each other—beyond the verbally transmitted lore of female survival—a knowledge that is subliminal, subversive, preverbal: The knowledge flowing between two alike bodies, one of which has spent nine months inside the other" (1976, 220). I would submit that foot-binding, whether verbal or not—and I think its use of physical pain obviated the verbal—was the essential "lore of female survival" that mothers transmitted to daughters. The lore of foot-binding reinforced the knowledge that was subliminal, subversive, and preverbal.

names and entitlements—a genealogy of fathers and sons—into immediate, tangible, temporal reality. As in the Greek myth of Persephone and Demeter, the fertility of the earth and the continuity of human life are tied to the endurance of the bond between mother and daughter.

Family reputation and imperial law required that a daughter keep her virtue intact, even to the point of death. This was the extent of her formal commitment to her natal family (Ng 1987). From birth she was already thought of as “belonging to another family” and generally treated accordingly. The ever-growing realization that her presence in the family was merely temporary intensified the anxieties between parents and daughters. Popular references to daughters as *peiqianhuo* (goods on which money is lost) made daughters feel they used household resources that they could never repay. Daughters could compare themselves to the family-owned draft animal and note that fathers were less willing to part with their animals than they were with their own daughters (e.g., see Blake 1979a). In poor families daughters might be sold outright or sent into marriage sooner rather than later, while in elite families fathers (Levy 1968, 180) and, even more so, mothers (Ko 1992) with certain dispositions might just as readily indulge their daughters and encourage them to develop their literary talents in line with Neo-Confucian ideals of self-cultivation.

By whatever means parents chose to fill the void between themselves and their daughters, ordinary mothers were saddled with the task of teaching their daughters the realities of a woman’s domestic roles. In the ordeal of foot-binding and in its complex symbolism of separation and identification, mothers surpassed—and in some ways subverted—the expectations of their institutional role by establishing a powerful and enduring relationship with their daughters. The Neo-Confucian family system and the civilization that rested upon it veiled its own ontology in the “uterine family” (Wolf 1972). Margery Wolf suggested the concept of the uterine family to show how Chinese women exercise influence over their sons in order to contest loyalties in the family system. The other source of “uterine” strength was hidden in the ostensible separation of mothers from daughters that foot-binding signified.

The body politic and the incorporation of female labor

While the mindful body of women was mystified in the rhetoric of foot-binding, its biological power to produce and reproduce things of material value was incorporated in a “body politic.” Foot-binding cannot be fully explained without reference to the historical system of material production in which the sexual, reproductive, and economic products of women’s labored bodies were systematically appropriated to make pos-

sible a Neo-Confucian way of being civilized. The remarkable fact about foot-binding is that while the modern world has relegated it to a historical curiosity, it exchanged untold amounts of human energy on a daily basis without direct force of law—even in violation of imperial edicts—and it lasted for a thousand years across generations, centuries, and dynasties. The origins of its popularity are located in the Song dynasty (Van Gulik 1961, 253; Levy 1966, 188). The Song dynasty was a period of social ferment in which Neo-Confucian doctrine was institutionalized and a commercial economy developed in an increasingly labor-intensive system of agricultural production. This late imperial social configuration lasted into the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when it disintegrated under the challenge of European-based capitalism. That the popularity of foot-binding flowed and ebbed with the rise and fall of China's late imperial order suggests that the custom of disabling women's feet and the system of production bear more than a fortuitous relationship one with the other.

My historical analysis does not attempt to correlate fine-grained historical changes in the structure of the political economy with the popularization of foot-binding.²¹ My aim here is to correlate the essential features of the late imperial political economy with the sociocultural mystification of foot-binding that I have described. The critical features of the late imperial political economy included a labor-intensive grain-agriculture-based adaptation, an (Neo-Confucian) ideologically driven political system, and a growing urban-centered commercial economy based on what Gates (1989) calls "petty capitalism." These features were integrated in the family system in which the contributions of women's labor (biological and economic) was essential and in which women took part as both pawns and players in the increasingly fluid system of social climbing. Also, my data on the economic contributions of foot-bound women are necessarily limited and come mainly from the period when the mystification of foot-binding was penetrated by the reified world of European capitalism in which foot-binding became scorned as irrational and economically wasteful. This led, however, to the view that handicapping women removed a large segment of the population from the process of economic production and made women practically worthless. Few observers were able to see through either the Chinese mystification

²¹ The history of women during the period of foot-binding from the Song to the end of the Qing dynasty has become a topic of considerable scholarly interest. Although historians have begun to discern shifts in the status of women and gender constructions in various regional and historical periods (Ropp 1976; Rawski 1985; Ebrey 1990; and Ko 1992), attempts to comprehend the actual spread and changing incidence of foot-binding are frustrated by a general lack of systematic data. Also, what data do exist tend to be more relevant to the social elites than to the ordinary laboring people. An accurate understanding of foot-binding must include the ordinary people.

or the European reification to appreciate the economic contributions that foot-bound women made. I believe that the impairment of women's feet served more to mask than to completely restrict their participation in economic production.

During the late imperial society, the family-based system of production was increasingly integrated by an expanding "petty capitalist" economy. The "self-exploitation" (Chayanov 1986) of family labor increasingly transferred the value of women's labor to male kinsmen. Referring to this process as the "commoditization of women," Gates (1989) points to the many ways in which Neo-Confucian discourse called upon women to sacrifice themselves for the material welfare of the family coupled with "petty capitalist" references to the commodity value of their bodies. The material contributions that women made to the family were indeed substantial. They included women's traditional handiwork—making items like clothes and shoes—as well as their biological contributions in making sons for the labor-intensive economy. As I have discussed here, foot-binding helped to mystify the process by which these products of women's bodies were appropriated by the male-dominated family system. Foot-binding facilitated the process of appropriation by a mystification that entailed masking a woman's labor power. The ritual-like idiom of "masking" women's labor power—of forcefully making it "disappear"—reflected the intentional, artificial, and arbitrary nature of foot-binding. The bound foot was seen and appreciated for the mystification that was intended. This way of mystifying social relationships, I believe, was unique to the "petty capitalist" system of family-based self-exploitation of late imperial China. It was altogether different from the reification of consciousness by which the European-based capitalist mode of commoditization totally rationalizes a life world and ridicules devices such as foot-binding as wasteful.²²

²² The mystification of foot-binding used the ritual idiom of "masking," which plays on manipulating the appearances of the body's natural endowments. The manipulation of relationships around appearances is seen as artificial and in some sense arbitrary, and it is culturally valued and appreciated for the skills entailed. Elvin likewise notes that the relationship between standards of beauty and the conventions of assigning gender roles in traditional China were to a large extent "arbitrary" (1989, 279–80). This way of mystifying relationships is very different from the reification of consciousness in which social relationships are transformed into separate objects (see Lukacs 1971, 223–55). In a reified world, the natural body becomes a thing of "nature" separated from things of "culture." Relationship, appearance, and artifice are devalued, and determinism, usually located in "nature," replaces human initiative and mediation. The idiom of "masking" in foot-binding is similar to Francis Hsu's (1949) distinction between "suppression" and "repression," in which Chinese suppress or mask undesirable or unpleasant impulses in contrast to the Freudian theory in which antisocial impulses are driven into the unconscious and transformed. In Chinese, the mindful body has control over its impulses; in the West the mind is divided from the body and there is a contest over which is the determining force.

As noted, foot-binding mystified more than the handiwork of domestic labor; it also helped to mediate the reproductive strategy of the family-based system of labor-intensive agriculture. The labor-intensive economy generated high levels of output that required and supported a huge and growing population (Banister 1987, 3). A number of economic historians have noted the long-term critical relationship between agricultural production and labor intensification in China's late imperial society. The system achieved high levels of productivity but was "trapped" (Elvin 1973), "stagnated" (Chao 1986), or "involuting" (Huang 1990) in its own demographic success. But the agricultural countryside with its pronatalist values was also (and increasingly) integrated into the urban commercial ("petty capitalist") classes of artisans, traders, merchants, and financiers. Networks of rural markets operating outside the imperial system of tributary extraction facilitated trade in raw materials, handicrafts, and small-scale industrial goods on at least a regional basis (Skinner 1977). Small-scale industry and commerce were established as a way of life as early as the thirteenth century (Gernet 1970) and became increasingly characteristic of late imperial Chinese society. But the petty capitalist classes with all their commercial power and clamor for social recognition did not seek cultural or political autonomy. Instead they tied their aspirations for recognition and status to respect and support for the traditional bureaucratic-based elites (Balazs 1972). In turn, the ideologically steered bureaucratic system that was based on surplus extraction from family-based farming extended its traditional consumption values to the nontraditional gentrified elites (Lippit 1987). The system required a vast army of agricultural producers, at the same time allowing petty capitalism to flourish everywhere and people from all walks of life to climb the many and varied rungs of the social ladder. Women embodied this manifold synthesis, which required their labor as incubators, producers, and game players.

As I have shown, the structure of opportunities in late imperial society was predicated on self-improvement in the management of human relationships. The family system was not only the training ground for this social orientation toward life but also the principal organization within which this life was produced, biologically and economically. Family relationships were systematized, rationalized, codified, and ritualized sufficiently to be employed in a variety of productive enterprises of small and medium scale. The family system provided the social training and the bodies for the pool of labor necessary to sustain the increased outputs that the system required. Women involved themselves at every level of this recruitment process. They harnessed themselves to the pronatalist system-wide drive for biological reproduction while they managed individual strategies for limiting the strain on family resources by the widespread

although proscribed practice of female infanticide (Ho 1959, 58–62; Doolittle [1865] 1966, 203–9). It was in this manifold of labor-intensive production and social climbing that foot-binding's popularity acted as a mechanism for hiding the labor power of women. Foot-binding impaired women's feet; it gave a woman and those who possessed her a claim on social status by mystifying her sexual and reproductive powers, but it did not immobilize her to the point that she could not walk.

Feet that were bound so small that the woman had to be carried disqualified her as a legitimate player in the great contest to appear sexually interesting. Many men, indeed, even connoisseurs of the small foot, warned against the mania for "smallness." Some argued the matter in terms of aesthetics while others argued the matter in personal terms. One man became alarmed after his sister's daughter exhausted herself in a contest with her cousins. Every night she added a length of cloth to her binding in order to make it tighter. He warned her to stop lest she impair her ability to walk. He cynically offered to save her further anguish by simply slicing off her feet. (It is relevant to my thesis that this same uncle had instigated his niece's nightmarish quest in the first place by another thoughtless remark in which he compared her "big feet" with those of her cousins. "Uncle's remark hit me like an ice cold downpour and a clap of thunder and I could not find a space small enough to hide in" [Yao 1936, 1:258–60].) A woman might even use her opponent's mania for smallness as a strategy to overcome the latter's challenge in a small foot contest. In the novel *Sancun Jinlian* (Feng 1986, 46), Xiang Lian, the protagonist, faces an opponent whose reputation for tiny feet exceeds only her own. Xiang Lian's winning strategy is to invite her opponent to view the peach blossoms in the courtyard. As Xiang Lian leads the way her opponent falls and is unable to pick herself up. Sensing victory, Xiang Lian scolds rhetorically: "Are not feet that are unable to stand a person on her own truly wasted?" It was in the walking that the whole project of compressing the twisted foot was realized. We have already noted that the gait of foot-bound women was construed by men not only as sexually provocative, but also as transferring a woman's strength from her feet to her thighs and groin. This added to the perception of women as weak on their small feet but strong in their reproductive and sexual functions. Yet, because foot-bound women retained physical mobility, their labor power was left intact to a considerable degree.

In most areas of central and north China, women of all social classes bound their feet. The motive, even among working-class women, was the dream, the hope, or the real expectation of upward mobility through marriage. But even without the promise or hope for upward mobility, women bound their feet to signify their claim on the dignity accorded those who embodied refinement and a "sense of class." For many

working-class women the hope of upward social mobility through marriage never materialized, but they did not stop binding their own feet or those of their daughters. There was always the possibility of a change in personal or family fortune. Many continued to bind despite their poverty because it was more painful, they said, to let out the feet or, worse, to let them out only to begin binding again when the circumstances improved (McCunn 1981, 30–31). Even when the possibility of upward mobility through self-improvement and marriage proved personally elusive, there was still the dignity of one's own family and its male heads to uphold and there was the next generation of daughters who if properly informed with a sense of class might entertain the hope and promise of mobility through self-improvement and marriage.

The life story of Lao Ning is especially poignant in this regard, in part because in the end she did not even have the dignity of her husband and his family to uphold. Still, she bound her feet only to spend a lifetime laboring as a domestic servant and begging in the city streets in turn-of-the-century northern Shandong (Pruitt 1967). Sometimes her attempts to bind were frustrated by her absolute lack of means to purchase the materials for bandages and shoes. While bound feet hindered Lao Ning they did not prevent her from walking about the city all day and doing physical labor. Nor did she hesitate to bind her daughter's feet when the time came.

As mentioned at the outset, the evidence for the actual work performed by foot-bound women comes from observations made toward the very end of the period in which the custom had been popular. The end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries was a period of industrialization and penetration by European-based capitalism. This certainly facilitated the struggle to end foot-binding, but it is not clear how far we can extrapolate these observations to comprehend the labor of women in previous centuries and dynasties. Still, the observations I offer are mostly of foot-bound women working in traditional commercial and agricultural occupations.

The traditional work of women based on ancient patterns that preceded the advent of foot-binding was domestic-based sewing, spinning, embroidering, and weaving. The domestic task of women was to provide shoes and clothes for their families. While suffering through the early phases of binding, all little girls were impressed with the traditional need to develop a sense of industry at the very least by learning how to sew and spin. This domestic industry along with other small- and medium-scale industries employed the labor of women in various places and times throughout the late imperial period. Data from the waning years of the dynastic period show that women's labor in the traditional handicraft industry, especially in spinning and weaving, was the cheapest form of

labor (McCunn 1981, 30; Huang 1990, 85). But these data also show that the household incomes produced by women in home and community-based rural handicraft industries, although defined as “supplementary,” were sometimes comparable to or even greater than the income from male-managed agricultural or industrial production (see, e.g., Fei 1939, 170; Gamble 1968, 15).

From the early part of the twentieth century, women were increasingly recruited into the modernizing sector of the textile industry, and some reports indicate that the women workers in these urban industries were still binding their feet. A sociological survey of female labor in the city of Chefoo, where Lao Ning lived and worked for much of her life, reported in 1926 that “practically all women and girls who examine nets have bound feet. I have found some who walk to and from work covering a distance of three miles every day. Forewomen in most shops and factories have unbound feet. The custom of binding feet is still fixed among these working people” (Rietveld 1926, 560). In this case women from the lower class of workers were still binding their feet while the “forewomen” had begun to quit the practice. Beyond this, women with bound feet performed all kinds of menial labor; they worked as serving women in large houses and in city shops. In the countryside of north and central China, women with bound feet often contributed their labor to agricultural production, especially during critical labor shortages. Here again it was defined mostly as “supplementary” work or relegated to “cheaper” divisions of the agricultural labor force.

The 1926–33 social survey of Ting Hsien, a network of rural villages in the Central Plain north of the Yellow River, provides data that allow us to account for some of the productive labor done by foot-bound women (Gamble 1968, 46–49, 52, 60). Based on a sample of 1,736 women in 515 families, Gamble calculated that 99.2 percent of the village women born before 1890 had bound feet. Although Gamble made no direct reference to the relationship between foot-binding and the work women did, the data make plain the fact that agricultural and cottage production were dependent in significant ways on the contributions of women with bound feet. Between 1926 and 1933, 71 percent of women over the age of ten had bound feet, and 80 percent of women over the age of twelve reported farm work as their primary occupation. This means that at least half of the agriculture done by women was done by women with bound feet. Only fifteen women (1.3 percent), a smaller percentage than that of men, reported that they were idle or had no occupation. Of working women, 95 percent reported spinning and weaving as their primary or secondary occupation. Fifty-seven percent of Ting county’s industrial income was from cottage industry, which employed mostly women. Forty-three percent of the industrial income was from “wage

labor," which employed mostly men (Gamble 1968, 15). At least during the period of Gamble's observations, the foot-bound women of Ting Hsien made substantial contributions to the local economy.

South of the Central Plain in the Yangtze River region, women were also recruited for agricultural labor in varying degrees depending on the structure of local and regional economies. Here the custom of foot-binding was widely practiced. Observers from the mid-nineteenth century such as Robert Fortune pointed out that "in the central and eastern provinces . . . [foot-binding] is almost universal—the fine ladies who ride in sedan-chairs, and the poorer classes who toil from morning till evening in the fields, are all deformed in the same manner" (1857, 248–49). In the Yangtze delta village of Huaiyangqiao, studied by Philip Huang, the task of planting rice in wet paddy was assigned to men while women were assigned tasks that had much lower prestige and only one-third the material reward. Huang believes that "this division of labor rested on an irrational assumption" that women were not as capable as men in the physical labor of rice agriculture: "That a fiction could be so completely and irrationally maintained attests to the power of custom and ideology. In this case, I think that the association of planting with men might have been linked to the custom of footbinding, which made sloshing around in the flooded fields a rather messy business. Wu Xiaomei . . . , for example, said she never did any farm work for which she had to take off her shoes, which rules out not only planting but also weeding whenever the fields were wet" (Huang 1990, 56). While working in wet fields was obviously inconvenient and sometimes risky (see below), Wu Xiaomei's refusal to do work that required her to remove her shoes in public must have been dictated by the same sense of modesty that caused Ding Wenyuan's grandmother (mentioned earlier) to keep her shoes on while bathing in the tub with her grandson. Huang (1990, 56) goes on to say that economic imperatives could overcome the fiction of women's unfitnes for farm work: in other areas of the Yangtze delta, growing cotton was strictly women's work, although Huang does not indicate whether the women responsible for cotton production bound their feet. Some women with bound feet did take charge of certain outdoor tasks and oversee the labor of others. William Lockhart, a missionary physician in mid-nineteenth-century Shanghai, treated an elderly woman who suffered a compound fracture when she slipped, "owing to her crippled feet," while supervising the spring cutting of bamboo shoots (Fortune 1857, 251).

In regions where women were systematically recruited into the production of wet rice, as in the south coastal provinces of Fujian and Guangdong, foot-binding was not generally accepted (and in a few places actively rejected as utterly impractical and pretentious). In these areas, foot-binding marked differences between women who spent their working lives

in rice paddy agriculture and women whose lifestyles did not require them to remove their shoes in public and labor in their bare feet. Although foot-binding was not prevalent in the agricultural villages of the far south, it was practiced in the towns and cities where distinct local and regional styles were noted by traveling votaries as late as the end of the nineteenth century (see Yao 1936, 1:133). For now, anecdotes such as these provide the most direct evidence of the relationship between foot-binding and agricultural labor.

Our small stock of anecdotes on the agricultural work done by foot-bound women suggests that these women were capable of providing significant physical labor to the system of economic production. They could exempt themselves from labor in wet fields that required workers to remove their shoes, but they could be called upon to labor in the “lighter” and “cheaper” divisions of farm work. We also know that there is no inherent contradiction between agricultural work on the part of women and high rates of female fertility (Banister 1987, 133–34). The physical labor that women could and I believe did provide coupled with years devoted to bearing and rearing children describes the world of Chinese women. This world was enmeshed in the historical synthesis of a system of political economy that coupled a systemwide strategy of labor-intensive production with family-based strategies for social climbing. Foot-binding played a role in every aspect of this system.

During the past century the regional system of imperial hegemony that gave foot-binding its *raison d'être* began to give way to the challenge of the global capitalist system. Although the Manchu dynasty (1644–1911) had forbidden foot-binding by imperial fiat from the beginning of its reign, it was the modern revolution with its patriotic appeal to “unleash the labor power of women” that finally spelled its end. But the end of foot-binding was no more abrupt than the attempt to reconstruct a modern society was decisive. The practice lingered in the cities for twenty years into the Republican period and held on in remote parts of the countryside until the Great Leap Forward of 1958–60. The Great Leap mobilization and collectivization of the Chinese countryside aimed to transform radically the traditional forces and relations of production. The total mobilization of women into the labor force was a key component in this effort (see Blake 1979b). In some areas foot-bound women who were mobilized under a piecework system surprised observers by outproducing their male co-workers. A young man from Ningxia province told me how his grandmother, who still has three-inch bound feet, gained a local reputation for harvesting three times as much wheat per day as her male co-workers. If the end of foot-binding helped to “unleash the labor power of women,” which it undoubtedly helped to do, it certainly made the question of what women’s labor is worth a point of lively

debate. My argument that foot-binding did more to mask than to completely cripple the labor power of women is of course contestable. I offer it in the spirit of a hypothesis that a renewed interest in research on foot-binding might find challenging.

Conclusion

An adequate theory of foot-binding must move beyond the conventional typifications of Chinese culture in order to see how they are constituted in, and help to inform, individual experience, social relationships, and the historical process. The three-dimensional model of the "mindful body" that was suggested by Schepers-Hughes and Lock (1987) for medical anthropology seems particularly appropriate for comprehending the complex questions surrounding foot-binding.

The first dimension of the mindful body is its intentional embodiment of a world. Mindful of its experience in the "real world," the body becomes a "self." Here is where an intentional mutilation of a woman's body induced the (re)embodiment of her self by the application of a rigorous discipline designed to inflict and to overcome protracted physical pain. This embroiled a mother and daughter in a project that embodied the world in its spatial modality. It dramatized the ontological tension between femininity and masculinity such that "femininity" came from the muted management of body and space while "masculinity" came from the articulation of language and time.

The second dimension of the mindful body is its organically based system of symbols. The body provides a means by which a socially constituted reality represents itself as "natural." Foot-binding was an intentional manipulation of a "natural (female) body" that was predefined in the Neo-Confucian-dominated domain of male-managed discourse. The rhetoric of foot-binding thus connected human effort and individual initiative on the part of women to the ontology of femininity, to the idea of self-control over individual fates, to the social roles that allowed women to fulfill their purpose as bearers of sons, to the fertility of the earth, and to the cosmic order of things. It was a powerful mystification of gender because it entailed the mindful bodies of women overcoming intense, protracted physical pain in a drama that coupled "self-sacrifice" with "self-exaltation."

The third dimension of the mindful body is the socialized object that presents itself to the incorporation process of the body politic. This is where women's bodies came under the full weight of male-managed discourse in a historical system of production and reproduction. The relative objectification of erotic desire—the crippling of the foot, the natural symbol of labor power—made the labor of foot-bound women

less visible and easier to appropriate than it otherwise might have been. The everyday reality of foot-binding masked the work of women by defining incubation more as “nature” than as “labor” and by defining foot-bound women’s labor as worthless in view of the obvious, if indeed artificial, disability of their bodies.

The three bodies discussed here are, according to Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987), a “matrix” of interpersonal emotional experiences. In foot-binding the nexus of interpersonal emotional experience began in the “interuterine” intersubjectivity of mothers and daughters. Over a period of months and years mothers and daughters shared an indescribable, hurtful, caring, mystifying experience. Foot-binding did not “cause” this exchange. Foot-binding was merely the mute idiom of expression by which mothers chose to inform daughters about “the world out there.” Verbal instructions and didactic manuals on how to behave, how to succeed in the real world, simply paled by the side of two mindful bodies locked in a manifold of contesting wills and fused intentions rigorously and relentlessly unmaking and remaking the world. Foot-binding embodied the memory of mothers in their daughters. Men were excluded from this province of memory just as men excluded women from their written genealogies that recorded for posterity the names of their fathers. The embodiment of mothers in daughters was cultural ontology: it intended the world in its ostensibility, that is, in making the world appear other than what it is. The writing of genealogy was cultural authority. It intended the world in its objectivity, that is, in describing the world just as it appears to be. The world of cultural authority upheld the gender hierarchy as natural. The world of cultural ontology as revealed in the ordeal of foot-binding showed the gender hierarchy to be unnatural and altogether artificial. Foot-binding was the way women in China supported, participated in, and reflected on the Neo-Confucian way of being civilized.

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