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## Ambivalent Orientalism: Footbinding in Chinese American History, Culture and Literature

Roxane Hughes

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Ambivalent Orientalism: Footbinding in Chinese American  
History, Culture and Literature

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par

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## ABSTRACT

A trope of footbinding in Chinese American literary and artistic productions developed in the 1970s at a time of ethnic and feminist assertion. Several Chinese American female writers and male artists turned to the custom of footbinding to explore and represent their conflicting legacies and positionalities in the United States. Despite the proliferation of footbinding references in Chinese American literature and other forms of artistic representations between the 1970s and the early 2000s, this trope has escaped much critical attention. Literal and metaphorical depictions of footbinding and unbinding have mostly been read as representing Chinese immigrants' and Chinese American women's journey to self-assertion in the United States, and their progressive and symbolic move from China to the United States. The equations of footbinding with an oppressive Chinese cultural and historical past, as well as unbinding with American freedom and success, in addition to being assimilationist and Orientalist in scope, have obscured the ambivalent representations and functions of this imagery in Chinese American literature and art. Footbinding and unbinding references refuse fixity and categorization as they simultaneously reproduce *and* deconstruct Orientalist stereotypes of Chinese exoticism and barbarism. This contradictory undertaking reflects the ambivalent position of Chinese American authors and artists, torn between American expectations and ethnic preservation at a time of individual, communal and literary self-definition, as well as echoes the ambivalent role played by footbinding historically in the creation of Chinese America.

Interdisciplinary in scope, this thesis puts literature, art and history in conversation in its exploration of the *ambivalent Orientalism* that has marked the literal and metaphorical development of footbinding in Chinese American history, culture and literature. Divided in two parts, this thesis first places the ambivalent footbinding trope in historical and cultural contexts. Following Chinese immigrants to the United States, this section retraces the construction of bound-footed women as Orientalist curios in the nineteenth-century U.S. imagination, the role played by this custom in Chinese women's migration to the United States, as well as the Chinese American community's conflicting visions of and responses to footbinding at the turn of the twentieth century. This historical section also illuminates the intertwined processes of gendering and racialization that affected, and continue to affect, Chinese (American) women and men.



These processes have pathologized Chinese femininity and masculinity, as well as Chinese patriarchy and culture more generally, but also contributed to relegating Chinese immigrants to positions of inferiority and marginality since the second half of the nineteenth century.

The literary and artistic section analyzes how the Chinese American community's ambivalent vision of footbinding was reproduced in Chinese American literature and theatrical representations in the late twentieth century, catering to the American audience's persisting Orientalist taste, while concurrently offering a subversive message. This section first contextualizes the ambivalence of this trope in the already contradictory discourses that Chinese bound-footed women held over the centuries regarding their footbinding practices. It then examines Chinese American and Chinese expatriate writers' and artists' figurative use of footbinding to approach conflicting identity formation processes in the context of Chinese migration, in their recuperation of an obscured cultural and familial past, in their negotiation of conflicting family relationships at cultural and generational crossroads, and in cases of Communist totalitarianism. Deployed by Chinese American male and female artists, as well as applied to Chinese women's and men's bodies, the trope of footbinding thus dramatizes the oppressive mechanisms of subjectivation regulating the lives of Chinese women and men, drawing connections between Chinese and American patriarchal societies, past and present. Yet, this trope of footbinding is also endowed with transgressive overtone. Refusing easy categorization, it offers a cross-cultural, cross-gender and cross-generic view on the multifaceted Chinese (American) experience. This ambivalent and fluctuating trope thus destabilizes the binaries infusing Orientalist discourses and calls for a rethinking of the cultural and geopolitical divide of East and West in contexts of migration and diaspora. While this footbinding trope fluctuates to represent the evolving issues of an ever-changing Chinese American community, it nevertheless foregrounds, the continuing problems faced by Chinese Americans in their ongoing battle against stereotypes, and in their assertion as ethnic American subjects. The trope of footbinding has however receded in current Chinese American literary and artistic productions; a decline that accompanies the de-Orientalizing turn in Asian American studies characterizing the beginning of the twenty-first century.

## INTRODUCTION—AMBIVALENT ORIENTALISM: FOOTBINDING IN CHINESE AMERICA

The trope of footbinding developed in Chinese American literary and artistic productions between the 1970s and the early 2000s and takes its ambivalent roots in bound-footed women's conflicting discourses regarding this custom in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and in the Western construction of the *Oriental* Other that shaped American mission in China and framed the perception of Chinese immigrants at home. The footbinding imagery has predominantly been read as portraying Chinese (American) protagonists' oppression and disabling Chinese culture/legacy in the context of their self-assertion and integration in the United States. Analyses of this footbinding trope are often juxtaposed to an exploration of *unbinding* metaphors that scholars have conversely associated with Chinese (American) characters' development and emancipation in the United States. The tropes of footbinding and unbinding deployed in Chinese American literature refuse, however, this linear and progressive development from footbinding to unbinding, and from China to the United States that these equations sustain, but deconstruct the assimilationist rhetoric conveyed by this progressive move. I argue that these tropes take the form instead of ambivalent depictions that complicate and destabilize oppression and liberation, as well as the separation between China and the United States that this linear progression implies despite their Orientalist undertones. These ambivalent representations speak of protagonists' inner struggles as they grapple with ethnic revival and assimilation, cultural recuperation and American recognition, individual identity and community—struggles that started a century before with the development of a Chinese American community and identity mediated by American Orientalist constructions of China as well as racist discrimination and exclusion laws. This ambivalent imagery also tells about Chinese American authors' ambivalent positionality as ethnic American, as they negotiate the double bind of community building among their Asian American audience and the pressure of both mainstream reception and the publishing or production industry. While the ambivalence at the core of this binding/unbinding trope refuses easy categorization, it also caters to American prevalent taste for exoticism, thus hindering Chinese American writers' and artists' simultaneous efforts at dismantling Orientalist stereotypes.

The ambivalence of this trope at the junction of Orientalization and de-Orientalization takes further significance when examined across the gender divide. Re-imagined and re-appropriated by Chinese American female and male writers and artists alike, as well as figuratively applied to female and male bodies in contexts of diaspora, footbinding plays a more ambivalent role in Chinese American literary and artistic representations than its usual association with femininity and womanhood implies. Reading this footbinding trope across the gender line sheds light on the imbricated processes of gendering and racialization at the core of Orientalist discourses that have fixed the *Oriental* Other—male and female—in a position of inferiority to the heteronormative order of white patriarchy governing the U.S. nation; a position of inferiority often internalized by Asian Americans. Yet, refusing to be fixed in this degrading position, Chinese American writers and artists have equally attempted to subvert these gendering and racialization processes by re-appropriating footbinding and unbinding images in unsettling ways to explore and negotiate their conflicting identities, but also to denounce and dismantle the oppressive mechanisms to which Asian Americans have been subjected since the mid-nineteenth century.

The fluctuating footbinding/unbinding images permeating Chinese American literary and artistic representations between the 1970s and the turn of the twenty-first century convey, therefore, what I would like to call an *ambivalent Orientalism* that captures Asian American writers' and artists' simultaneous replication *and* subversion of Orientalist discourses in their re-articulation and re-fashioning of their constructed *Oriental* identities in resistance to their objectification and dehumanization, as well as in their rejection of the universalizing ideals of heteronormative whiteness. Drawing on Edward Said's *Orientalism* and contemporary Asian American and postcolonial responses to his work, as well as transnational feminism, and gender studies, this work situates the footbinding/unbinding tropes at historical, cultural, national, gender and disciplinary crossroads to illuminate the ambivalent processes of ethnic identity formation and representation within and against Western hegemonic discourses.

### *Footbinding: A Brief History*

The origin of footbinding is debated and based on myths dating from the late Tang (618–907 C.E.) and early Song dynasties (960–1279 C.E.).<sup>1</sup> Around the tenth century, women of a high social standing started binding their daughters' feet at a young age (between 5 and 7 years old). Mothers hoped their daughters' feet could become perfect *golden lotuses*, as they were called, of no more than three inches in length.<sup>2</sup> The first step consisted in the binding of the toes, which were bent under the sole, except for the big one. The extremity of the foot and the heel were then drawn close together, firmly and tightly wrapped in long bandages, before being confined into small slippers. Whereas footbinding was first practiced by upper-class women, the custom gradually spread to all classes: by the beginning of the Qing dynasty (1644–1912 C.E.), Han women from upper and lower classes had widely adopted this cultural rite (Ko, *Cinderella* 177).<sup>3</sup>

Despite the mutilation at their origin, bound feet were considered as signs of beauty, gentility, social status and ethnicity, and were fundamental assets for a girl's marriage. In addition, footbinding was an important passage into womanhood (Yu 170). It was believed that through the ache of footbinding, women were preparing their daughters for the pain of menstruation, sexual relation, pregnancy, birthing, and life within a highly restrictive patriarchal society (Blake 684).<sup>4</sup> However, by controlling their bodies, girls not only learned to become women, but also bonded with their female elders. Women transmitted the skills of binding and shoemaking from one generation to the next. The tiny embroidered shoes created in the women's quarters were proof of women's weaving and embroidery skills, and representative of the female culture that developed around it.<sup>5</sup> However, despite footbinding's role in defining a girl's future

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<sup>1</sup> For examples of tales about the origin of footbinding, see Jaime Yu, "Chinese Footbinding" 168-9; Wang Ping,

<sup>2</sup> For more on terminology and shoe size see Ko, *Cinderella* 191-3.

<sup>3</sup> Not all ethnic groups in China practiced footbinding. Manchu women did not adopt footbinding when the Manchus took over China in the seventeenth century. Manchu women were prohibited from binding their feet not to mingle with Han Chinese. However, Manchu women developed special shoes in imitation of lotus shoes. This shows how popular, widespread and cherished footbinding was throughout the Qing dynasty among women. See William Theodore De Bary, *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (1999); Frederic Wakeman, *The Great Enterprise: The Manchu Reconstruction of Imperial Order in Seventeenth Century China* (1985); Ko, "Body as Attire" (1997); and Susan Mann, *Precious Records* (1997).

<sup>4</sup> It has more recently been argued that footbinding was performed for economic reasons to force girls to sit down and work. See the works of Hill Gates, including her monograph *Footbinding and Women's Labor in Sichuan* (2015), and her co-authored book with Laurel Bossen, *Bound Feet, Young Hands: Tracking the Demise of Footbinding in Village China* (2017). See also Bossen's *Chinese Women and Rural Development: Sixty Years of Change in Yu Village Yunnan* (2002).

<sup>5</sup> See Ko, *Every Step a Lotus*, and Wang, *Aching for Beauty*.

and position within a family, it considerably crippled them, often confining them to their domestic quarters (Yung, *Unbound Feet* 6).

Footbinding declined in the late nineteenth century following China's increasing contact with the West. With the opening of China to international trade and the degrading relationship between China and Britain culminating with the Opium Wars (1839–42 and 1856–60), a large number of Westerners settled in China. Anglo-American missionaries who came along slowly formed anti-footbinding societies, as they saw footbinding as an act of torture, but also as a custom that deprived women of mobility and held the Chinese nation in a state of inferiority.<sup>6</sup> Bound feet became in their view a double synecdoche for the Chinese female body, crippled and subjugated by Confucian beliefs and patriarchy, and for the barbaric nation as a whole (Zito, "Secularizing the Pain" 3; Whitefield 208). By liberating women's feet, missionaries gave women mobility, encouraged them to pursue an education and economic activity, but also worked for the Westernization of the Chinese nation-state.

Western women—unmarried missionaries and wives of doctors and missionaries (Zito, "Bound to Be Represented" 27)—played an important role in this civilizing and modernizing mission through the physical liberation of Chinese women's feet. Escaping the domestic sphere and the gender boundaries governing their lives at home, Western women saw the liberation of *Oriental* women as a self-empowering mission (Zito 29). Yet, their own emancipation was ironically predicated on the displacement of white patriarchy on the *Oriental* Other, as they sought to transform Chinese women into models of Christian wives and *Republican mothers* upon whom the good of the nation rested. The unbinding of women's feet was a first step in this endeavor, as footbinding was considered a proof of Chinese barbarity, primitivism and heathenism. By encouraging Chinese women to unbind their feet and to embrace Western ideals, Western women not only used the Chinese female body as a "terrain for civilizing labors" (Zito 27), but also established Western values as universal norms, thus masking the power differentials between East and West permeating their discourses of modernization and liberation.

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<sup>6</sup> Yu states that footbinding was in missionaries' conception a "senseless procedure for cosmetic gain, a method of keeping the women in their place both physically and socially, a form of imposed deformity of the body, an aspect of the sexual depravity of the East, a victimization of young girls, and a stubbornly continued practice of the Chinese people" ("Chinese Footbinding" 173). See Mrs. Alicia Archibald Little's two memoirs *Intimate China* (1898) and *In the Land of the Blue Gown* (1902), as well as Reverend John MacGowan's *How England Saved China* (1913).

Meyda Yeğenoğlu highlights, in her discussion of the Orientalist unveiling of Arab women in the Middle East, the inevitable cultural “re-inscription” that *Western* universalism entails:

To be Western here implies feeling that one is entitled to universalize one’s particular achievements and interests. The effacement/erasure of the particularity of Western women in the name of universality has the effect of legitimizing the colonial-feminist discourse as an act of generosity and as an act of conferring upon Middle East women the privilege of participating in Western women’s universalism rather than a denial and negation of difference. (102)

In this light, Yeğenoğlu reads the unveiling of Arab women as “another way of turning the flesh into a particular type of body,” a “not-to-be-veiled” body that is “taken as the norm for specifying a general, cross-culturally valid notion of what a feminine body is and must be” (115). Dismantling these universalizing discourses also means disrupting essentialist notions of woman and womanhood. Deconstructing universalism and essentialism is crucial indeed in highlighting the power disparities on which sexual and gender constructions are based locally and globally (see Kaplan and Grewal 359).

Western women’s unbinding of Chinese women’s feet resonates with their unveiling of Arab women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In addition to stopping this maiming practice for the goods of Chinese women, unbinding became a necessary step in Westernizing Chinese culture, as it meant altering Chinese gender markers in favor of a Western universal norm. The link that can be drawn between the Western liberation of Chinese and Arab women not only foregrounds the apparatuses of control and domination, notably the imbricated processes of racialization and gendering (feminization and eroticization of the Orient, emasculation/castration of Oriental men, etc.), that continue to sustain asymmetries of power between East and West despite discourses of modernization, but also the mechanisms of oppression that keep Western women subjugated to white patriarchy notwithstanding their attempt at liberating the extremely oppressed women of color in distant territories from their own oppressive systems, thus pointing to the interconnections of imperialism, Orientalism, colonialism and patriarchy in prompting power differentials across the color and gender lines.

Yet, the complicity of local powers in sustaining and negotiating Western models of modernization cannot be forgotten. In China, the anti-footbinding campaign was more than a Western endeavor in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Chinese reformers whose

goal was to modernize the Chinese nation at the turn of the twentieth century to better rival growing world powers such as England, the United States, and their neighboring Japan, joined Anglo-American missionaries in their fight to abolish footbinding, using the Chinese female body as a tool in this self-strengthening endeavor.<sup>7</sup> Putting the Chinese woman at the center of national discourses, male reformers used the female body as a tool to modernize the nation, but also to assert their own masculine power. Yet, Chinese women also developed counter-narratives and negotiated reformers' nationalist agenda to develop their own feminist perspectives and narratives of resistance to patriarchal oppression within and against hegemonic configurations. It is the case, for instance, of revolutionary women such as Qiu Jin who unbound their feet in protest, donned male attire and vocally opposed footbinding and other debilitating practices keeping women backward in the early 1900s.<sup>8</sup> Yet, not all women sustained these new revolutionary ideals. Lower-class and rural Chinese women's participation in both the anti-footbinding campaign and the nationalist movement remains mostly filtered through missionaries' and reformers' writings,<sup>9</sup> if not erased altogether.

The gender re-fashioning of the Chinese female body in Western and local nationalist discourses was accompanied by the pathologization of bound feet and Chinese cultural rituals to a larger extent. The anti-footbinding campaign, coinciding with the advent of scientific and medical progresses in the West at the end of the nineteenth century, led to an increased focus on bound feet's deformed bones, which accelerated the demise of the custom. As Dorothy Ko asserts, bound feet's attractiveness lied in their concealment. As soon as their physicality was exposed to the view of all, they ceased to appeal.<sup>10</sup> The diffusion of medical reports, narratives of gangrene and amputation cases,<sup>11</sup> photographs of naked bound feet, amputated and preserved bound feet, and even X-Rays—invented at the turn of the twentieth century—revealed the

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<sup>7</sup> See chapter 3 of this work for more on Chinese reforms and Chinese reformers' view and discourses on footbinding.

<sup>8</sup> For a more general discussion on women's counter-narratives in nationalist discourses, see Caren Kaplan, Norma Alarcón, and Mino Moallem's introduction in *Between Woman and Nation*.

<sup>9</sup> As Byrony Lau highlights, what we know in the West about footbinding and the anti-footbinding campaign mainly comes from missionaries' works (206).

<sup>10</sup> See Ko, "Bondage in Time" 201, 218; "Body as Attire" 10, 16, 23n4; and *Cinderella* 9-37.

<sup>11</sup> Mrs. Archibald Little in her *Intimate China* emphasizes medical cases in which women lost their toes, remained crippled or died because of footbinding. She recounts the story of a poor girl who suffered from an ulcer at the ankle due to binding. When she arrived at the hospital, "her feet were already black masses of corruption. Her relations would not allow her feet to be amputated; so in a few months they dropped off. The stumps were a long time in healing, as the skin was drawn back from the bone. The child was taken home, gradually became weaker and weaker, and after a year and a half of suffering died" (142).

deformed bones and putrefying flesh of Chinese women's feet, shocking the West, while shaming Chinese reformers and compromising their self-strengthening movement.<sup>12</sup>

Missionaries and reformers' joint effort led to the first edict against footbinding passed by the Empress Dowager Cixi in 1902, mostly implemented regionally in China and Taiwan. Footbinding was thereafter banned at the provincial level by Sun Yat-sen, leader of the Chinese Revolution of 1911, who forced bound-footed women to unbind their feet and to stop the propagation of this cultural rite on the younger generation (Ko, *Cinderella* 234n3).<sup>13</sup> Footbinding was yet again banned in 1949 with the advent of Communism, this time nationally. Although reforms, bans, changing attitudes to gender roles, and new progressive ideals encouraged many women to unbind their feet in urban centers, other women resisted the fight and kept their feet bound in rural areas (Ko, *Cinderella* 11; Whitefield 205). Recent interviews and documentaries of the last footbound women attest to women's ambivalent responses to footbinding throughout the twentieth century in different parts of China.<sup>14</sup> However, by the advent of Communism, the number of women still binding their own and their daughters' feet had substantially declined.

### ***Recuperating Footbinding in the West: Feminist and Ethnic Assertions***

The history of footbinding is well known. Many scholars in China and in the West have looked at footbinding and at the embroidered shoes that have survived to this day since the early twentieth century. A resurgent interest in footbinding took shape in the West in the 1950s and 1960s with a wave of male scholarship devoted to China's past erotic customs. This is the case for instance of Williams Fielding's *Strange Customs of Courtship and Marriage* (1956), Lawrence E. Gichner's *Erotic Aspects of Chinese Culture* (1957), and Robert Van Gulik's *Sexual Life in Ancient China* (1961). The fantasy created by the bound-footed woman

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<sup>12</sup> Ko explains how China's national shame has been imputed onto the bound foot (*Cinderella* 30). For more on the anti-footbinding campaign, physical exposure of the bound foot and medical discussions of bound feet's deformity, see *Cinderella* 9-68.

<sup>13</sup> There is contention regarding the date of Sun Yat-sen's edict. Levy declares that it was passed in March 1911 (*Chinese Footbinding* 279), while Ko states that it dates from 1912 (*Cinderella* 234n3). Both cite, however, the same source: the Chinese *Cai feilu* 2.39. Similar to his contemporary reformers and literati, Sun Yat-sen considered footbinding as "an evil custom which hurt the family and wrought havoc on the nation" (Levy 279). He also considered bound-footed women as epitomes of ignorance as they were disabled and confined to their home (279).

<sup>14</sup> See Levy's "Ladies of the Bound-Foot Era" in his *Chinese Footbinding* 239-85; scattered interviews directed by Beverly Jackson collected in her *Splendid Slippers* (1997); the life stories of May Fourth women transcribed by Wang Zheng in her study *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment* (1999); as well as Yang Yang's study *Jin Lian Mi Zong* (2012) conducted in Liuyi, Yunnan.



dominating these works echoes a larger tradition of Orientalist writing that eroticizes and fetishizes the Oriental female body, and uses this exotic female Other as a metonymy for the Orient as a whole, thus submitting this feminine Other to the masculine order and fantasy of the West (see Yeğenoğlu 11). Howard Levy's *Chinese Footbinding: The History of a Curious Erotic Custom* (1966), although equally fetishizing, eroticizing and Orientalizing Chinese women's feet and bodies, simultaneously moved footbinding scholarship to new grounds by including oral testimonies of bound-footed women conducted in Taiwan between 1960 and 1961. These testimonies constituted a first attempt at giving voice to the surviving practitioners of this tradition who had been predominantly silenced in Anglo-American missionaries' accounts dominating the knowledge of footbinding in the West before the 1950s.<sup>15</sup> Although complicating the objectification, subjugation, if not erasure, of bound-footed women, these oral testimonies do not subvert the Orientalist frame of Levy's work. As Yeğenoğlu states regarding nativist accounts: "what the Western audience desires to hear is the native's own voice, the true and authentic story" (121) told by the oppressed Other, which would cast the West as "considerate and benevolent," while masking its continuing hegemony and essentialist assumption of a "true" Orient (115). Levy's study thus introduces a more nuanced history of footbinding that replicates and attempts to deconstruct the objectification of the bound-footed woman, without however escaping the larger Orientalist tradition of representing the Orient in eroticizing, and essentializing terms.

Responding to this wave of male scholarship, Western feminists in the 1970s transformed footbinding into a prototypical example of an oppressive custom that kept women bound for centuries in their effort to liberate women worldwide, without however deconstructing the Orientalist framework of missionaries' and male scholars' writings. Andrea Dworkin in *Woman Hating* (1974) and Mary Daly in *Gyn/Economy* (1978) explored footbinding among other cases of female bodily mutilations, witch burning, as well as Indian suttee and African genital mutilation respectively. For both scholars, footbinding represented a case of female mutilation by a disabling and restrictive patriarchal system that lasted for centuries, a custom whose abolition enabled women's emancipation. Both authors thus conferred universal significance to

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<sup>15</sup> Ida Pruitt's 1945 transcription of Ning Lao Tai Tai's story in *A Daughter of Han: The Autobiography of a Chinese Working Woman* marks the first attempt to give voice to bound-footed women in memoirs written in English.

footbinding, transforming it into a universal symbol of female oppression under patriarchy, while using its demise as proof of women's successful liberation from debilitating customs.

The universalization of woman's oppression while drawing connections of patriarchal systems East and West, nevertheless contributed to erasing difference of racial inequality and discrimination in the West and thus obscured the special needs of women of color doubly discriminated because of their gender and race. Many feminists of color responded to white feminists in the 1980s. They argued that white feminists' attempt at fighting women's oppression worldwide remained centered around the needs of white women and oppressed women of color by marginalizing, if not ignoring, their needs (Benstock and Ferris 160).<sup>16</sup> Likewise, Dworkin's and Daly's rhetoric of liberation remained ingrained in a hegemonic discourse subordinating the East to the West, as the liberation of colored women's bodies—their return to their natural and normal shapes—was based on the same Western essentialist conceptions of what a woman should be and/or look like (Yeğenoğlu 115) upheld by their female missionary predecessors. In addition, by magnifying non-Western women's oppression in a distant land, both Dworkin and Daly minimalized the hegemonic role of white patriarchy and its continuing subjugation of women across the color line.

Dworkin's and Daly's approaches to footbinding—despite their shortcomings—have significantly impacted subsequent Western footbinding scholarships, and representations of women's oppression at a more global scale. These feminist scenarios oppose footbinding to the metaphor of unbinding on which women's liberation is predicated—although not always formulated as such. Shirley See Yan Ma's recent psychology study *Footbinding: A Jungian Engagement with Chinese Culture and Psychology* (2010) offers a case in point. Ma uses footbinding as a metaphor for the psychic suffering of women worldwide. According to her, as Chinese women were crippled by footbinding, women nowadays in many societies remain bound psychologically by norms dictated by patriarchy. She claims that women have been bound because they have “struggled to meet unattainable standards of perfection; they [have] tortured their bodies into shapes that men and society conside[r] desirable; and they [have thrown]

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<sup>16</sup> See Audre Lorde's critique to white radical feminists' racism in “An Open Letter to Mary Daly.” The anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (1983), in which this letter can be found, provides a good insight into the works of feminists of color in the 1980s. See also Wei's *Asian American Movement* 73-4 and 91-2.

themselves into the dreams of their parents or husbands but never their own” (xii). In other words, Ma equates footbinding, from a psychological point of view, with the suffering of women in general as well as with the repression of the *Feminine* imposed by patriarchy. Ma proposes therefore to liberate women from psychological subjugation through the analysis of recurring symbols produced by the unconscious. By *unbinding* these symbols, she seeks to bring psychological healing and transformation, as well as develop a non-repressed woman’s feminine personality and identity.

Chinese American historical projects published in the last fifteen years complicate this feminist reading of footbinding as exclusive symbol of Chinese women’s annihilation under patriarchy, as well as the Western liberatory discourse from which this custom has been predominantly approached. These recent works have re-integrated footbound women in the discussion, and drawn attention to the historical and cultural significance that this custom had had for the women who practiced it over the centuries. Chinese American scholars Wang Ping and Dorothy Ko have played an important role in this endeavor. Wang’s *Aching for Beauty: Footbinding in China* (2000) and Ko’s two monographs *Every Step a Lotus: Shoes for Bound Feet* (2001) and *Cinderella’s Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding* (2005) show how bound-footed women have been represented and constructed over the centuries in a variety of media and discourses, and explore the survival strategies, rituals and female culture that these women developed around footbinding. Both Wang and Ko have paid attention, for instance, to the shoes that Chinese women made and exchanged as gifts, as well as to the language—*nü shu*—that Chinese women invented and embroidered on their shoes to communicate with one another, thus circumventing the strict codes of behavior regulating their lives. By focusing on the rituals, culture and empowering strategies—as limited as they might be—that women developed around this custom, Wang and Ko have responded to Western feminists’ reductive association of footbinding with the offensive and maiming imposition of patriarchy only, and rewritten women’s victim script that continues to hold Chinese women in a state of inferiority and in need of salvation in Western discourses.

What remains to be written, however, is a revisionist history of footbinding across the gender divide that would also account for the cases of male footbinding that predominantly took place in the theatrical realm with the banning of female actors from the stage and the theater

from the seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries (Wu and Stevenson 47).<sup>17</sup> Such a revisionist history would help shed light on the construction of both cultured and gendered bodies in China outside of the bonds of Western discourses, but also on the Chinese hegemonic mechanisms *engendered* by these processes.

These feminist revisionist histories have been accompanied, at a larger scale, by the pressing need to record the oral testimonies of the surviving bound-footed women, for the most part, in their nineties, as shown by the increase in interviews<sup>18</sup> conducted in remote areas of China in the last twenty years. Photographic projects recording the last vestiges—feet and shoes—of these surviving women,<sup>19</sup> museum displays devoted to this custom,<sup>20</sup> as well as documentaries of these women's lives have also appeared at the turn of the twenty-first century in the United States and beyond.<sup>21</sup> Although these projects often continue to display the

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<sup>17</sup> For more on the female impersonation by male actors and the practice of footbinding in the theatrical realm see Cuncun Wu and Mark Stevenson's "Male Love Lost," Tian Min's "Male Dan" and Beverly Jackson's scattered references to this tradition in her *Splendid Slippers* 37, 112-3. See as well my analysis of Winston Tong's performance "Bound Feet" in chapter 5 of this work.

<sup>18</sup> See fn 14 of this introduction.

<sup>19</sup> Jo Farrell's photographic project *Living History: Bound Feet Women of China* (2014) combines interviews of women in Shandong with extensive photography of their naked feet. Her project received international attention.

<sup>20</sup> Many museum displays of footbinding artifacts took place in North America in the early 2000s. "Body Art: Marks of Identity" on view at the American Museum of Natural History between November 1999 and May 2000 and "Extreme Beauty: The Body Transformed" seen at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET) in New York City during winter 2001-2002 exhibited footbinding artifacts and reflected on the common association of footbinding with crippling beauty norms and fashion trend across cultures. Lotus shoes were featured in the exhibition "The Eagle and the Dragon: U.S. Relations with China" at the Herbert Hoover: Presidential Library & Museum in West Branch, IA in 2001. The Museum of Sex in New York City included lotus shoes and related artifacts as part of its temporary exhibition "Sex Among the Lotus: 2500 Years of Chinese Erotic Obsession" exhibited between March 2004 and January 2005. The Fleming Museum of Art in Vermont, MA hosted two temporary exhibitions in which lotus shoes were featured: "Collecting the Body, Transferring Desire" on view in 2005, and "From Heel to Toe: Shoes from the Fleming Museum" in 2007. The Museum of Anthropology of the College of Arts and Science at the University of Missouri had lotus shoes on display in 2012 as part of an exhibition on world shoes. The Mütter Museum exhibited in 2012 a preserved amputated bound foot in its special exhibition "Grimm's Anatomy: Magic and Medicine" for the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Grimm brothers' *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (1812). American museums have also hosted special footbinding exhibitions. The McClung Museum of Natural History and Culture at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville offered a footbinding display "Bound to Be Beautiful: Footbinding in Ancient China" in summer 2005. So did the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum with its micro-exhibition "The Golden Lotus: Footbinding in China" exhibited in the winter of 2000-2001. The Bata Shoe Museum in Toronto also offered a major footbinding exhibition "Every Step a Lotus: Shoes in the Lives of Women in Late Imperial China" displayed from January 2001 to June 2002 and curated by footbinding specialist Dorothy Ko. Lotus shoes and other footbinding artifacts can still be found in permanent museum exhibitions, notably at the Bata Museum in its collection of shoes from different places and periods. Lotus shoes and cleaning instruments for bound feet are on display at the art gallery of the Museum of Clean in Pocatello, ID. The Shoe Museum of the Temple University School of Podiatric Medicine (TUSPM) in Philadelphia presents a few pairs of lotus shoes among over 900 pairs of shoes.

<sup>21</sup> See *Small Happiness: Women of a Chinese Village* (1984), the first sequence of the documentary trilogy *One Village in China* co-directed by Carma Hinton and Richard Gordon and filmed in Shanxi Province; *Footbinding: In*

deformed bones of women's feet, they have equally re-integrated bound-footed women in the discussion, thus slowly changing the common perspective and knowledge regarding this custom.

Since the publication of Western feminists' take on footbinding, this custom has also attracted the attention of fictional writers in the West,<sup>22</sup> many of whom are American of Chinese descent. Thirty years before the publication of Ko's and Wang's revisionist histories, Chinese American writers turned to this ancient tradition, transforming it into a corporeal metaphor in their writings to approach a variety of topics related to imperial China, patriarchal oppression, immigration, generational and cultural clashes, gender identity issues and relationships, general living conditions in the United States, as well as Communism, more recently. This Chinese American footbinding literature is mainly clustered between the 1970s and the early 2000s, after which footbinding references substantially decline.<sup>23</sup> The time frame of these publications is crucial, as its beginning not only coincides with second-wave feminist discussion of bodily mutilation, but also with the development of Asian American studies as a field in the 1970s and Asian American assertion in the years that followed. With the civil rights movement, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Immigration Act of 1965, the ethnic revival led by minority groups, as well as the rise of second-wave feminism, women's studies, ethnic American studies, and queer studies, the 1970s offered new opportunities for Asian Americans to express themselves and define a sense of Asian American identity (see Wei's introduction and chapter 1). Chinese

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*Search of the Three Inch Golden Lotus* (2004) directed by Canadian filmmaker Yue Qing Yang; *Chinese Footbinding: The Vanishing Lotus* (2004) directed by Tang Yuan Mei Joani and Fung Wing Chuen Tely; Joanne Cheng's *Golden Lotus: The Legacy of Bound Feet* (2006); and Shirley Yi Hong Zhao's *The Golden Lotus* (2008).

<sup>22</sup> A few American women writers also found inspiration in footbinding. See Emily Prager's *A Visit From the Footbinder and Other Stories* (1983); Lisa Loomer, *The Waiting Room* (1988); JoAnn Levy's *The Daughter of Joy: A Novel of Gold Rush California* (1998); Barbara Hamby's poem "Footbinding as a Way of Life" (*The Alphabet of Desire*, 1999); Kathryn Harrison's *The Binding Chair, or a Visit from the Foot Emancipation Society: A Novel* (2000); and Donna Jo Napoli's *Bound* (2004).

<sup>23</sup> Jade Snow Wong was the first to mention footbinding in her memoir *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1950) and travelogue *No Chinese Stranger* (1975). More Chinese American texts referring to footbinding were published in the late 1970s onward. This is the case of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976) and *China Men* (1980); Bette Bao Lord's *Spring Moon* (1981); Ruthanne McCunn's *Thousand Pieces of Gold* (1981); Eileen Chang's *Love in a Fallen City* (1984); Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), *The Kitchen's God Wife* (1991), *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995) and *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001); Jung Chang's *Wild Swans* (1991); Genny Lim's *Paper Angels and Bitter Cane* (1991) and *Child of War* (2004); Wang Ping's *American Visa* (1994) and *Of Flesh and Spirit* (1999); Pang-Mei Natasha Chang's *Bound Feet and Western Dress* (1996); Laurence Yep's *Ribbons* (1997); Catherine Lim's *The Teardrop Story Woman* (1998); Ha Jin's *Waiting* (1999); Lensey Namioka's *Ties that Bind, Ties that Break* (2000); Anchee Min's *Becoming Madame Mao* (2001); May-Lee and Winberg Chai's *The Girl From Purple Mountain* (2001); and Lisa See's *Snow Flowers and the Secret Fan* (2007). Chinese Canadian Ting-Xing Ye also published her memoir *A Leaf in the Bitter Wind* (1998) containing references to footbinding, and a children's book *White Lily* (2000) centered on this custom. This list is not exhaustive.

American scholars alongside other Asian American groups began to retrace their literary traditions obscured by a predominantly white American canon as well as by decades of exclusion and discrimination laws against Asian immigrants in the United States. They also started to write their own experiences giving rise to numerous memoirs, novels, poetry and short story collections, as well as theatrical plays and representations. Yet, their self-assertion as ethnic American writers remained controlled and mediated by mainstream society, whose assimilationist rhetoric and normative order continued to influence their lives. Torn between their integration into American society and the preservation of their ethnic cultures, Asian Americans' recuperation of their literary and historical past, as well as their ethnic self-assertion, needs to be understood and contextualized within this conflicting background of the late twentieth century.

This conflicting background also led to tensions within the Asian American community—tensions that predominantly developed across the gender line between male cultural nationalists and feminist women writers. The editors of the first Asian American literary anthology *Aiiieeee: An Asian-American Anthology of Writers* (1974), Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada and Shawn Wong defended the necessity of developing an Asian American sensibility that would oppose the offensive Orientalist stereotypes of Asianness deployed by mainstream society, an Asian American sensibility that they first and foremost defined in masculine terms. Indeed, not only were these male editors defending the necessity of defining an essentialized and fixed Asian American cultural identity that was predominantly masculine, heterosexual and patriarchal (see Eng loc1902 and loc1930), they were so doing by repudiating a lineage of Asian American writers, predominantly women, whom they accused of reproducing offensive stereotypes in their ethnic *prostitution* to white readership and of contributing to the demonization of Asian American men through their “feminization” of Asian American literature and exaggerated misogynistic misrepresentations of Chinese patriarchy (Lowe 75).<sup>24</sup>

The solution offered by Chin and his colleagues to redress a century of exclusion laws and castration was not viable. As David Eng explains in *Racial Castration*, their “reification of a strident cultural nationalism, with its doctrine of compulsory heterosexuality and cultural

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<sup>24</sup> This critique to Asian American women writers is fully formulated in Chin's infamous introduction “Come Ye All Asian Americans of the Real and the Fake” to their second anthology *The Big Aiiieeee!* (1991).

authenticity, mirrors at once the dominant heterosexist and racist structures through which the Asian American male is historically feminized and rendered self-hating in the first place” (loc485). In other words, far from dismantling the destructive racializing *and* gendering system that emasculated them since the mid-nineteenth century, the *Aiiieeeee* editors re-duplicated these heteronormative values in their community. Eager to regain a sense of masculinity, the *Aiiieeeee* editors thus forged an important gap between Asian American men and women, while continuing to propagate hegemonic heteronormative discourses.

This tension between the sexes is crucial for understanding the footbinding trope that developed in Chinese American literature in the 1970s, making of the 1970s and 1980s crucial decades of gender conflicts within the Asian American community. These conflicts led to demonized representations of gender identity sustaining hegemonic discourses, as well as to important countering modes of production dismantling these power structures of racialization and sexualization. The footbinding literary and artistic representations that took shape during the 1970s and 1980s simultaneously reproduced the gender division among Asian Americans at the heart of this conflict as they were predominantly deployed by women writers to explore their conflicting matrilineage. Yet, these representations also brought to light a more communal attempt to fight and oppose offensive stereotypes across the gender divide in this time of ethnic revival, notably as footbinding came to embody both Chinese (American) men’s and women’s pasts of exclusion, gender oppression and displacement in the writings and artistic productions of a few Chinese American artists—male and female. In this respect, the Chinese American trope of footbinding is always-already double-edged, as discourses of femininity and masculinity in Chinese America are not only imbricated, but also interwoven with larger discourses of racial subjugation and resistance.

The feminist assertion of the 1970s certainly motivated many Chinese American female writers and artists to oppose the masculinist stance of cultural nationalists and their erasure of Chinese American women from the community’s history and arts. Grappling with the silence of the first generation regarding both their past lives in China and their immigration, as well as the patriarchal ideals permeating both the Chinese American community and mainstream society, American-born Chinese women began to explore their Chinese matrilineal culture and history, while simultaneously recuperating and writing Chinese American history from a female perspective, thus opposing and filling the gaps left by their male counterparts.

Influenced by radical feminist footbinding discussions, and the rise of an ethnic feminism leading to the development of the Asian American women's movement (see Wei's chapter 3), Chinese American women writers regarded footbinding with a critical eye in their concurrent attempt at dismantling Chinese and American patriarchal systems, while asserting themselves as women. It is not surprising that many Chinese American women turned to footbinding to explore aspects of their Chinese culture and legacy at a time of renewed interest in this practice in the United States as it not only spoke of the Chinese misogynistic culture Chinese (American) women confronted, but also of a female culture that brought their female ancestors together for generations. Indeed, it is an ambivalent footbinding history across which Chinese American women writers came, footbinding equally speaking of subjugation and self-fashioning, oppression and resistance, patriarchal imposition and matriarchal appropriation—a practice made even more ambivalent when transposed to the American context as gender roles and markers were redefined.

Although the footbound women who migrated to the United States in the nineteenth century were rare, the few who arrived prior to the massive immigration of Chinese laborers were exhibited in museums as exotic curios for the entertainment of the forming American middle class. With the Yellow Peril that this massive immigration brought forth, Chinese immigration soon became regulated to its extreme, limiting the entry to Chinese merchants and upper-class Chinese citizens. Bound-footed women were granted privileged entrance in the aftermath of the exclusion laws of 1882, footbinding being considered at the U.S. border as a marker of social status distinguishing them from the forbidden prostitutes (Luibhéid 48-9; Yung, *Unbound Feet* 23-4). It was also seen as a disabling practice that would confine women to their domestic sphere, if not limit them from “wandering” outside of the segregated space of Chinatown (see Yung, *Unbound Feet* 25). In this respect, footbinding played a fundamental role in the history of Chinese women's immigration, a history that not only speaks of their objectification and subjugation, but also of their agency—as limited as it might be—in using their unusual bodies to appeal to their American audience at a time of conflicting relationships. Thus turning to footbinding at a time of feminist and ethnic assertion, Chinese American women writers explored their confused and often conflicting Chinese matrilineal legacy, as well as the equally obscured history of Chinese women's immigration and experience on American soil, while trying to make sense of their own cross-cultural identity. Yet, despite this female



perspective, footbinding remains interlaced to broader discussions of gender, such as patriarchal mutilation and women's resistance to subjugation and oppression. It cannot be therefore dissociated from representations of Chinese men and masculinity, power and castration, in China as in the United States.

The literary and performance group Unbound Feet that formed in 1979 is typical of this early wave of Chinese American feminist assertion. Chinese American writers Genny Lim, Canyon Sam, Kitty Tsui, Nellie Wong, Nancy Hom and Merle Woo created Unbound Feet to “challenge the stereotypes of passivity and servitude that *bound* Chinese women in their mind,” as Trinity A. Ordoná puts it (327). William Wei similarly emphasizes that these writers used bound and unbound feet in their literary performances<sup>25</sup> as metaphors to allude to their Chinese legacy, “one that traditionally bound the souls as well as the feet of its women,” but also to mark “their liberation as women and as writers” from a Chinese patriarchal order (87). Their figurative identification with unbound feet inscribed them as well in a legacy of Chinese feminism that developed at the turn of the twentieth century with the nationalist movement that led to the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1911. Following Chinese male reformers, a group of Chinese revolutionary women loosened or unbound their feet—when possible—in a sign of self-making and encouraged women to unbind and to stop perpetuating this custom for the good of the Chinese nation, as well as to free women from their physical and intellectual enslavements.<sup>26</sup> By thus calling themselves Unbound Feet, this group of Chinese American artists simultaneously expressed their Chinese legacy and their feminist affiliation. This group was short-lived, however, as Unbound Feet dissolved in 1981, ending their collective stage appearances, yet pursuing their individual careers.

Unbinding has often been read as symbolic of the relationship of Chinese women's gender roles and emancipation from constrictive Confucian ideals in the United States (see Yung, *Unbound Feet*). Often having to unbind their feet to adapt to the economic reality of their new land, they stepped outside of their domestic sphere and delimited area to help their husbands/fathers make ends meet. This liberation rhetoric however masks the gender displacement that took shape among Chinese immigrants. Not only were Chinese men forced to

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<sup>25</sup> Unbound Feet started off by reading poems on stage (Wei 87). Their performances became more complex as their audience increased. Opening with a description of bound feet's mutilation, and closing on a chorus emphasizing their *unbinding* as women and writers, their performances became more ritualistic (Ordoná 327; Wei 87).

<sup>26</sup> See chapter 3 of this work.

take on the tasks usually performed by women in their predominant bachelor societies, but they were also commonly portrayed as emasculated in mainstream society due to their more feminine gender markers (queue, attire) and phenotypes in the eyes of the Western majority. In addition to being emasculated, they were also castrated—deprived of their reproductive ability to found a family due to exclusion and anti-miscegenation laws, as well as disenfranchised and deprived of rights. Unbound Feet's feminist identification with so-called *liberated* feet, contributed to obscuring the emasculation and pathologization of Chinese American men, thus responding to their contemporary Chinese American cultural nationalists' erasure of Chinese women in their discussion of migration and community building by turning this erasure back at them. In so doing, Unbound Feet did not subvert mechanisms of gender oppression, but replicated them in their attempt to figuratively unbind themselves from their constricting positionality as culturally and racially oppressed women.

Similar attempts at identifying with unbound or liberated feet can be noted in the fiction of other Chinese American writers, such as Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, Genny Lim, and Wang Ping, where footbinding is evoked in female protagonists' personal fights against the oppressive burden of their heritage in the United States and in the self-assertion of their fluid cross-cultural identities. Yet, these writers have equally revised the line separating footbinding and unbinding, as protagonists—often unable to unbind from their cultural legacy—reconnect or metaphorically *rebind*, so to speak, with their female ancestors. Frequently associated with heroines' ethnic and feminist assertion against *and* in symbiosis with their Chinese female forbearers and culture, footbinding and unbinding representations refuse clear-cut division and linear development.

Maxine Hong Kingston also brings footbinding representation to new grounds as she approaches both Chinese American women's inner conflicts at cultural and patriarchal crossroads, and the emasculation of Chinese American men in the United States through the trope of footbinding, thus dismantling the gender boundaries dominating her contemporary writers' works—cultural nationalists and feminists alike—and pointing to the necessity of building coalitions across the gender line. Chinese American women writers, in their works dating from the 1970s to the early 2000s, have thus complicated the literary group Unbound Feet's exclusive identification with *liberated* feet and deployed more complex and ambivalent

representations of footbinding to examine Chinese (American) history, gender displacement and redefinition, as well as the formation of fluctuating identities across borders.

Maxine Hong Kingston was not alone in approaching gender displacement through the trope of footbinding. Other contemporary Chinese American male artists also turned to footbinding to explore gender issues from a predominantly feminist point of view. Singer and performer Winston Tong brought footbinding to the theatrical realm in 1979 with his solo performance “Bound Feet.” Perhaps as a response to *Unbound Feet*’s feminist identification with liberated feet, Tong’s performance, produced the same year as this literary circle’s first readings, similarly turns to footbinding but to explore the difficult gendering of the Chinese body—male and female—through footbinding and his own conflicting ties (gender, familial, cultural). His performance draws attention to, if not denounces, the instrumentality of cultural and sexual markers of difference in the construction of Otherness and in self-identification processes, reformulates feminist ideas across the gender line, and dismantles gender categories altogether. A decade later, Arthur Dong also used footbinding to explore Chinese women’s cultural, social, familial and gender ties in the transnational context of migration, thus retracing part of his own cultural legacy through the unsettling custom of footbinding. His narrative film *Lotus (Toisan Trilogy)*, (1987) retraces the plight and everyday battle of Chinese immigrants’ so-called *widow wives* in the early decades of the twentieth century through a compelling story of a mother’s rebellion against her daughter’s footbinding. Tong’s, and Dong’s visual adaptations, while complementing female writers’ recuperation of an obscured and contested chapter of Chinese history, have, despite their feminist overtones, contributed to exhibiting, sensationalizing and fetishizing the deformed and gory bound foot to cater to the still prevalent exotic taste of American viewers.

Although footbinding has more often been re-interpreted and used by male artists and film directors in Chinese American productions with feminist overtone,<sup>27</sup> a few Chinese American writers have approached footbinding in their fictional works—a minority, however, compared to their female counterparts. Laurence Yep and Ha Jin are the only Chinese American male writers, to my knowledge, to have made footbinding an integral part of the plot in their

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<sup>27</sup> More recently, film director Wayne Wang brought footbinding to the attention of a larger audience in his cinematic adaptation (2011) of Lisa See’s novel *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, a novel retracing the difficult life journey of two sworn sisters (*laotong*) in a misogynistic nineteenth-century China. See the epilogue of this work.

respective novel *Ribbons* (1997) and *Waiting* (1999)—two fictions that respectively explore cultural and generational clash and bonding in a Chinese American family and the contradictory and debilitating discourse put forth by the Communist regime in China. These literary works lack, however, the subversive tone of their female counterparts, as they re-produce more than subvert Orientalist stereotypes of Chinese-ness.

Deployed by Chinese American women and men writers/artists, as well as applied to both female and male bodies, the Chinese American trope of footbinding needs to be read as an ambivalent motif fluctuating across gender, cultural, social, historical and national borders, but also between Orientalist stereotypes and countering modes of expression and production; an ambivalence which has however been obscured in the existing scholarship on Chinese American footbinding representations.

### ***Limitations of the Existing Scholarship***

The creation and deployment of footbinding and unbinding tropes in Chinese American literature and their visual adaptations in popular culture have remained largely unexplored. While scattered references to footbinding can be found in articles mostly dealing with Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* and *The Woman Warrior*,<sup>28</sup> only two articles surveying the trope of footbinding in Chinese American literature have been published, to my knowledge: Bonnie Khaw-Posthuma's "Unbound Feet: A Metaphor for the Transformation of the Chinese Immigrant Female in Chinese American Literature" published in *The Chinese in America: A History from Gold Mountain to the New Millennium*, edited by Susie Lan Cassel (2002), and Cassel's own article "'...The binding altered not only my feet but my whole character.' Footbinding and First-World Feminism in Chinese American Literature" that appeared in the *Journal of Asian American Studies* in 2007. Inspired by Judy Yung's metaphorical frame deployed in her socio-historical study *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Women in San Francisco* (1995), Khaw-Posthuma and Cassel read footbinding representations in relation to their symbolic portrayal of Chinese

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<sup>28</sup> See Shirley Chew, "'Double Binds Around My Feet': The Enormity of the Everyday in Women's Writing and Writing about Women" (2005); Lance Weldy, "The Rhetoric of Intertextuality: Maxine Hong Kingston's Emasculation of China Men Through Li Ruzhen's *Flowers in the Mirror*" (2003); Donald C. Goellnight, "Tang Ao in America: Male Subject Positions in *China Men*" (1998); Sheng-Mei Ma, "Asian Immigrants with 'Magical Disabilities': Oriental Tongues and Bound Feet." *East-West Montage* (2007); as well as Deborah Madsen, "Queering Cultural China: Performing Nation through the Feminine Body" (2011), among others.

(American) female protagonists' self-development from oppression to emancipation, leaving the historical pathologization and emasculation of Chinese American men aside.

Yung, perhaps inspired by the work of *Unbound Feet*, uses the metaphors of footbinding and unbinding to frame her discussion of Chinese women's development in San Francisco. She links footbinding—symbol of Chinese women's oppression and subjugation under a restrictive feudal and patriarchal system—to Chinese immigrant women's life condition *bound* by sexist and racist beliefs that not only confined them at home and in Chinatown but also excluded them from mainstream society in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (7). In contrast, she associates the process of unbinding with Chinese immigrant women's and their American-born daughters' slow liberation and emancipation from sexist and racist laws. Yung thus hints at Chinese women's emancipation movement occurring in China in the early decades of the twentieth century in which unbinding became a fundamental step in women revolutionaries' nationalist and feminist modernization and self-assertion. By transposing footbinding to Chinese America where Chinese (American) women rarely had their feet bound—the custom being quickly discontinued in the United States—Yung bestows unbinding with figurative meaning. Applied to their bodies more generally, as well as to their voices, unbinding discursively epitomizes Chinese American women's liberation from their *bound* lives in the United States.

Drawing on Yung's metaphorical frame, Khaw-Posthuma analyzes footbinding and unbinding metaphors in her article "Unbound Feet"—a synthesis of her dissertation *Unbinding the Feet: The Physical and Symbolic Representation of Bound Feet in Chinese American Literature* defended in 1998. She explores these metaphors in the context of female protagonists' struggles against their conflicting Chinese and American cultures across generations in the fictions of Maxine Hong Kingston, Jade Snow Wong, Amy Tan, Ruthanne McCunn, and Pang-Mei Natasha Chang. She reads the bound foot in Chinese American fiction as "a powerful *physical* and *symbolic* representation" of female protagonists' oppression by their Chinese culture ("Unbound" 260), while unbinding depicts their achievement of "a freedom and power unknown in [their] native China—as signified by the symbolic and sometimes literal unbinding of [their] feet" (261).

Although offering a comparative view on footbinding references across Chinese American women's writings, this article remains limited in its claim and analysis of this recurrent trope. Not only does this progressive move from footbinding to unbinding fail to

capture the complex and ambivalent depictions of footbinding and unbinding in the Chinese American texts analyzed, it is also quite assimilationist and Orientalist in scope. Despite some Chinese American women's personal use of unbinding as symbol of their assertion as women and writers, the association of footbinding with oppression and unbinding with liberation, especially, needs to be complicated. The association of footbinding with oppression is based exclusively on bound feet's deformed bones and flesh. Yet, as Wang Ping explains, there is more to footbinding than the mutilation, eroticism and silence that have been associated with it: beneath deceptive "codes of silence," footbinding appears as a "roaring ocean current of female language and culture that integrated writing and binding with weaving, talking and female bonding" (*Aching xi*). Interpreting footbinding as a bodily and cultural language, Wang diverts attention from the mutilated feet that lotus shoes once contained to focus instead on this custom's connecting power. The female culture that developed around footbinding through the teaching of the binding and shoemaking skills across generations in the female space of the inner chamber, but also through the exchange of shoes among female relatives and friends, has much to teach us about matrilineage and female bonds beyond mutilation (see also Dorothy Ko's *Every Step a Lotus*). As a result, equating footbinding exclusively with the deformed bones of the mutilated foot suggests a one-dimensional story of subjugation and oppression that obscures the more positive bindings that this custom could also symbolize. Indeed, footbinding representations in some Chinese American texts are often more ambivalent, simultaneously separating *and* connecting Chinese practitioners and their female descendants, negatively and more positively.

Similarly, the liberation achieved through the unbinding of the feet needs to be nuanced, as the "un" of unbinding remains deceptively simple despite the empowering connotation Chinese revolutionary women conferred to it at the turn of the twentieth century. The process of unbinding rarely brought physical liberation. Oral testimonies of bound-footed women who tried to unbind their feet, as well as medical studies, have pointed to the irreversibility of footbinding.<sup>29</sup> In other words, the unbinding of the feet, which women have described as more painful than the binding process, rarely returns the foot to its natural shape and normal function.

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<sup>29</sup> Ko states that "footbinding is an irrevocable bodily process once the bones are bent and new muscles habits formed. 'Liberated feet,' as they were called, were harder to walk on and more deformed than bound feet" (*Cinderella* 11). Surgeons H.S.Y Fang and F.Y.K Yu show in "Foot Binding in Chinese Women" how the joints in the feet, once they have adapted to the newly shaped bound foot "cannot be straightened, even by force" (199). See as well Steven R. Cummings, Xu Ling, and Katie Stone's "Consequences of Foot Binding" 1677-79; and M.E. Mottram and I. Roger Pyle's "Mandarin Feet" 318-9.

Many women have been forced to keep bandages, although loosened, in order to walk, while other women had to keep their feet tightly bound, unable to walk altogether without the support of wrappings and shoes.<sup>30</sup> A discrepancy between the literal and metaphorical unbinding can therefore be noted, a discrepancy rarely acknowledged in discussions of women's figurative unbinding in Chinese American literature. Looking at the more ambivalent process of unbinding would thus complicate the exaggerated success stories that this trope puts forward, and focus instead on the more ambivalent function of these unbinding representations in Chinese American fiction. It would also acknowledge the figurative re-binding that often replaces protagonists' attempts at liberating themselves from their legacy, family and/or community in their journey to self-assertion.

Ultimately, the move from China to the United States that this progression from footbinding to unbinding sustains in Khaw-Posthuma's work continues rather than subverts the assimilationist rhetoric put forth by mainstream society. In her analysis, liberation is predominantly associated with the United States, while footbinding comes to symbolize a crippling Chinese culture that hinders protagonists' development or self-realization. The Orientalist scope of this equation is problematic as it depicts China as an unwanted and barbaric cultural past, while portraying the United States as a land of possibilities. Chinese American experience described in fiction refuses this linear development. This assimilationist and Orientalist progressive move from footbinding (=oppression and China) to unbinding (=liberation and America) does not represent the conflicting identity struggles of Chinese (American) protagonists who often refuse ethnic/cultural rejection in the name of assimilation, despite preliminary attempts to do so, and come to inhabit a more ambivalent space across borders. As a result, representations of footbinding and unbinding, in many Chinese American texts, do not progress from one term to the other as Khaw-Posthuma contends, but appear in interwoven juxtapositions, constantly revising and destabilizing one another.

In her article "...The binding altered not only my feet but my whole character:' Footbinding and First-World Feminism in Chinese American Literature" (2007), Cassel goes a step further and argues that footbinding is used in Chinese American literature as a synecdoche that "serves a modern, feminist, and anti-bound-foot agenda" (53) in its "straddl[ing] of the

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<sup>30</sup> Bound-footed women's testimonies on the unbinding process will be discussed at more length in chapter 3.

Asian/American, first-world/developing world cultural and nationalist divide” (31–2). “This activist agenda,” she continues, “ironically objectifies, homogenizes, and ahistoricizes the Chinese subaltern woman in the name of anti-racism and anti-sexism” (32).<sup>31</sup> In her view, Chinese American authors Jade Snow Wong, Ruthanne McCunn, Lisa See, Genny Lim, Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston have deprived footbinding of its cultural, historical, social and emotional specificities to advocate the unbound foot, which supports a pro-American feminist rhetoric. Similarly to Khaw-Posthuma, Cassel reads representations of footbinding as principally progressing from footbinding to unbinding, from China to the United States, but denounces, instead the assimilationist and Orientalist scope of this progression as bound feet are turned, in her opinion, into Orientalist stereotypical depictions of a mysterious, exotic, yet backward and remote Chinese culture, at the detriment of the women who bound their feet. Yet, similarly to Khaw-Posthuma, Cassel pays little attention to the rather ambivalent depictions of footbinding in Chinese American literature that refuse easy categorization, and does not account for the predominant failure of America’s unbinding power for Chinese (American) women who remain bound by sexist and racist laws in the United States, and often choose to *rebind* with their Chinese cultural heritage, thus opposing her pro-American “anti-bound-foot agenda” rhetoric (19).

Furthermore, by approaching the trope of footbinding in Chinese American literature from a Chinese historical perspective, Cassel points to the limitation of her argument. What is missing in Chinese American literary texts dealing with bound feet, Cassel claims, are “stories that go beyond the surface and that meet footbinding in its full cultural and historical space in order to illustrate in a satisfying way how this practice was perpetuated for so long and so widely, given its severity” (53-4). As admirable as this endeavor might be, the question remains: how can Chinese American representations of footbinding “meet footbinding in its full cultural and historical space” if, in Ko’s words, “we hardly know what footbinding is about because the archives fail to answer the most rudimentary questions” on the origins of the custom, on how it spread, and especially on how women felt about it (Cassel 31, qting Ko, *Every Step a Lotus* 8-9). Although Cassel agrees with Ko regarding the elusiveness of footbinding’s historical facts (54), she nevertheless expects Chinese American literature to recover footbinding’s historical and

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<sup>31</sup> The first-world feminism Cassel refers to here, while not specifically defined in her article, can be linked to Dworkin’s and Daly’s attempt in the 1970s to stop crippling beauty customs worldwide.



cultural past from bound-footed women's standpoint by paradoxically "imagin[ing] the *truth* that once existed" (54, my emphasis) and thus subverting pro-American first-world feminist narratives.

Yet, as Sue-Im Lee underlines, Asian American literature is a constructed and performative discourse, not an ethnographic practice ("Introduction" 2, 6), although it is indissociable from history in many ways. Literary depictions of footbinding should not be read as *authentic* renditions of footbound women's experiences, but as discursive constructions.<sup>32</sup> Accordingly, by blurring the lines separating fiction from history, as well as China from diasporic communities, Cassel does not recognize the symbolic potential of footbinding beyond its historical factuality, and the figurative meaning this custom has for Chinese American writers across generational, temporal, cultural, and spatial borders<sup>33</sup>—symbolic meaning already present in historical records. In predominantly focusing on Chinese history, Cassel does not see what the recurrent tropes of footbinding and unbinding can teach us about Chinese American writers' visions of their community and heritage at the end of the twentieth century, at a time of important—yet conflicting—self-definition and assertion.

Moreover, in her desire to subvert Orientalist constructions of bound-footed women diffused in Chinese American literature, and in her call for revisionist and reparative narratives that would go beyond "first-world critique" and "orientalist intrigue" (54), Cassel equally invokes, through her quotation of Gayatri Spivak's words, the need of more *authentic* renditions of bound-footed women's lives and vision that would help us "understand 'the consciousness of the subaltern'" (54). By inviting Asian American authors to "imagine the truth that once existed," she not only deploys an essentialist vocabulary, but also puts the West in a position of discursive and representational power while relegating the bound-footed woman to the place of the represented. In so doing, she also positions Asian American writers as cultural insiders needed to better interpret and therefore recover bound-footed women's lost voices and lives. Cassel thus

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<sup>32</sup> For more on the danger of reading realities in Asian American literature, see Elaine H. Kim, "Defining Asian American Realities" 146-70; Patricia P. Chu, *Assimilating Asians* (2002); and Schultermantl, *Transnational Matrilineage* 9-31. These *authentic* renditions are further questioned when read in the context of Homi Bhabha's concept of "cultural translation"—the carrying or bearing across of culture from one place to another and its inevitable transformation as a result of "migration, diaspora, displacement, relocation" (191). Footbinding's practice and cultural significance are necessarily subject to change when relocated to new grounds.

<sup>33</sup> As Ma states in "Asian Immigrants," "Asian Americans are railing less against the historical phenomenon of footbinding than against its metaphorical description of women's abiding pain here and now" (192).

presumes their origins and background in China not in the United States, to use Henry Yu's terminology (*Thinking Orientals* 23). In other words, despite her endeavor to de-Orientalize footbinding representations, Cassel nevertheless replicates the Orientalist discourse she seeks to subvert. Moreover, by focusing exclusively on Chinese American female writers and protagonists, she does not see how the trope of footbinding and its deployment across the gender divide complicates first-world Orientalist feminism and proposes instead alternative modes of feminist representations.

### ***Toward an Ambivalent Orientalism: Redefining Chinese American Footbinding Literature***

Although I wish to complicate Khaw-Posthuma's and Cassel's readings of the binary of footbinding and unbinding in Chinese American literature, especially their reading of unbinding as liberation, and the pathologization of the Chinese male figure that this liberation implies that both authors have left out, I do not intend, however, to dispute Cassel's analysis of Orientalist depictions of footbinding. Building on Edward Said's definition of Orientalism, Cassel rightly points to Chinese American literature's often reification of Chinese culture as backward and remote, as well as erotic and exotic, through its pervasive footbinding representations. Following her lead, I take Orientalism at the starting point of my discussion, but reflect on how Chinese American writers and artists deploy *and* subvert these predominantly Orientalist bound-feet images of Chinese-ness in their representations of Chinese (American) protagonists' identity struggles in a hostile environment, as well as in their own fights for self-assertion as American writers/artists of Chinese descent in the United States.

Said defines Orientalism as the “corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it” (3). “In short,” he continues, “Orientalism is a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (3). Orientalism thus stems from a hegemonic discourse that creates and represents the Orient—or the East more generally speaking—as *Oriental* to sustain the supremacy of the West (Said 5, 60): “The Orient was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be ‘Oriental’ in all those ways considered commonplace by an average nineteenth-century European, but also because it *could be*—that is, submitted to being—*made Oriental*” (5-6). Unable to represent themselves in Western discourse,

*Orientalists* were indeed created and mediated by the West. These Orientalist ideologies were propagated “into the general culture” (Said 6) through a variety of discursive constructions and representations—“material investments,” in Said’s terms (6), that inferiorized, objectified, often feminized and dehumanized the Oriental Other (Yoshihara 6-7); expressions of cultural inferiorization that justified European imperialism in its national and cultural construction.

Following the lead of Malini Johar Schueller and other Asian American scholars including Henry Yu, Robert G. Lee, John Kuo Wei Tchen and Mary Yoshihara, my work complicates the Eurocentricism of Said’s *Orientalism*. While acknowledging the Orientalist impulse of the United States in the nineteenth century, Said mostly locates the beginning of an American Orientalism in the post-World War II context when the United States rose as an imperialist and colonialist power (290). The American Orientalist vestiges dating to the nineteenth century he describes mostly consist of writings by Herman Melville and Mark Twain, as well as a few transcendentalists, theologians, diplomats and missionaries (290). However, Orientalism played a more important role in nineteenth-century American national and cultural self-definition at home and abroad than Said contends. The construction of China as an exotic and erotic, yet primitive and barbaric cultural landscape attests to the American Orientalist practices that led to the creation of a sense of American national and cultural identity, as well as fostered the building of the United States as a world power.

A tradition of Orientalist writings about North Africa, the Middle East and India in the United States dating from the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth century precedes the American Orientalization of China, and East Asia more generally, that started in the early nineteenth century and became more prominent in the context of the Yellow Peril and the Chinese exclusion laws of 1882. In her book *U.S. Orientalisms: Race, Nation and Gender in Literature, 1790-1890*, Schueller maps the development of this early tradition and multifaceted constructions of the Oriental Other in American discourses.<sup>34</sup> Not only does she deconstruct the

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<sup>34</sup> For other works dealing with form of American Orientalisms, past and present, see Zeynep Çelik’s *Displaying the Orient: Architecture of Islam at Nineteenth-Century World’s Fairs* (1992); John Kuo Wei Tchen’s *New York Before Chinatown* (1999); Holly Edwards’s *Noble Dreams, Wicked Pleasures: Orientalism in America, 1870-1930* (2000); Henry Yu’s *Thinking Orientals* (2001); Mari Yoshihara’s *Embracing the East* (2003); Christina Klein’s *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (2003); Douglas Little’s *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945* (2008); Regina Varin-Mignano’s *Orientalism and American Immigration: A Social Work View* (2008); David Brody’s *Visualizing American Empire: Orientalism and Imperialism in the Philippines* (2010); John Carlos Rowe’s *The Cultural Politics of New American Studies* (2012);

Eurocentricism of Orientalist practices at the heart of Said's work, but she revises as well the monolithism of Said's definition to point to the multiplicity and historicity of Orientalist constructions that evolved in time and contexts, as well as the fluidity of these representations "dependent on the Oriental qualities [they] sought to (control and) dissociate [themselves] from" (3; 6-7).<sup>35</sup> Indeed, Schueller shows, on the one hand, the multifacted Orientalism in U.S. discourses through its shifting representational focus from North Africa (Algeria and Egypt) to India that accompanied the development of the United States throughout the nineteenth century as an empire able to rival with Europe and ultimately to take its place as a world power (see chapter 1 of Schueller's work); an imperialist project complicit in the building of a national and cultural identity masking "the internal colonization of Native Americans and African Americans" and the "national instabilities" of the newly-formed United States (9).<sup>36</sup>

On the other hand, Schueller deconstructs the gender, racial, and cultural dynamics at the core of Said's *Orientalism* and points instead to "the mutability of gender categories in a transnational context" (11). Although Schueller agrees with Said regarding the predominant feminization, objectification and primitivization of the Oriental Other in contrast to its masculine, and civilized Western nation, she points to moments of reconfiguration that revise gender binaries in American Orientalist discourses (5).<sup>37</sup> In so doing, she questions the masculine heteronormativity of the American nation to point to the "possibilities of homoerotic gendering that cannot be freely articulated at home" offered by the encounter with the Oriental Other abroad (6). This creates more subversive forms of Orientalism that complicate, if not question, the national, cultural and gender constructions of both the Oriental Other and the American

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Teemu Ruskola's *Legal Orientalism: China, the United States and Modern Law* (2013); and Joseph Allen Boone's *The Homoerotics of Orientalism* (2014). This list is not exhaustive.

<sup>35</sup> A similar deconstruction of Said's monolithic approach and pluralization of Orientalist practices has been noted by Lisa Lowe in her *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms* (1991) in the context of her analysis of plural European Orientalisms.

<sup>36</sup> Schueller foregrounds how U.S. Orientalisms were always enmeshed with racial and cultural problems taking place in the United States, often in an attempt to mask and/or repress anxieties regarding "the wholeness and stability of the nation in the face of diverse ethnic immigration and African American and Native American presences" (4).

<sup>37</sup> Schueller gives as examples the European picturing of the Americas "through the body of the Native American woman, resplendent with fruits, a symbol of fertility" (11), the representation of the New World through its identification as Columbia—a feminine figure which was "associated with activity, power, athletic vigor and (virtuous) desire for expansion and control, qualities traditionally coded as male" (12), and the national symbol of liberty based on the "Roman goddess of liberty" (12). The nation was subsequently masculinized in imperial and national discourses, but, as Schueller underlines, this construction of the nation as masculine was punctuated by moments of gender destabilization and questioning enabled by the encounter with the Oriental Other (12).

empire. Schueller's discourse thus highlights the unstable grounds in which Orientalist discourses developed in the United States, thus making of Orientalism a tool of oppression for Orientalist practitioners, but also a tool of resistance to heteronormative norms. Schueller's work is therefore instrumental in emphasizing the ambivalence, as well as constructivist and de-constructivist stances, already inherent to discursive forms of American Orientalisms. This double-edged stance is crucial for my analysis of representations of Chinese immigrants through footbinding practices that not only complicate the gender binaries of male and female in contexts of migration, but also portray Chinese male and female immigrants' gendered identities in ambivalent terms. Indeed, this double-edged stance also enables a subversive reinterpretation and/or repositioning of Orientalist practices from the perspective of the Oriental Other.

Although drawing on Schueller's *U.S. Orientalisms*, my work starts where hers ends. Concluding her introduction on a note regarding the other types of U.S. Orientalisms thriving throughout the nineteenth century that her book left out, she mentions the proliferation of Orientalist representations of China in the United States. She suggests however that we should read these Orientalist productions "in the context of the Chinese immigrant cultures of California more than in the context of imperialism, although, no doubt, the two are related" (20). Departing from her suggestion, my work reads the Orientalist constructions and representations of Chinese immigrants in a transnational context, paying particular attention to how American trade and imperialist mission in China constructed footbinding in the U.S. imagination in ambivalent terms as exotic and mesmerizing, yet barbaric and primitive, and how Chinese women immigrants—as well as the Chinese American community more broadly—simultaneously used and deconstructed these stereotypes from the 1840s to the early twentieth century in their own self- and cultural definition. I therefore explore what Schueller calls the "new Oriental contexts" of the late nineteenth century (21) in relation to the degrading transnational relationship between China and the United States that led to the American exclusion of Chinese immigrants in 1882 and their vilifying representations in American media and literature,<sup>38</sup> thus making the ambivalent Chinese

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<sup>38</sup> Henry Yu links these *new Oriental contexts* to the involvement of the United States in China and Japan through missionary work, and the influx of immigrants from both countries that settled on the West Coast (*Thinking Orientals* viii, 30). His work, focusing on 1920s Chicago Sociologists' Race Relation Survey and their tackling of the "Oriental Problem" in the United States shows indeed how American Orientalist discourses evolved in the early twentieth century to center, almost exclusively, on Chinese and Japanese at home and abroad. This narrow focus, as he explains, contributed to the exclusion of other Asian immigrants (from Korea, the Philippines and India notably)

and Chinese American histories of footbinding an integrant part of my work. Indeed, taking roots in and building on these ambivalent histories, the Chinese American trope of footbinding that developed in the 1970s needs to be understood in this transnational, transcultural and fluctuating context.

Asian American scholars have been instrumental in identifying these Orientalist practices in the United States. They have approached the early years of contact between the United States and Asian nations, the exotic and vilifying representations of Asian populations at home and abroad, the dehumanization of Asian immigrants and Asian American people in the context of the Yellow Peril that formed in the second half of the nineteenth century and led to exclusion acts barring Asian populations from entering the United States in 1882 and 1924, and the pervasive racializing and gendering of Asians and Asian Americans in contemporary representations. Suffice here to mention as examples John Kuo Wei Tchen's *New York Before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture, 1776-1882* (1999); Anthony Lee's *Picturing Chinatown: Art and Orientalism in San Francisco* (2001); Robert G. Lee's *Orientalists: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (2001); Henry Yu's *Thinking Orientalists: Migration, Contact and Exoticism in Modern America* (2002); and Mari Yoshihara's *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism* (2003). The extensive publication of scholarship on the topic of Orientalism at the turn of the twenty-first century represents an attempt from Asian American scholars to dismantle pervasive Orientalist practices and discourses, leading to what I would like to call the de-Orientalizing turn in Asian American studies.

While principally focusing on the American construction of the Oriental Other and its devastating effect, Asian American scholars have predominantly left aside, however, the Asian American community's internalization of these Orientalist stereotypes and their participation in disseminating Orientalist ideologies despite their insistent response and resistance to pervasive stereotyping in the United States, beyond the *Aiiieeeee* editors' early and problematic denunciation of Asian American writers' *white prostitution*. Sheng-mei Ma's work *Deathly Embrace: Orientalism and Asian American Identity* (2000) is a pioneer in this endeavor in Asian

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in immigration discourses, obscuring their presence and participation in the building of an Asian America in academic discourses before the advent of Asian American studies (30).

American studies and in scholarship on Orientalism more generally. Sheng-mei Ma locates Orientalism at the center of Asian American identity:

The struggle for ethnic identity presupposes a lack thereof, or a spurious identity imposed by Orientalism, the discursive tradition in the West dealing with the subject and the subjugation of the East. But in order to retire racist stereotypes, one is obliged to first evoke them; in order to construct ethnicity, one must first destruct what is falsely reported as one's ethnic identity. Both result in an unwitting reiteration of Orientalist images (xi).

Ma sees Orientalism and Asian American identity as “symbiotic” (xii), or as “two cultural forces ... not necessarily at odds” (xiv), although Asian Americans have resisted dehumanizing stereotyping since the 1850s.<sup>39</sup> Yet, despite Asian American active resistance and although Asian American identity is developed and often expressed in reaction to Orientalist stereotypes constructed by the West, Asian American authors do not completely subvert these stereotypes, Ma argues, but reiterate them in their ethnic self-assertion. Indeed, the alternative and “imaginative worlds” (Iwata n.p.) they create to challenge and counteract Western stereotypes of Asian-ness, and their concurrent effort to appeal to readers’ “common humanity” in their representations of the Asian American experience (Wei 70) are often not enough to dismantle the power and dominance of white mainstream culture that casts Asians as inferior and exotic (9). This conflicting endeavor to subvert stereotypes and appeal to a *common humanity* partially reflects Asian American writers’ predicament: to be published in the United States, they have to satisfy the demand of their audience, putting their ethnicity on the front line, while simultaneously engaging with, or responding to, the Orientalist stereotypes permeating in the U.S. imagination. Indeed, Ma contends that “only those Asian Americans who compose, more or less, in alignment with such Orientalism stand a chance in emerging among mainstream readers as representative ethnic voices” (xiii),<sup>40</sup> thus furthering the inseparability of Orientalism and ethnic consciousness in Asian American literature.

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<sup>39</sup> Robert G. Lee explains that Asian Americans have “contested their exclusion as Orientals, critiqued the unfulfilled promises of democracy and mapped alternative visions of American identity” (*Orientalism* 13). For more on Asian stereotypes diffused in the West, see Wei 47-50.

<sup>40</sup> In his 1989 review, Edward Iwata highlights Asian American artists’ “cross over to new white audience” and resulting commercial success; a “riding on the hyphen” as it is more commonly called in slang (n.p.). Both Li-Young Lee and Frank Chin emphasize the limitations of this crossing over. For Chin, Asian American writers are still “ornamental Orientals, the latest chimps that can talk sign language” (qtd. in Iwata n.p.). Although less critical, Lee concurs that Asian American writers “still have to create literature without pandering or making it seem exotic”

The self-Orientalizing modes of identity representation that Ma reads at the heart of Asian American literature can be understood in a larger transnational context of what has interchangeably been called “self-Orientalism” or “auto-Orientalism.” The link that can be made between self-Orientalizing practices across time, space and ethnic groups across the globe not only foregrounds the still pervading disparity of power subordinating the non-Western, non-white, and/or non-Christian to his/her Western, white and/or Christian Other in our global era, but also the “tactics of intervention” to use Rey Chow’s terminology (*Writing Diaspora* 15)—as limited as they might be—deployed over time by the Orientalized Other to regain a sense of self in colonial and post-colonial contexts.

Christina Civantos’s understanding of auto-Orientalism captures this inherent duality, which she discusses in the contexts of the (self-)Orientalization of Arab immigrants in Argentina. She defines auto-Orientalism as the “essentialization of the self based on preexisting archetypes” created and diffused by the dominant culture (22). Yet, she points to the subversive potential of this auto-Orientalism in diasporic contexts, which she demonstrates through her analysis of Arab immigrants’ contradictory literary self-representations at cultural crossroads between Argentina and the Arab world. Thus contextualizing auto-Orientalist practices in contexts of anti-colonial and post-colonial subversions, Civantos’s analysis opens up the discursive potential of this term to destabilize Orientalism. Yet, the subversive possibility of this practice is undermined as it continues hegemonic discourses established by the West. In this respect, auto- or self-Orientalism points to both the complicity of the Orientalized Other in sustaining hegemonic discourses of power differentials, and his/her dismantling of Western cultures as sites of power and control. In other words, self-Orientalist practices are often ambivalent in nature—oscillating between oppression and resistance.

The resilient Oriental Other in post-colonial contexts has been the focus of many studies, notably Homi Bhabha’s *Location of Culture* (1996), where he explores how the colonized subject, forced to imitate, repeat and take on the culture of the colonizer in submission to the colonial order, develops strategies of resistance to counteract his/her objectification and erasure. This process, which Bhabha calls *mimicry*, is however double-edged; “an ironic compromise” as

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and “still have to create art” (qtd. in Iwata n.p.). Wei have similarly underlined how Asian Americans have tried to adapt their narration of the Asian American experience to reach out to a broader non-Asian American audience to make themselves “recognizable” in the United States, but also to achieve “commercial success” (67).



Bhabha states (122). On the one hand, mimicry reifies the cultural difference of the colonized subject who is, through this repetitive process of imitation, “*almost the same but not quite*” (128). In this respect, “mimicry emerges,” Bhabha explains, “as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal” (122); a disavowal that perpetually differentiates the colonized subject from and inferiorizes him/her to the colonizer. This reiterative process thus seeks to forcibly concretize the hegemonic power of the colonial order and fix the colonized Other in place. Yet, on the other hand, Bhabha’s mimicry also contains a deconstructive potential as it is “at once resemblance and menace” (123); a “threat,” Bhabha argues, “to ‘normalized’ knowledges and disciplinary powers” (123), or, in other words, a “mockery” (123) of the colonial order. The process of mimicry is therefore ambivalent as it simultaneously highlights the hegemonic power *and* failure of the colonial regime, which casts the colonized subjects as foreign or unassimilable, yet fails to contain and fix them in place. This ambivalence is therefore *ambivalently* “productive” (67), as it produces power differentials between the colonizer and the colonized, while simultaneously enabling “a transgression” “from the space of Otherness” (67).

Bhabha’s notion of mimicry better informs our understanding of the ambivalence at the core of self-Orientalist practices and the subversive resilience of the Oriental (colonized and gendered) Other. Post-colonial scholar Gauri Viswanathan also invites, in her brief reading of Said’s work, to re-consider and look at the “enablement” at the heart of Said’s *Orientalism* which can “trigger critique and self-examination” (xv); critique of the negative images created by the West, and examination of the subaltern subject’s own fluctuating identity and position in this hegemonic discourse. As she states: “Orientalism is not finally an annihilating system; rather, in a boomerang effect, it equips its subjects with a critical repertoire that ultimately is used, ironically, to contest Orientalism’s power and reach. This conviction pervades much of Said’s works and interviews, and provides the dialectical energy for considering negative representation of ‘Orientals’ not in order to wallow it in a rhetoric of victimization, but to deflect such representations back to their perpetrators” (xv-xvi). In other words, Orientalism does not silence the Orientalized Other, but contains within its seeds the discursive power of resistance—the power to talk back, to re-appropriate, and to re-write this discursive power “in terms that restore agency to the[m]” (xiv). Post-colonial theory thus sheds light on the double-edged sword of self-Orientalism that at once repeats the Western hegemonic discourse of Orientalism *and* rearticulates these discursive practices subversively.

These complicit and subversive self-Orientalist practices resonate strongly as well with Judith Butler's theory of performative reiteration that she maps in *Bodies that Matter* (1993) around the "discursive limits of sex" (title). Although Butler's theory of performative reiteration is concerned with the construction and discursive production of sex, it can be applied to the more general construction, regulation and subjectivation of bodies in colonial and diasporic contexts, as the sexualizing and gendering of bodies—an integral part of Orientalism—works hand in hand with the process of racialization in ostracizing and marginalizing bodies. Butler declares that sex is "a process whereby regulatory norms materialize 'sex' and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms" (2). Yet, this reiterative process also points to the simultaneous failure of this materialization that is "never quite complete" as "bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled" (2). This incompleteness underlines the "constitutive instabilities" of bodies constructed through interpellation and repetition (10). As a result, reiteration, in addition to repeating the regulatory norm, also "escapes or exceeds the norm" itself, creating "gaps and fissures" in which "the *deconstituting possibility*" of said norms simultaneously takes place (10). Indeed, Butler sees the normative process of subjectivation as always predicated on the othering of the "abject" (3)—or the "humanly unthinkable" (8)—that is confined to a "zone of inhabitability" that delimits "the subject's domain" (3) and legitimizes the exclusion of the non-normative Other. Yet, the inevitable existence of the inhuman, over and against which the human is constructed (8), however haunts the law, reminding it of its possible "disruption and rearticulation" (8). In this respect, agency always takes shape within *and* against the law (2). Butler defines agency as "a reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power" (15). In other words, agency is always already contained within the power structure that regulates bodies, and formed of normative and deconstructive seeds. Thus reading self-Orientalist practices through the lens of Butler's theory of performative reiteration not only complements Bhabha's post-colonial theory of mimicry in pointing to the resilience of the Orientalized subject and body, but also reminds of the inevitable imbrication of sexual and racial discourses in the construction of Orientalized subjects.

These post-colonial and gender approaches to self-Orientalist practices inform the double-edged sword of footbinding references in Chinese American literature and representations that combine self-Orientalizing images and stereotypes with disruptive discursive

re-appropriations. Sheng-mei Ma briefly discusses the ambivalence of these footbinding representations in Chinese American literature in his *East-West Montage: Reflections on Asian Bodies in Diaspora* (2007). In his reading of the transformative power conferred to disability in Asian American fictions and films, Ma states that Asian American writers use bound feet and “Oriental tongues” to “exteriorize their own neuroses first as the disabilities of immigrants, and then seek catharsis in magical transformations” (191); magical transformations that do however not exceed the Orientalist underpinning of these feet and tongue representations. Although Ma pays attention to the ambivalent role of disability in Asian American literature—its empowering and disenfranchising functions (192), its simultaneous accentuation and negation of “Asian American particularities” (191), as well as its markers of “ethnic pain” and “ethnic pride” (196)—he does not grant magical transformative power to footbinding itself. He certainly reads footbinding images in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* as “invigorat[ing]” and “stimulat[ing]” protagonists, through the pain and suffering caused, to act against discrimination and confinement (196); a stimulation that ultimately leads protagonists, in his view, to seek liberation. He also points to a similar invigorating effect in Laurence Yep’s *Ribbons* as it is through the “sharing of sorrow embodied in the mutilated feet” of granddaughter (hammer toes) and grandmother (bound feet) that the “generational gap is resolved” (199), and that the granddaughter finds determination and endurance to continue to suffer to achieve her goal of becoming a ballet dancer. Yet, despite its invigorating potential, footbinding remains at the end of his essay a self-Orientalizing fetish that emphasizes the disenfranchisement of certain groups of protagonists in Chinese American texts and their inability to “effect power differentials” (200). In other words, Ma deprives self-Orientalizing footbinding representations of their enabling abilities to repeat these stereotypes differently and subversively.

Ma is too quick in depriving footbinding imagery in Chinese American literature from transformative potential beyond the necessary move from oppression (footbinding) to liberation (unbinding) that his reading emphasizes. I concur with Ma that the recurrent use of footbinding references in Chinese American literature Orientalizes a Chinese culture that appears cast in a barbaric past and disabling for the Chinese (American) protagonists, as well as fetishizing, eroticizing, and exoticizing the Chinese female *and* male bodies. Indeed, feet representations often resonate with other racial and gendered stereotype of Chinese women as submissive, docile

and obedient China Dolls or Lotus Blossoms,<sup>41</sup> and of Chinese men as effeminate and castrated. In this respect, these stereotypical representations of Chinese-ness constitute the reiteration of the heteronormative law against which Asian and female bodies are read as exotic, erotic, inferior and barbaric, footbinding standing, to borrow Butler's words, as "the humanly unthinkable" (*Bodies That Matter* 8).

Yet, I contend that the "deconstructive seeds" that Mas sees at the heart of many Asian American literary texts and films, and which he reads as having the power to one day "exorcize the specter of Orientalism" (201) are also already contained in the Chinese American trope of footbinding itself. By building his conclusion on isolated feet references, Ma obscures the juxtaposition of contradictory passages and/or references that complicate his notion of shared pain and shame as grounds for self-liberation and point also to the recalcitrance, and disruptiveness of footbinding in Chinese American fiction and other artistic representations, that recalls Butler's "troubling return" (23) of this *humanly unthinkable*. Footbinding references, in their rejection of easy categorization, have power, therefore, to simultaneously reproduce *and* subvert common Orientalist stereotypes of Chinese-ness.

Indeed, the footbinding trope in Chinese American literature and art cannot be reduced to Orientalist stereotypes alone, but need to be inserted in a larger legacy of subversive bodily representations used by Asian American writers/artists to approach the *body politic* of the Asian American community—past and present—in the United States (see Nguyen). The Asian body—marked as racial and gender Other in American history and culture—has become a site of resistance and contention for the Asian American community beyond *magical* transformations. Viet Thanh Nguyen in *Race and Resistance* argues that body representations "collectively constitute the most consistent form of political consciousness in the literature" (6), as Asian American authors have turned to the body to examine and counteract offensive stereotypes of the Asian (American) body diffused in American society to justify "capitalist exploitation and foment racial hatred" (6).

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<sup>41</sup> As Linda Trinh Võ and Marian Sciacchitano state in "Moving beyond 'Exotics, Whores, and Nimble Fingers,'" "The colonial imagination, which is perpetuated by the mainstream media and imperialist nostalgia, has historically limited Asian American women to racialized and sexualized representations as evil dragon ladies, exotic, erotic lotus blossoms, whores with hearts of gold, submissive mail-order brides, and compliant model minorities" (7). See also Sheridan Prasso, *The Asian Mystique* (2005); Geert Hofstede, "Gender Stereotypes" 533-46; and Renee Tajima, "Lotus Blossoms Don't Bleed" 308-17.

In this larger context, footbinding not only offers Chinese American writers the visibility of a mutilated body to approach and denounce their struggles as Chinese Americans, but also grounds for subversion across the gender line. With its gory and *unruly* physicality,<sup>42</sup> the bound foot offers disruptive possibilities to Chinese (American) protagonists, writers and artists in their self-assertion beyond the expected unbinding or liberation of women's feet and bodies. Indeed, the corporeal deformity of the bound foot offers a language that is "communicable" and "shareable" as Andrew Hock Soon Ng puts it (652) and therefore appropriate to approach and represent conflicting identities and/or political issues. By re-appropriating the custom of footbinding to address a variety of personal, cultural and historical conflicts, these writers/artists have re-oriented negative representations and stereotypes to denounce the oppressive discursive mechanisms that keep cultural and/or racial Others in a state of inferiority and expose the discursive constructions on which they are based.

These *dis-orienting* re-orientations also highlight the strategies Chinese American writers/artists have developed over time to make sense of their own conflicting and fluctuating identities at cultural and gender crossroads and find a sense of empowerment in the telling of their stories in their own terms (see Kwong), while building a sense of community among Asian American readers and viewers despite the constraints of publishing houses and other sites of production. Chinese American writers and artists have indeed played with the ambivalent nature of footbinding that combines aesthetics and mutilation to disrupt impinging categories of class, race, culture, and gender. They have increasingly sought to define what solo performer Denise Uyehara has called "borderless identities" (Lee, "Between Personal" 290)—identities that refuse the limitation and separation of categories. In this respect footbinding itself can be read as a metaphor for the ambivalent subjectivation of the Chinese American subject, interpellated and re-appropriated, mutilated and self-fashioned. It is precisely in this ambivalent space that refuses social, racial, cultural and gender constraints that Chinese American writers/artists find a sense of self-empowerment within and beyond the hostile environment of American mainstream culture and society. These ambivalent images of footbinding that refuse to be contained in an either/or binarism thus offer an *enabling* twist to Orientalist discursive constructions,

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<sup>42</sup> Hint here at Susannah B. Mintz's term "unruly bodies" used in her study *Unruly Bodies: Life Writing by Women with Disabilities* (2007).

emphasizing the resilient power of the Orientalized Other often masked under hegemonic discourses.

What is more, these ambivalent feet images also question the borders on which Orientalist discourses are predicated. Cast as Oriental in American Orientalist discourses, Asian Americans are denied Western subjectivity and therefore conflated with the distant Oriental Other, if not located in the remote Orient itself. Although Asian Americans contribute to Orientalizing themselves in their self-representations, magnifying the cultural link that ties them to Asia, they simultaneously attempt to reclaim their American-ness and Western identity, from which they are continuously stripped, and dismiss the Asian bound-footed body as Oriental. Writing from the West, as well as using *and* re-appropriating Western hegemonic discourses, while simultaneously emphasizing their *Oriental*-ness—not through essential qualities but through imagined constructions—Asian American writers destabilize the East-West divide on which Orientalism and self-Orientalism are based. Ambivalently positioned as Western and Oriental, insider and outsider in the United States, Asian American writers call for a rethinking of Orientalism that would acknowledge these complicated geopolitical dynamics that can no longer maintain a separation of the East and the West in a time of globalization. For that matter, the ambivalent position of Asian American subjects in the United States, and their equally ambivalent positionality toward Orientalism itself, calls for a theorization of ambivalence that captures the fluidity and multiplicity of identities and cultures in contexts of diaspora, transnationalism and globalization and recognize the empowering space of ambivalence in self-representations. Although post-colonial scholars have pointed to the enabling aspect of ambivalence in their works, ambivalence needs to be further theorized to ultimately rethink the borders that continue to separate colonized and colonizer, citizen and non-citizen, included and excluded, East and West in diasporic discourses. I propose to do so by reading ambivalence in terms of its *trans*-positionality, i.e., its constant movement across, through and beyond borders.

Ambivalence—as a term and concept—is controversial and multifaceted and resonates strongly with Butler’s and Bhabha’s respective gender and postcolonial theoretical notions of interpellating and subversive reiteration. Looking at the etymology and historical use of ambivalence illuminates the contradictions at the heart of this concept. Ambivalence takes its roots in the eugenicist discourse of the early twentieth century. First coined by Swiss psychiatrist Eugene Bleuler, ambivalence—semantically based on the term *equivalence* (*OED*), came to

denote the “coexistence of mutually exclusive contradictions within the psyche” in discussions of schizophrenia (“Eugene Bleuler” n.p.). In *Modernity and Ambivalence* (1991), Zygmunt Bauman maps the development of ambivalence in scientific and nationalist contexts in the early twentieth century, as he locates ambivalence at the heart of the modern nation-state and of modernity at large. He contends that in a world organized around categories and classifications in which hierarchical dichotomies prevail (self vs. other; white vs. black; superior vs. inferior, etc.), ambivalence was seen as a disruptive force against the normative nature of the modern nation-state; a threat to both order and the superior intellect of the ruling elite (7-9; 14-5). This hegemonic ordering translated into the surveillance, control, institutionalization, incarceration and pathologization, if not extermination, of the constructed Other for the sake of science and nationalism (see Bauman’s chapter 1 “The Scandal of Ambivalence”).

In a context of migration, this control often translated into a discourse of assimilation that masked the coercive power of the nation-state in an illusion of agency and recognition, the forced embrace of the dominant culture, beliefs, and language reaffirming the superiority of the dominant society (Bauman 70). Doomed from the start, this *reiterative* or *mimicking* process of assimilation, to allude to Butler and Bhabha here, magnified the difference of the cultural and/or racial Other cast as a perpetual, unassimilable and unwanted foreigner in a nation believing in the homogenization and *purification* of its national subjects (78). Left to inhabit the space between assimilation and rejection, heterogeneity and homogeneity, inside and outside, the immigrant, or diasporic subject, became the embodiment of the ambivalent disorder, the neither/nor of modernity (56).

Like Butler and Bhabha, it is precisely in its ambivalent function and resilience, however, that Bauman locates the immigrant/Other’s subversive potential. Bauman explains, that in their neither/nor positions, the immigrants/Others had the power to disrupt the hegemonic order, as they constantly reminded it of its limits and failure to eradicate the unclassifiable, the uncertain, the ambivalent (55-6). In other words, the pathologization of ambivalence always contained within its seeds a transgressive power, stemming from its resilience to classification and order;<sup>43</sup> a resilience that echoes Butler’s “troubling return” of the abject (*Bodies That Matter* 23) and the

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<sup>43</sup> The subversive power of ambivalence has also been underlined in psychoanalytic studies. Freud for instance deconstructs the division between self and other to focus instead on how the self is constructed in relation to—and not against—the other. See Bauman 173-179 and Chiang 42-45.

“reworking of abjection into political agency” (21) at the core of performative reiteration, as well as Bhabha’s mimicry as mockery.

Contemporary definitions of ambivalence, departing from the scientific origins of the term, point to ambivalence’s subversive potential situated in its refusal to be one or the other. Indeed, ambivalence is now commonly defined as the co-existence and combination of contradictory attitudes, and/or feelings toward a person, an object or an action; contradictory attitudes that refuse fixity but *fluctuate* between one term and the other (see *OED* and *Merriam-Webster*). This fluctuation is also characterized by a refusal to bridge the two opposite sides of the opposition or contradiction. The bridge—or the hyphen in discussions of ethnic American *hyphenated* identities—literally and metaphorically fills the empty space between with a concrete bridge/hyphen, and fixes the two terms of the equation to create a harmonious whole. This material concretization resonates strongly with Butler’s definition of matter as “a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity and surface we call matter” (*Bodies That Matter* 9). Ambivalence refuses this *material* concretization, but takes its power and freedom in its nomadic, fragmentary, irregular, unstable and fluctuating nature, in its ability to move between literal and imagined territories and spaces. In other words, ambivalence is always-already *trans-*, moving across, through and beyond borders. Thus, ambivalence is not only heterogeneous, multifaceted, fluid and flexible, but also *trans-national*, *trans-historical*, *trans-cultural*, and *trans-gendering*.

Chih-Yun Chiang points in her analysis of ambivalence in Ang Lee’s transnational cinema, to the inextricability of ambivalence and transnationalism in a diasporic context: “the moment of transnationalism is a more scattered space where cultures and meanings across multiple spatialities and temporalities move beyond the binary opposition of the local and the global” (15). In other words, transnationalism offers ambivalent spaces of “cultural negotiation, resistance and subversion” (Chiang 2) despite the power differential governing these *contact zones*, to borrow Marie Louise Pratt’s infamous term (“Arts of the Contact Zone”).<sup>44</sup> Indeed,

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<sup>44</sup> Pratt defines contact zones as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery or their aftermaths as they are lived out as many parts of the world today” (34). These ambivalent spaces or contact zones have been discussed under various formulations in Asian American studies and beyond. See Amy Ling’s concept of “between worlds” presented in her book *Between Worlds: Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry* (1990); a concept echoed in the more common term “in-between.” Ethnic hyphenation has been discussed since the 1960s in relation to Asian American/Asian-American spelling but also in the context of hyphenated identities. See Donald C. Goellnicht and



transnationalism is always already transgressive of borders, geographies, cultures and monolithic identities, granting a disruptive potential to the diasporic subjects who literally and metaphorically move between spaces and temporalities. This ambivalent space of transnationalism, more than a hybrid space, or a place of inbetweenness, is a site of continuous contestation and intervention<sup>45</sup> that mirrors the diasporic subject's fluctuating identities between oppression and resistance, internalized interpellation and empowering negotiation; a site of self-creation and transformation that however remains co-dependent on the overseeing social, cultural and political structures in which this ambivalence takes shape (Chiang 57).

This ambivalent space of transnationalism also sheds light on the multiplicity at the core of identity; a plurality that indeed refuses the fixity of the either/or binarism and points instead to the complexity and fluctuation of our subjectivities in time and space. As Stuart Hall contends in his analysis of cultural identity and cinema, "identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and positioned ourselves within the narratives of the past" (223). Identities, in other words, are constantly transformed and redefined by our present and evolving circumstances, but also by our retrospective "*re-telling* of the past" in the present (222) that implies a fluctuating, multiple, and creative, "*production* of identity" (222), but also a *deferral*, in the Derridean sense, or a *time-lag* in Bhabha's words; a process that Hall calls "imaginative rediscovery" (222). The ambivalence of the diasporic subject therefore needs to be understood in terms of this deferred imaginative rediscovery, as identities form and transform in transnational contexts at cultural, geographical, national, historical, temporal, social, and at times, gender, crossroads.

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Eleanor Ty's co-edited essay collection *Asian North American Identities: Beyond the Hyphen* (2004). Lisa Lowe in *Immigrant Acts* (1996) uses the term "hybridity" to talk about Asian American cross-cultural identity. The concept of "cultural hybridity" is also discussed by Bhabha in the context of postcolonial studies in *The Location of Culture* (1994). Bhabha also talks about "Third Space" where cultural difference can be enunciated and represented (53-6). Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) talks about "borderlands" to challenge the geographical borders between Mexico and the United States, and to discuss the people caught between geographical, cultural, linguistic and gender categories/boundaries. Recent cultural and anthropological studies have also approached cultural hybridity from the standpoint of liminality. See Lucy Kay, Zoë Kinsley, Terry Philips and Alan Rougley's co-edited volume *Mapping Liminalities: Thresholds in Cultural and Literary Texts* (2007), and *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality* edited by Agnes Horvath, Bjørn Thomassen and Harald Wydra (2015). I prefer to approach the footbinding trope from the contested space of ambivalence—a term which refuses the idea of a monolithic China and a monolithic United States.

<sup>45</sup> Rey Chow reads diasporas as "tactics of intervention" (Writing Diaspora 15), as "the oppressed, the native, the subaltern" become places of "myth-making" that contest discourses of authenticity and essentialism (44).

It is with this transnational, and fluctuating, notion of ambivalence in mind that I would like to read footbinding representations in Chinese American literature and arts; representations that take shape at the juncture of past and present, as well as Orientalist practices and alternative forms of self-creation. They form what I would like to call an *ambivalent Orientalism* that disables *and* disrupts, disempowers *and* empowers, interpellates *and* inspires; an *ambivalent Orientalism* that revises geopolitical boundaries and takes into consideration the fluidity of Orientalist practices in and beyond the East-West divide. Ambivalent Orientalism thus complicates the fixed nature of stereotypes and points instead to their inherent contradictions and grounds for *dis-orienting* re-interpretations and re-imaginings. In this context, the concept of *ambivalent Orientalism*, by combining the hegemonic discourse of Orientalism with the subversive potential of ambivalent reiteration in contexts of diaspora and transnationalism, explores the representational strategies of the fragmentary, yet fluctuating and transgressive diasporic subject moving between literal and metaphorical borders, oppression and freedom, domination and self-construction.

This ambivalent Orientalism in the context of Chinese American representations of footbinding takes multiple forms, which symbolically mirror the multiplicity and fluidity of Chinese American subjectivities and countering modes of representations. These representations first and foremost evade the fixity of *genre*, genre intended here as categorical forms of artistic composition, but also, in allusion to the French term, as gender. Footbinding representations have not only been found in literature—in prose and poetry, as well as in autobiographical and fictional works—but also in the theatrical and cinematic realms, as well as in a variety of museum displays. Although differing in their representational strategies and possibilities, these various genres point to the fluidity of the bound foot metaphor to constantly re-invent itself to capture the complex experience of the diasporic subject. Likewise, exceeding gender boundaries, footbinding representations are used by male and female artists, as well as applied to male and female bodies to explore the complexity of gender displacement and re-configuration in contexts of diaspora and cross-cultural encounters.

As a result, these ambivalent representations across *genre* provide a multiplicity of views on footbinding as a historical custom and construction in the development of Chinese America, but especially as a creative tool of *dis-orienting* reinterpretation that rewrites this ambivalent past subversively and gives sense of the ever-evolving gendering and racializing processes

dominating hegemonic discourses. This multifaceted feet imagery, which takes origins in this ambivalent historical past, thus complicates Chinese American women's identification with unbound feet as symbol of liberation and deconstructs the dichotomies of footbinding and unbinding, oppression and liberation, China and America, while simultaneously denouncing and deconstructing the oppressive gender boundaries and dynamics at the heart of Orientalist discourses. Footbinding images, therefore, more than attesting Asian American subversion of Orientalist constructions, point to Chinese American writers' and artists' first steps in coming to terms with their interpellation and internalization of Orientalist stereotypes; first steps in the construction of a new politics of self-representation that would "challenge and counter the damaging internalized sexist, racist, classist and homophobic representations" of their ethnic communities created by the West (Võ and Sciachitano 7), as well as the literal and imagined borders that continue to divide East and West.

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The first part, "Footbinding in the U.S. Archives," situates the construction of footbinding's ambivalence historically and discursively in a transnational setting. It pays attention to the way Orientalist modes of representation developed at a time of contact between China and the United States and influenced understanding and representations of footbinding in the United States. Although this historical part captures the subjectivation of Chinese immigrants, male and female, as well as the imbricated processes of racialization and gendering, it also highlights Chinese immigrants' and the developing Chinese American community's ambivalent responses to footbinding from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries reflecting their battle against and resistance to exclusion laws, economic exploitation and dehumanizing practices.

Chapter 1, "Constructing China, Constructing America: Footbinding in the Nineteenth-Century U.S. Imagination" looks at American Orientalist representations of China and footbinding in the context of the China Trade that developed in the late eighteenth century between China and the United States, as well as in the backdrop of American imperialist interventions in China in the second half of the nineteenth century. This chapter retraces the development of an Orientalist taste for Chinese exoticism in the nineteenth century—and the role of footbinding in the construction of Chinese women as exotic curios. It focuses on the staging of

Afong Moy and Pwan-Yekoo—the first bound-footed women to be seen in the United States—in museums in New York City between 1830 and 1850. Although predominantly focusing on the exoticization of the Chinese female body, this chapter also highlights the co-dependent stereotypical representations of Chinese masculinity and patriarchy that developed alongside stereotypes of Chinese female exoticism. Indeed, the displays of Afong Moy and Pwan-Yekoo were often inserted in larger narratives vilifying Chinese society for its hegemonic patriarchal system and for the deviant and beastly sexuality of Chinese men from which Western entrepreneurs had saved both women. This praise of Chinese exotic femininity and the concurrent vilification of Chinese barbaric masculinity thus acted together in the U.S. imagination in constructing a highly racialized Chinese culture that simultaneously attracted and repelled, a Chinese culture already inferiorized compared to the West despite its alluring exoticism.

The fascination for the exoticism of Chinese bound-footed women was complemented by a growing interest in footbinding's deformed bones. The display of preserved bound feet in medical museums accompanied the diffusion of photographs and medical reports, which reified cultural and racial difference, despite an increasing desire in the West to understand the world scientifically. Footbinding thus, more than appealing to American Orientalist fantasy, contributed to determining racial and gender hierarchies that sustained white supremacy and justified American imperialism abroad. Indeed, these Orientalist practices and imagined visions of China as exotic *and* barbaric, erotic *and* sexually deviant, played a crucial role in the development of an American national and cultural identity that slowly defined itself against its cultural Other. Through an analysis of various footbinding displays, wavering from the bound-footed woman in the flesh and amputated and preserved bound feet, this chapter thus points to the Orientalist staging of Chinese exotic, racial and gender difference, and the developing imbrication of racializing and gendering processes that served to subjectivize, control and pathologize Chinese immigrants—male and female—in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Chapter 2 “Constructing Chinese America: Between Self- and De-Orientalization” continues the discussion of chapter 1 by exploring the racialization and gendering processes that not only created Chinese subjects, male and female, in the U.S. imagination in the second half of the nineteenth century with the massive immigration of Chinese laborers, but also negatively impacted the lives of Chinese immigrants, who were segregated, exploited, sexualized and

deprived of rights. This chapter looks at these shifting stereotypes from the perspective of the forming Chinese American community, who ambivalently sustained and opposed these Orientalist discourses in their everyday battle for survival. This chapter focuses indeed on the way the Chinese American community reproduced and deconstructed the Orientalist footbinding stereotypes produced by mainstream society to counteract the constructions of Chinese women as prostitutes and Chinese men as sexually deviant *and* emasculated, if not castrated. This chapter not only analyzes the strategies of self-Orientalization and self-exhibitionism developed by Chinese bound-footed women through time for economic and/or social purposes, but pays attention as well to the vocal opposition to footbinding coming from the larger Chinese American community at the turn of the twentieth century as they supported both the Chinese anti-footbinding campaign and the modernization of the Chinese nation to regain a political voice. In this context, Chinese Americans predominantly saw footbinding as detrimental to their self-image in the United States. They thought that by abolishing Chinese feudal and barbaric customs, China would be seen in a more favorable light, and Chinese Americans respected and given the rights they deserved.

These ambivalent responses wavering between self- and de-Orientalizing strategies continue today in Chinese American museums and historical societies. While the United States Immigration Station (USIS) and the San Diego Chinese Historical Museum (SDCHM) exhibit pairs of lotus shoes to approach the history of Chinese immigration, and Chinese culture more generally, other Chinese American museums have predominantly relegated lotus shoes to the archives. These conflicting responses, across time, ultimately mirror the ambivalent positioning of Chinese American women and men between cultural maintenance and assimilation, as well as their conflicting self-creation within and against dominating hegemonic discourses.

Grouped together, chapter 1 and chapter 2 thus present the development of an evolving Orientalist discourse of China in the United States through which Chinese immigrants were read and processed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These combined chapters also set the grounds for a better understanding of the difficulty encountered by Chinese immigrants in times of both early contact and massive immigration. Yet, these chapters also underscore the deconstructive seeds of this Orientalist discourse, as we follow the oppositional strategies developed by the forming Chinese American community within their limited allotted space. Cunningly re-appropriating Orientalist stereotypes to take advantage of American exotic taste for

and/or fear of the Oriental Other, Chinese immigrants thus created a first wave of ambivalent Orientalist discourses.

The second part “Subverting Binaries: Writing and Staging Footbinding at Cultural, Generic and Gender Crossroads” turns to the footbinding/unbinding imagery deployed in Chinese American literature and theatrical representations/productions. The chapters in this section follow a certain chronological progression to highlight the evolution of the trope. Starting with Chinese bound-footed women’s already ambivalent discourses of footbinding over the centuries, this section moves to discuss the beginning and progression of the footbinding trope in Chinese American literary and artistic works in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s, and concludes with Chinese expatriate writers’ return to Orientalist strategies in the late 1990s, which marks the climax and following decline of Orientalist footbinding imagery in Chinese America. The early 1990s is not represented in this work, not by omission, but because it does not offer examples of new subversive feet representations. Dominated by Amy Tan’s work dealing with mother-daughter conflicts, the feet imagery deployed in the 1990s presents a continuation of the trope that took shape in the preceding decades. Yet, by putting seminal and pioneering works in conversation with subsequent re-appropriations of the footbinding/unbinding imagery in similar contexts, this section does not follow a perfect chronological development, but also highlights the progression and/or resilience of certain imagery across time. The chapters thus privilege a thematic development, over a chronological progression.

This section also provides a reading of the metaphorical significance of footbinding and unbinding in Chinese American literature and art across *genres*. By analyzing novels, linked stories, poems, scattered autobiographical writings, oral testimonies, as well as a theatrical play, a narrative film, and a solo performance, I not only pay attention to the way these footbinding images are conveyed, but also to the strength and limits of each genre to subvert Orientalist stereotypes. Moreover, by offering a cross-generic analysis, this section foregrounds how footbinding images ultimately refuse fixity as they are constantly re-appropriated, re-imagined and re-fashioned across temporal, spatial and generic borders. It is in their multiplicity, fluidity and fluctuation that imaginative footbinding representations are the most disruptive. Although they carry an Orientalist overtone, they constantly repeat Orientalist discourses and representations with a subversive difference. As a result, a cross-generic analysis of footbinding

images in a transnational context sheds light on the ambivalent Orientalism of this trope that reproduces yet deconstructs and transgresses hegemonic discourses, here and there, now and then.

Complementing this cross-generic analysis, this section calls attention to the development of this trope across the gender line. Despite the predominance of the footbinding trope in Chinese American women writings, this section reads Chinese American male writers' and artists' footbinding references alongside the Chinese American women's footbinding trope—when possible or available—to emphasize the metaphorical significance footbinding and unbinding have for the Chinese American community beyond gender divides. This *cross-gender* reading also reflects the imbricated mechanisms of gendering and racialization that have kept Chinese American men and women in positions of inferiority since the mid-nineteenth century. Footbinding in this context can play a crucial role in representing the physical and psychological bindings of Chinese American women and men, whose respective stereotypes of China Doll and emasculated Charlie Chan, as well as Dragon Lady and Fu Manchu in mainstream society mirror one another, and underscore the larger offensive processes of subjectivation Chinese American men and women have confronted.

Chapter 3 “Voices from Past and Present: Footbound Women's Conflicting Textual and Oral Histories” first contextualizes the ambivalence of this trope in Chinese women's literary and oral histories that portray footbinding in ambivalent terms as enabling *and* disabling, culturally empowering *and* physically, as well as intellectually, debilitating for women. While seventeenth-century gentry women gave sense to the role played by footbinding in their everyday life, social relationships, as well as in their self-definition as upper-class women, Chinese female revolutionaries at the turn of the twentieth century condemned the custom, and advocated the modernization of the Chinese nation and Chinese women's emancipation. Female revolutionaries' unbinding movement was however opposed by other women in rural areas who refused to unbind their feet and continued to praise this custom. This ambivalent response—motivated by class, education and geographical division, permeated the twentieth century, as recent oral testimonies demonstrate. By providing an analysis of Chinese women's literature and oral records regarding both their footbinding and unbinding practices, this chapter gives a broader perspective on the ambivalent meaning footbinding had had for practitioners over the centuries and illuminates the irreversibility of the custom despite women's attempt at unbinding. Chinese women's ambivalent discourse regarding this custom is crucial to our understanding of

Chinese American writers' and artists' ambivalent tropes of footbinding and unbinding, as they already complicate the dichotomy of footbinding and unbinding and their respective association with oppression and liberation with which Chinese American writers and artists later engage.

While chapter 3 explores the conflicting discourses held by Chinese bound-footed women from the seventeenth century to the late twentieth century, chapter 4 and chapter 5 turn to Chinese American women and men's use of footbinding to approach and represent their identity conflicts at cultural and gender crossroads. Chapter 4 "Negotiating the Double Binds in *The Woman Warrior* and *Of Flesh and Spirit*" explores the trope of footbinding in the context of Chinese (American) female protagonists' cross-cultural identity formation and assertion in Maxine Hong Kingston's fictionalized memoirs *The Woman Warrior* (1975), and Wang Ping's poetry collection *Of Flesh and Spirit* (1999). Although footbinding is *a priori* associated with oppression, mutilation and an unwanted Chinese past to mark the delineation between the Americanized protagonists and their Chinese female ancestors, footbinding also appears as an important tie re-connecting these protagonists to their matrilineage across cultural and geographical boundaries. By complicating the dichotomy of footbinding and unbinding and deconstructing the progressive move from one term to the other, Kingston and Wang revisit and rewrite—but do not completely subvert—the Orientalist trope of footbinding to give sense to Chinese American women's conflicting identification processes, as they are torn between Chinese and American cultures, values and upbringings. By putting Kingston's 1970s pioneering text in conversation with Wang's subsequent re-appropriation of the footbinding trope at the end of the 1990s, this chapter not only underlines the emergence and evolution of this feminist trope in the last decades of the twentieth century, but also points to the influence of *The Woman Warrior* on the subsequent wave of Chinese American feminist writers. Yet, this conversation between Kingston's and Wang's works also points to the limitation of the footbinding trope in subverting Orientalist discourses in the late 1990s, especially as a sense of *déjà-vu* appears between the lines of Wang's poems.

My choice of analyzing Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* alongside Wang's *Of Flesh and Spirit*, instead of coupling it with its sequence *China Men*, favors the thematic organization around which my chapters are based. Moreover, by putting *The Woman Warrior* in conversation with Wang's poetry collection, my goal is not only to bridge the gap separating Chinese American acclaimed texts and subsequent texts that have received little attention, but also foster



connections across time, genre (linked stories vs. poetry collection), and Asian American feminist writings. Indeed, this juxtaposition gives insight into a larger body of Chinese American feminist works dealing with mother/grandmother-daughter relationships in which the trope of footbinding has been predominantly used to represent protagonists' inner conflicts *and* reconnections with their matrilineage.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, reading *China Men* alongside Genny Lim's play *Paper Angel*, which will be the focus of chapter 6, offers a better exploration into the way footbinding has been deployed in immigration narratives written by women in the early 1980s to represent Chinese immigrants' plight and resistance across the gender divide. Put together, these two texts further the critique addressed by Kingston and Lim to imbricated processes of racialization and gendering in contexts of migration. Ultimately, this partition offers a different approach to Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* that contrasts with more common critical reading of her work. This partition not only echoes the fragmentary and fluctuating nature of identity central in both of her books and for the argument of this work, but also lays out the influential and transgressive nature of her work that exceeds the limits of a chapter.

Chapter 5 "Exploring Footbinding History in Films and Performances: A Male Feminist Critique" complements Kingston's and Wang's subversive representations of identity conflicts through the trope of footbinding by analyzing male artists Winston Tong's and Arthur Dong's staging of footbinding in their endeavor to retrace and write a forgotten chapter of Chinese history, and come to terms with their own identity conflicts at cultural and/or gender crossroads. Tong, in his solo performance "Bound Feet" (1979), and Dong in his film *Lotus* (1987) approach footbinding from a feminist lens, denouncing the mutilation of women's bodies in the name of love, cultural belonging and social mobility. Their resistance to maiming cultural rituals is accompanied by their own re-interpretation of footbinding to approach personal and cultural identity issues beyond footbinding's matrilineal context. Tong's and Dong's works thus complement their female contemporaries' efforts at counteracting Asian American cultural nationalists' monolithic master narrative and masculinist stance by integrating Chinese women into Asian American focus and history, as well as by destabilizing gender roles and boundaries. By writing about China's cultural past in their own terms, both artists find in their artistic

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<sup>46</sup> Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995) and *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001) offer other examples of the mother-daughter footbinding trope in Chinese American literature. For lack of space, I have not included any analysis of these works in the present thesis.

reinterpretations and visual representations of footbinding a form of catharsis for themselves and their community. However, despite their social and feminist critiques, Tong's and Dong's works continue to display Chinese women through the gory and erotic exhibition of their feet. Yet, by exploring the symbolic potential of this custom through art, both artists equally complicate these Orientalist stereotypes of victimization and barbaric eroticism. Accordingly, read as a complement to chapter 4, this chapter makes visible the damaging effects of hegemonic and regulatory laws across gender, cultural and geopolitical borders.

Chapter 6 "Unsettling Unbinding's Liberatory Power: Maxine Hong Kingston's and Genny Lim's Immigration Narratives" continues the discussion of oppressive mechanisms of subjectivation and control Chinese immigrants confronted, as it turns to examine the metaphorization of footbinding deployed in Kingston's novel *China Men* (1980) and Lim's play *Paper Angels* (1980) in contexts of migration. Kingston's and Lim's denunciatory works, resonating with Tong's and Dong's artistic representations, point to the way footbinding magnifies the racialization and gendering processes that Chinese immigrants, male and female, confronted in the United States. More than epitomizing Chinese barbarism, the trope of footbinding lends a body to Chinese immigrants' disabling experience at the border and on American soil. Marking the body as distinctively Chinese and female, the literal and metaphorical bound feet of Chinese protagonists come to symbolize or embody the exclusion, discriminatory, racist and sexist laws Chinese immigrants confronted.

Although Kingston and Lim continue to rely on an Orientalist trope to appeal to an American audience through their references to and exhibitions of footbinding's mutilated corporeality, they equally deconstruct the victim script of footbinding diffused in the West. While footbinding magnifies the protagonists' impairment, it does not confine them to the status of passive victims. Kingston and Lim present subjugated, yet resistant, women and men fighting for survival. By ultimately displacing the bound foot from Chinese women's feet to immigrants' general conditions in the United States, Kingston and Lim unravel over-determined representations of Chinese barbarism and contrasting American paternalism and success at the core of Orientalism, and suggest instead nuanced representations of Chinese immigrants' mutilation *and* ground for resistance—albeit limited and contained—in the United States. Re-appropriating and building on Orientalist tropes, while destabilizing the line separating

footbinding and unbinding, as well as male and female bodies, both authors create an ambivalent depiction of immigrant life across Chinese and American cultural borders.

Chapter 7 “Re-Orienting Footbinding: Writing the Communist Foot in *Waiting* and *Becoming Madame Mao*” pursues a discussion of oppressive political mechanisms regulating and creating subjects, this time in the context of Chinese expatriate authors’ representations of the disabling China they left behind in times of Communism. This chapter examines the last wave of footbinding representations in Chinese American literature in the late 1990s through Chinese expatriate writers’ self-Orientalization in fictions dealing with Communism. No longer endowing footbinding with symbolic connecting power, Ha Jin in his novel *Waiting* (1999), and Anchee Min in her historical novel *Becoming Madame Mao* (2001) use the oppressive and maiming nature of footbinding to magnify their protagonists’ suffering, confinement and impossible unbinding under Communist totalitarianism. By complicating, if not annihilating, the liberatory function of the *unbinding* rhetoric put forth by Mao Zedong, both authors dramatize the shortcomings and inhumanity of the Communist regime. While their vilified representations of footbinding and Communism reify the spatial, temporal, political and cultural gaps between China and the United States, they simultaneously attempt to bridge this East-West divide, as they point to the humanity of the people caught in this destructive system. By de-humanizing *and* humanizing the Chinese society they describe, Ha and Min construct *and* deconstruct China as Orientalist, on the one hand, making of China a “theatrical stage affixed to [the West]” in Said’s terms (63), and, on the other, inserting it in a larger discourse of global human rights. This discursive tension translates into a borderland between Oriental and universal representations of the human body in physical and psychological pain. Yet, Orientalism persists at the end, as the demonization of Communist China predominates despite the characters’ humanization, thus undermining the global message they want to convey. More so than for their predecessors, Ha’s and Min’s somewhat ambivalent Orientalism points to the two authors’ own ambivalent positioning between a Communist China they fled and an America that *saved* them. Yet, read in conversation with Kingston’s and Lim’s vilification of American laws through footbinding, Ha’s and Min’s denunciation of Mao’s maiming regime through the mutilated bound foot simultaneously magnifies *and* destabilizes the geopolitical division of East and West.

The ambivalent trope of footbinding predominantly deployed by Chinese American writers and artists across genres from the 1970s to the early 2000s thus documents Chinese

American and expatriate artists' struggles, at an important time of self-definition and assertion, to disrupt and subvert the offensive Orientalist stereotypes conveyed through a variety of media. Although these efforts often led to the reiteration or re-appropriation of stereotypes, more than to their subversion, the ambivalence of bound feet representations that refuse easy categorization constitutes a first step in this endeavor. It shows a Chinese American community torn between their desire to re-connect with their Chinese ancestral past, and the pressures of assimilation and the publishing/production industries; a Chinese American community in search of its own identity. By looking back at the prevalence of this trope in late twentieth-century Chinese American literature, culture and art and reading it alongside the Chinese American community's equally ambivalent historical response to footbinding, this work ultimately emphasizes the progress made by the Asian American community in their still on-going battle against marginalization and stigmatization in the United States.



**PART I**  
**FOOTBINDING IN THE U.S. ARCHIVES**



## CHAPTER 1 – CONSTRUCTING CHINA, CONSTRUCTING AMERICA: FOOTBINDING IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY U.S. IMAGINATION

*“Orientalism is—and does not simply represent—a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with ‘our’ world.”*

(Said 12)

Extended contact and trade between China and the United States throughout the nineteenth century led to a multiplicity of representations of China in the United States as exotic, yet barbaric, as well as inferior to and dependent on Western salvation. China was “*made Oriental*” to use Said’s terms (6), not just because it “was discovered to be ‘Oriental’ in all those ways considered commonplace” (5-6), but also because it was compared and contrasted with, and therefore subordinated to the West. The dichotomy of self and other became crucial in American visions of the world, as well as in their cultural, national and imperial self-definition. As Robert G. Lee states, the “Oriental as racialized alien ... originates in the realm of popular culture, where struggles over who is or who can become a ‘real American’ take place and where the categories, representations, distinctions, and markers of race are defined” (*Orientalists* 5). In this respect, the making of the Orient in U.S. narratives and representations say more about American culture, ideology and hegemony in the nineteenth century than it says about the *Orientalists* depicted (Yu, *Thinking Orientalists* 58).

Footbinding was instrumental in the making of an *Oriental* China in the American mind throughout the nineteenth century. Two bound-footed women, Afong Moy and Pwan-Yekoo, were exhibited in museums and other performance venues in New York City between 1834 and 1850. They were rare sights for the American public: their bound feet appealed and puzzled at a time when the China Trade was well implemented and Chinese goods highly coveted. While their tiny embroidered shoes emanated beauty, elegance and craftsmanship, their concealed feet spoke of deformation, mutilation and torture both of which attracted people’s curiosity. Their bound feet became powerful statements of exotic and erotic, yet barbaric, Otherness, influencing the fabrication of the Orientalist stereotypes of Chinese women as rare exotic curios on the one



hand (Yung, *Chinese Women* 14), and of Chinese men as barbaric, savage and sexually deviant on the other.<sup>1</sup>

This male stereotype was co-dependent on the eroticization of Chinese women's mutilated feet, although it was less mediatized than Chinese women's bound feet in this early stage of contact between Chinese and Americans in the United States, as lithographs, newspaper clippings and exhibition catalogs published at the time of Afong Moy's and Pwan-Yekoo's displays attest. Note here that Chinese men were not yet emasculated in the U.S. imagination but rendered *beastly*, thus pointing to the evolving portrayal of Chinese masculinity in American discourses, Chinese men being increasingly defined, with their massive immigration in the second half of the nineteenth century, in ambivalent terms as both *beastly and effeminated*, sexually deviant *and* castrated as will be discussed in chapter 2. Two sides of the same coin, these gendered stereotypes of exotic femininity and *beastly* masculinity intertwined to depict a primitive Chinese culture distant from the developing American nation.

Exotic displays of bound-footed women in the flesh were complemented by medical exhibitions exposing the barbaric deformity of bound feet—exhibitions fostered by the advent of the anti-footbinding campaign in China and scientific progress in the West. The admiration for Chinese women's Oriental bodies slowly gave way to a morbid fascination for the deformed bones and putrefying flesh of their bound feet. Images and records of footbinding were circulated between the two nations, as Anglo-American missionaries worked hand in hand with doctors to modernize and advance the Chinese nation. Photographs, medical reports, narratives of medical cases described in missionaries' memoirs, X-rays (late 1890s),<sup>2</sup> as well as amputated and preserved bound feet were disseminated between China, the United States, and the West more generally. These preserved bound feet found their place in medical museums where they were distanced from their cultural contexts and framed within a larger discourse on the human body. Not yet presented as universal symbols of crippling beauty ideals, as they would be a century later, bound feet were compared to other deformations, natural and human-inflicted, to uncover

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<sup>1</sup> The portrayal of the Other in sexually-deviant terms was not a Western practice uniquely. Chinese were also said to demonize and barbarize foreign men as "men of animal instincts and animal sexual drives" (Louie 12).

<sup>2</sup> The discovery of the X-ray is attributed to German scientist Wilhelm Conrad Roentgen in 1895 who was the first man who managed, through the generation of cathode rays into a Crookes tube to penetrate the body and photograph its dense structure and reveal its bones. See Alexi Assmus, "Early History" 10-24.

the mysteries of the human body, and humankind's propensity to alter the body for cultural practices.

Indeed, the display of body parts and cultural artifacts in the second half of the nineteenth century points to the development of a type of globalism, as Western powers increasingly sought to understand the world scientifically. Ethnography and anthropology as disciplines developed in this context, furthering the contrast and comparison of diverse cultural and social habits used in scientific discourses. The advent of ethnographical museums complemented medical museums in fostering a sense of American self and in furthering this new globalist discourse of the world's races and cultures.

Understanding the world scientifically meant, however, contrasting cultures, habits and bodies; a process that remained dominated by the West, and Orientalist and hegemonic in purpose.<sup>3</sup> Western assertions of power at the technological, political, racial and cultural levels (see Said 246) were masked under this discourse of scientific globalism uniting East and West—a globalist impulse that sustained white supremacy and the racial and gender hierarchies on which it was based. Science was thus used to reify racial, sexual and cultural differences and to justify American imperialist interventions abroad. Seen in this light, exhibitions of amputated and preserved bound feet accentuated, rather than diminished, China's cultural distance and inferiority in the eyes of American scientists and spectators. Chinese women's bound feet were made hypervisible reifications in these scientific discourses of the patriarchal *savagery* governing the Chinese nation.

The displays of footbound women in the flesh as well as preserved bound feet and lotus shoes have much to teach us about the Orientalist discourses that took shape with Chinese and American contact throughout the nineteenth century. Read together, these different footbinding displays give a broader vision of American Orientalist fantasies that combined an erotic appeal for the exotic Chinese female foot covered in embroidered slippers with a repulsive curiosity for the mutilated feet these shoes contained—an ambivalent fantasy that ultimately translated in a compulsive desire to unbind the bound foot and *unveil* its mysterious physicality. They also illuminate the imbricated processes of gendering and racialization at the core of American imperialist definition. Constructing both China and a sense of American national, cultural, racial

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<sup>3</sup> As Said argues, Orientalism is also about “a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world” (12).

and patriarchal identity in the American imagination, these representations not only present the dichotomy of self and Other on which American imperialism abroad, and exclusion and discrimination at home, are based, but also testify to a growing interest in looking beyond national borders, with all the hegemonic complications it entailed. This ultimately foregrounds the already intrinsic ambivalence at the roots of Orientalist discourses on which footbinding representations were based in the United States.

### ***Orientalizing China: The Chinese Lady and Family***

In his 1962 study *Scratches on our Minds: American Images of China and India*, Harold Isaacs defines the first half of the nineteenth century as the declining “Age of Respect” between China and the United States.<sup>4</sup> The Age of Respect was mostly based on Enlightened writers’ printed impressions about China’s civilization and arts during the eighteenth century, leading American leaders to think of China “as worthy of emulation in their own new world” (Isaacs 67, 72). The early decades of the China Trade consolidated this Age of Respect between the two nations.

The Chinese passage to America began with the opening of a maritime trade between the two nations in the aftermath of the American Revolutionary War (1775–83). The *Empress of China*—the first American ship to sail to China—arrived in Canton in 1784. Attracted to China for its numerous exotic and luxurious goods, as well as for the prospect of its millions of consumers, the newly formed American states saw the China Trade as a road to success, especially as the United States was trying to break free from Britain’s dominion (Hunt 5). The war of independence from Britain resulted in American exclusion from the markets in Europe and the West Indies (5). However, this newly gained freedom meant novel opportunities for the United States to secure new trade and consolidate its empire. In an age of industrial developments, the United States looked at China with envy and “imperialist fantasy,” as it came to epitomize the United States’s two-fold dream of capitalist achievement and territorial expansion (Jacobson 25-6). Chinese goods were seen as the emerging elite class’s “must-have” and the luxurious material testimonies of their power and social distinction (Tchen 5, 10, 13), contributing to the definition of an “exceptional Americanness” (xix).

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<sup>4</sup> Isaacs divides the history of Chinese and American relationships in six historical periods: the Age of Respect (18th century), the Age of Contempt (1840–1905), the Age of Benevolence (1905–1937), the Age of Admiration (1937–1944), the Age of Disenchantment (1944–1949) and the Age of Hostility (1949-) (71).

The American scramble for China was facilitated by the war opposing the European nations until 1815. The maritime competition around China being scarce, the United States achieved a better access to the Chinese market, enabling them to firmly establish their trade. However, Americans, like any foreigners, had to comply with strict Chinese regulations and laws regarding trade and foreign presence in Chinese ports and cities. They were confined to Canton and were not allowed to remain on Chinese shore after the end of the trading season (Hunt 9). Similarly, foreign merchants had no contact with local officials and had to trade with intermediaries who supervised foreigners and secured commercial agreements (Hunt 9-10). American merchants' presence on Chinese territory was therefore controlled and policed.

Despite these restrictive policies, the United States slowly made its way into China. As Matthew Frye Jacobson explains, "the notion of American grandeur entailed not only establishing a global presence by reaching out to other regions and peoples of the world, but fully transforming the ways in which those peoples lived" (17). With the growing dissidence between Britain and China resulting in the Opium Wars in the mid-nineteenth century, Americans took advantage of the opening of Chinese doors to penetrate its formerly forbidden territory. Evangelical missionaries intervened in Chinese inner grounds to convert Chinese to Christianity and model the Chinese nation on an industrialized and civilized West.

It is in this broader commercial, maritime and theological context that transnational contact increased between China and the United States, and that Americans similarly confronted Chinese sailors' and merchants' arrival in New York City harbor in the first half of the nineteenth century. John Kuo Wei Tchen argues that it was not uncommon to see Chinese men in Atlantic world ports before Chinese immigrants' influx in San Francisco due to the "long seafaring tradition of diasporic Chinese traders and adventurers," and contact between Asian and European traders (79). Most Chinese merchants temporarily came for business and were seen only close to the docks in lower Manhattan (Bonner 1).<sup>5</sup> Partially due to their temporary stay, Chinese merchants and sailors were viewed by Americans, in this early period, as "friendly, non-threatening, and pleasing to the dominant culture" (Tchen xxi).

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<sup>5</sup> Historical records describe Punqua Wingchong as the first identifiable Chinese in New York. He stayed in the city for about 9 months in 1808 before returning to China. The purpose of his visit has been debated. Arthur Bonner argues that he came to the United States to collect a debt owed to his father (1).

Although Chinese sailors and merchants rarely remained in the United States before the 1850s, New York Census data name several Chinese men who settled in the port city of Manhattan, adopted English names and married Irish women in the early decades of the nineteenth century (Jackson, *Encyclopedia* 215).<sup>6</sup> Chinese men adapted to the hybrid port culture that was forming in New York City and intermingled with other citizens from various origins and nationalities (Tchen xxii). The lower part of Manhattan slowly transformed into a visible site of cultural Otherness, however, the more immigration to the United States unfolded (xix).<sup>7</sup>

Gender and class were also crucial in the development of a relationship between Americans and Chinese. In the midst of seafaring and trade, Chinese women of social distinction were rarely seen in Chinese port cities. The Qing dynasty's restrictive laws concerning foreigners' movement within China, and the confinement of upper-class women to their domestic quarters made the sight of Chinese footbound women exceptional (Haddad 6). Precisely because of her rare visibility in China,<sup>8</sup> the footbound woman was a subject of fantasy for American sailors and merchants, who "yearned to witness one in the flesh," as Haddad puts it (6).

Osmond Tiffany explains in his travelogue how shopkeepers in Canton sold "models in clay of the contracted feet, painted flesh color and set into shoes of the same size as those actually worn" to satisfy foreigners' curiosity (51). Lotus shoes and other footbinding replicas were common souvenirs that travelers and merchants brought back from China in the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries (Ross 322). Merchant Robert Morris in 1788 brought Chinese collectables and lotus shoes to Philadelphia aboard the ship *Alliance*; artifacts that were later donated to the Peale Museum<sup>9</sup> (Ross 322). A few years later, merchant Robert Dale similarly

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<sup>6</sup> E.g. John Huston came to the U.S. in 1829 when he was two years old (Tchen 77). In the 1855 census, he was reported to be a naturalized U.S. citizen and seaman; probably the first Chinese to become a citizen in New York (76). The census also mentions William Brown, a Chinese ship steward who arrived in New York around 1825, and John Lewis who had been in the United States since 1835 and who had been married to an Irish woman for twenty years when the survey was taken (77). Note the Anglicization of their names.

<sup>7</sup> While early immigrants were viewed as distant exotic Others, "the arrival of thousands of Chinese settlers in California, however, undermined the definition of Oriental difference, which relied on distance," as Lee contends (*Orientalists* 28). Their exotic Otherness gave way to their "construction of racial difference as present and threatening" (28).

<sup>8</sup> Osmond Tiffany states in his travelogue that bound-footed women were "sometimes [to] be seen in the streets [of Canton] supporting their trembling limbs with a staff" (51). However, as emphasized by Lisa Joy Pruitt, Western women missionaries were more likely to get in contact with bound-footed women than Western merchants and sailors who could not travel freely beyond the city ports (43-5).

<sup>9</sup> The Peale Museum opened a Chinese exhibition in 1784 alongside its display of African and Indian artifacts (Lee, *Orientalists* 28). Lee explains that the Peale first wanted to use Chinese artifacts "to refute negative portrayals of the

returned with lotus shoes and a plastered model of a bound foot once again donated to the Peale Museum (322). The commerce of lotus shoes and replicas of bound feet speaks of Western merchants', sailors' and travelers' curiosity for a practice predominantly hidden from view; a curiosity that also developed at home. If the sight of bound-feet replicas became sensational in the United States, as their exhibitions in forming museums attest, the spectacle of bound-footed women *in the flesh* were extraordinary and an enormous source of profit for entertainers.

The Orientalist constructions of Afong Moy and her successor Pwan-Yekoo on the American stage have to be contextualized in this larger transnational context that developed with the China Trade in the first half of the nineteenth century. Both women arrived to the United States during this propitious time of admiration for everything Chinese, which contributed to their positive receptions and fame. Displayed in forming museums and other performance venues, their bodies were marked as exotic curiosities. The American taste for the Orient was projected onto their bodies, which were used on stage to represent this distant and exotic China that Americans fantasized about. Their construction as *Orientalists* led to the creation of the first stereotype of Chinese women in the United States as exotic curios.

In addition, Afong Moy and Pwan-Yekoo embodied the tension brought along by industrialization and capitalism. On the one hand, the emphasis on their exotic femininity speaks, in these early decades of contact, of the creation of what Jacobson calls, the “mythic, preindustrial figure of the foreigner as a living symbol of the world left behind” (107), serving to condemn the harsh realities of American progress and offering a temporal escape from industrialization by bringing Americans back to the *romantic wilderness* of a distant past. This return to the past is also expressed in gender terms. While the spatially and temporally distant Orient was feminized through the image of the footbound woman, the American imperialist nation was contrastingly and increasingly defined in masculine terms, furthering the association of industrial progress with masculinity.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, non-Westerners were presented as distant Others of a bygone era in need of the “stewardship of the West,” to use Jacobson’s words

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Chinese as barbaric heathens—being circulated by frustrated Christian missionaries—and instead to promote a positive image of the Chinese as potential trading partners” (29).

<sup>10</sup> See Schueller 11-12 for more on the fluidity of gender categories in American nationalist discourses in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

(107), equally highlighting the rhetoric of liberation at the heart of imperialism.<sup>11</sup> Conflicting reactions to Afong Moy and Pwan-Yekoo, oscillating between fascination, wonder and cultural/racial distancing, stress this paradoxical American response to modernization, industrialization and economic progress.

Little is known about Afong Moy's identity, why she came to the United States and how she lived her American experience. What is left is a lithograph representing one of her exhibitions, dates of past shows, and excessive fictional narratives published in local newspapers advertising for her cultural and physical exoticism, as well as Oriental exhibitions.<sup>12</sup> She is said to have arrived on October 17, 1834 on board the *Washington* (Haddad 9). Merchants Nathaniel and Frederick Carne were involved in the importation of Chinese goods to the United States. After the failure of one of their cargoes of Chinese products unknown to American consumers, they decided to work with Captain Obear "to develop a marketing ploy to draw attention to the new kinds of Chinese goods being introduced," as Haddad explains (7). The Carne brothers thought that by bringing a Chinese woman with bound feet back with them and showcasing her amid a variety of Chinese exotic objects in several American cities, American consumers would become attracted to Chinese goods, which would then spur sales (7).

Afong Moy's arrival was highly documented in newspapers due to the extraordinary nature of the ship cargo (Haddad 9). Americans were fascinated by the idea that the ship brought a Chinese lady with bound feet—the first they had ever seen. The *New York Daily Advertiser* of October 20, 1834 describes this excitement: "The ship *Washington*, Capt. Obear, has brought out a beautiful Chinese Lady, called *Julia Foochee ching-chang king*, daughter of *Hong wang-tzang tzee king*. As she will see all who are disposed to pay twenty-five cents, she will no doubt have many admirers" (qtd. in Haddad 9). Another reporter in the *New York Commercial Advertiser* of October 18, 1834 referred to her as "Miss Ching-Chang-foo" (qtd. in Haddad 9). Note the Orientalist construction of this Chinese woman, whose name appears in both newspapers as onomatopoeic imitation of the Chinese language as "ching-chang" demonstrates—a term later

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<sup>11</sup> Conversely, Chinese immigration that took place in the years that followed was considered—in Lee's words—as "symbol for the break between a pastoral past and the commercial future" (*Orientalism* 31) and as a "metonym for the collapse of time and space produced by the transition to industrial capitalism" (32). This led to the transformation of Chinese people from exotic curios to "pollutant" and unwanted settlers (32).

<sup>12</sup> Little was known about Afong Moy's display until John Haddad published his article "The Chinese Lady" which combines archival newspaper clippings to shed light onto Afong Moy's journey to the United States, arrival and performances.

used as racist slur. Note also the Westernization of these names. Not only is she called “Julia” or “Miss,” but also “Julia Foochee ching-chang *king*.” This name echoes her father’s name “Hong wang-tzang tzee *king*” (my emphasis) and subverts the Chinese name order that puts family name first. While her naming defines her in Orientalist terms, it equally breaches the distance between China and the United States by making her more approachable for an unfamiliar Western audience. By November 1834, these Orientalist constructions were substituted by the name of Afong Moy—whose origin remains undetermined (Haddad 9). She was better known, however, by the equally Orientalizing moniker of “the Chinese Lady” subsequently used in local newspapers alongside *Afong Moy*.

Reporters speculated on the reasons for her visit, while inserting their narratives in a larger, yet ambivalent Confucian society. A few pointed to an agreement that was made between Captain Obear and her father, “‘a distinguished citizen’ of China ‘residing in the suburbs of Canton’” (Haddad 7).<sup>13</sup> The father was said to have lent his daughter to Obear for two years for a large sum of money. The *Baltimore Patriot* of October 21, 1834 presents various hypotheses including her necessity to secure money for her father, and her own decision to travel abroad. Unable to decide, the reporter gives a somewhat contradictory portrait of Afong Moy, whom he describes as both a submissive daughter to her father in need, and a courageous, “chivalrous,” “dauntless,” and strong natured lady, “whose natural fire and vivacity, rather than patient submission to her destiny” had “buoyed up her spirits, and screwed her courage to the resolution of so bold a voyage” (qtd. in Haddad 7).

The creation of Afong Moy’s character is co-dependent on the father’s construction in these narratives, the father being equally defined in ambivalent terms. While he is described as a *distinguished* citizen, which connotes fame as well as achievement, and a patriarch controlling and *lending* his daughter, he is also presented as a somewhat emasculated figure in financial troubles in a society that sees men as breadwinners of the family. The father’s emasculation is further magnified by the description of the daughter as chivalrous and emboldened by the undertaken voyage. These gender ambivalences at the core of both descriptions served to attract the American audience’s curiosity, but foregrounds as well the cultural and gender fabrications at the heart of these Orientalist narratives.

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<sup>13</sup> Haddad does not specify which newspaper article(s) he is quoting here.



Upon arrival, Afong Moy was first shown in the bourgeois area of modern City Hall Park in Manhattan and became an important figure of Broadway shows, but changed location regularly within the range of 15 years. George Odell in his *Annals of the New York Stage* mentions more than once the exhibition of the Chinese Lady, who was first seen in her native costumes, in 1834, at 8 Park Place (IV, 43), and at the American Museum<sup>14</sup> at the crossroads of Broadway and Ann Streets, where she was exhibited alongside “a party of Indians” who “was to dance and hold a council,” as well as with a magician and a glass blower (IV, 42). In 1835, she appeared at the City Saloon on Broadway with Harrington, a magician, and a moving panorama of the Battle of Waterloo (VI, 43). In 1836, she stayed for two weeks at the freshly opened Brooklyn Institute<sup>15</sup> on Fulton and Cranberry Streets (IV, 186). The opening exhibition featured a concert, including German and Italian songs and music, as well as “the Chinese lady, ‘richly dressed in Chinese Costume,’ and the Hanington’s Hydro-Oxygen Microscope” (IV, 186). She ultimately appeared at the Temple of the Muses (315 Broadway), a boat converted into a theater sometime between 1847 and 1848 (V, 398-9). Afong Moy also traveled to Eastern American cities such as New Haven, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Richmond, Norfolk, Charleston, New Orleans, Boston, and Washington where she even visited President Andrew Jackson at the White House (Haddad 10). Afong Moy’s identity as a traveler is crucial to understand her reception. She was welcomed and acclaimed because she was a temporary visitor on the move.

The juxtaposition of a variety of curiosities ranging from objects to people from different corners of the world in these heterogeneous venues points to the entertainment purposes of these displays, as well as to their growing anthropological and ethnographic nature. Modern-day museum-goers’ “anthropological gaze,” as James Moy declares, developed from these early forms of interactive shows that were meant to entertain, but also teach, as audiences came “to study, to learn, to participate in an exchange which promised an authentic, scientifically

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<sup>14</sup> George Wilson Pierson, in his *Tocqueville in America*, describes the American Museum in the 1830s as “one of the noted institutions of the city” “housed in a five-story marble building standing in Broadway opposite St. Paul’s Church.” This museum contained “four ‘halls’ or showrooms, the first exhibiting stuffed birds; the second, quadrupeds; and the ‘best collection of Fish ever known’; the third, ‘miscellaneous curiosities’; and the fourth, a ‘Grand Cosmorama, which contains Views of most of the principal cities in the world’” (150).

<sup>15</sup> The Brooklyn institute (named as such in 1843) was first established in 1823 with the “founding of the Brooklyn Apprentices’ Library” to educate young tradesmen. Merging with the Brooklyn Lyceum in 1841, the Brooklyn Institute offered “exhibitions of paintings and sculpture in addition to lectures on subjects as diverse as geology and abolitionism.” See “Founding the Museum” on the Brooklyn Museum website, as well as the Brooklyn Museum records (1823–1963) of the Smithsonian Archives of American Art.

grounded explication of the freakish assembled objects, despite the awkward truncation of time and geography” (14). The didactic function of these shows and museum exhibits was also based on a compare/contrast pattern, accentuating the dichotomy of self and other in vogue since the sixteenth-century antiquarians’ cabinets of curiosities. This contributed to the consolidation of a national consciousness. As Martin Prösler argues, the nineteenth-century museum was a space in which the nation could imagine and create itself (34). The contrast and comparison with other nations and/or civilizations became instrumental in this endeavor. The exhibition of primitive cultures served to define “standards of civilizations” against which these newly unified states could evaluate and measure themselves (34). By teaching about others and ourselves, museums thus purveyed national and cultural ideology to the masses, as well as embodied the changing visions and representations of the nation.

The development of a freak show culture in the nineteenth century furthered the comparison and contrast of cultures and bodies offered by museums. As Rose-Marie Garland Thompson suggests, freak shows consolidated a version of American selfhood that was capable, rational and normative, while simultaneously foregrounding the necessity of sameness for the building of a democratic order (*Extraordinary Bodies* 66, 107). By delineating normalcy and putting the *deviant* body on display, Americans reinforced the cult of whiteness and able-bodiedness on which their nation was built and made any type of Otherness hypervisible and purposely unassimilable. The unmarked or “neutral, disembodied and universalized” audience (135) was thus asked to relate the performance to themselves, to their growing sense of American individual and collective identity (8). The exhibition of the racial Other beside *extraordinary bodies* thus furthered the racial discrimination on which the American nation was built, not only giving sense to how racial difference was perceived and treated in the United States, but also abroad as other civilizations were often deemed culturally backward and racially inferior to the forming American nation.

Although Afong Moy was supposed to stay for two years, she did not board the ship *Mary Ballard* that was to bring her home in 1836 (Haddad 16). A reporter of the *New York Times* from July 8, 1836 depicts Afong Moy’s “farewell” to her “First Friends” at the Peale Museum “prior to departing for her native country” (“Chinese American, a History of Resilience” n.p.). How long she stayed at this venue and when her departure was planned are not specified. Odell also notes that Afong Moy stopped at the City Saloon in 1837 while she was waiting for a ship to

China (IV, 177). If she boarded the ship is another matter. The *Monmouth Enquirer* of April 3, 1838 offers another interpretation. Afong Moy had not returned to China but was living in economic precariousness, and was “residing in a very poor and obscure family” in New Jersey. The reporter blames her misfortune on “the agent who had her in charge” (qtd. in Haddad 16). She was exhibited once again in 1847 or 48 at the Temple of the Muses under P.T. Barnum’s supervision before disappearing from the stage (Odell V, 398; Haddad 16).

In addition to being portrayed as a perpetual traveler and temporary sojourner, Afong Moy was simultaneously contained in a delimited Oriental space outside of the life of New York City. Geographical delineations reinforce the “multiple sites of separation and oppositions” (5) at the core of state formation, as Jaqui Alexander proclaims (5), which in the case of Afong Moy reinforces the dominance of the forming white patriarchal American nation. Museums, as well as other performance venues, have the power to disrupt notions of geographies by recreating new temporalities and spatialities. In Afong Moy’s case, the space of the museum was changed into a distant and exotic China within the confines of a building, or even a stage. By constructing China as exotic and Oriental, Americans spatialized difference and created an elsewhere that could be coveted by spectators; but also delineated a space that *Orientalists* could inhabit, slowly demarcating a boundary between American citizens and distant outsiders.

Alexander’s space delineation resonates with Said’s vision of the Orient as a “theatrical stage” attached to the West (63), to which the Other is confined, but also mediated and manipulated to produce—through representation—“the larger whole from which they emanate” (63). Barnum draws attention in his Chinese Museum catalog to the Orientalist nature of his museum, for instance: “this Museum . . . transports us to China itself; and furnishes to the eye and ear a perfect and lasting impression of the Chinese as a nation, their habits, their customs, and their singularities” (6). By stressing the *authenticity* of the exhibitions that in his words “transport” the audience to China itself, Barnum paradoxically emphasizes the fabrication and Orientalist mediation of such displays. Indeed, as Josephine Lee claims, authenticity in the context of Orientalist displays “was often mobilized to confirm existing stereotypes,” and “accentuated racial difference” (“Stage Orientalism” 65). While American spectators became temporary tourists, Afong Moy, and her successor Pwan-Yekoo, were thus turned into their Chinese destination.

The staging of Afong Moy within an Orientalist setting sheds light on the construction of this exotic China. The lithograph and the various newspaper clippings preserved to this day provide invaluable information concerning her exhibition.<sup>16</sup> Afong Moy was exhibited among a variety of Chinese objects and pieces of furniture that were meant to create an Oriental atmosphere. In the lithograph dating to 1835 (figure 1), Afong Moy is sitting on a chair in the middle of the stage on a raised platform in what appears to be a type of parlor. A table on which lay a cup of tea and a small teapot is set next to her. Tea, this valuable good massively imported



Figure 1: “The Chinese Lady” (1835); Lithograph by Russo Browne.  
Museum of the City of New York.

from China, serves here to *authenticate* Afong Moy’s Chinese-ness (Tchen 103). From the other side of the table is a lattice-work bank with Chinese motifs. Above her head hangs a canopy of drapery, topped by what resembles a Middle Eastern latticed dome (103). An octagonal Oriental lantern decorated with human characters hangs from the ceiling on the right side. Two painted Chinese characters—on the right, a woman with bound feet and, on the left, a man holding a scroll or painting—hang on the wall in the background. These paintings present stereotypical upper-class Chinese figures: the male

scholar and the bound-footed woman. *Wen* masculinity that Kam Louie defines as pertaining to the educated, the mental and the civilized (10) complement bound feet and the luxurious setting of the display in presenting an upper-class Chinese culture that Western viewers could look up to and reproduce—if not consume—at home. Other objects such as a stool, two vases filled with flowers, another painting in the left corner, a type of chest in the background and an additional

<sup>16</sup> *Cartes de visite* were often distributed or sold at the end of freak shows as souvenirs to take home (see Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.*). Afong Moy’s surviving lithograph may have had a similar function.

chair in the forefront fill in the space. The numerous pieces of furniture occupying the room create an atmosphere of luxury, wealth and social standing.

Although at the center of attention, Afong Moy is separated from her American audience, if we consider the audience's "higher vantage point" in the lithograph (Tchen 103). The audience, who literally looks down at her, is put in a privileged position as upper-class spectators would from their balcony seats in a theater (103). Indeed, the first location of her exhibition, Park Place, situated in a bourgeois neighborhood (Haddad 9), as well as the Orientalist setting showcasing a variety of Oriental objects and furniture point to the bourgeois spectators targeted. Yet, despite the Oriental setting and the separation between spectator and actor, the luxurious stage designed as a parlor—a common sitting room in Anglo-American wealthy households—bridges the gap between the exhibited Chinese woman and the American bourgeois audience. This parlor speaks of the familiar Victorianism *and* increasing Orientalism of their home (Tchen 105). Indeed, the rising middle class looked with interest at the fancy but affordable merchandise brought from China in the 1830s. The larger diffusion of these affordable goods for different income ranges brought China inside many American households through the appealing Chinese designs decorating porcelains and ceramics, creating an "Oriental wonderland" in the American imagination, as Haddad observes (8). Set as a parlor decorated with Oriental objects, Afong Moy's staged exhibition thus spurred American spectators to pay attention to these new types of Chinese goods, and imagine how good these items would look in their own parlors.<sup>17</sup>

The manipulation of space and the re-construction of a distant, exotic and luxurious China are accentuated by the central presence of Afong Moy dressed in *traditional* costumes: her appearance and geographical Otherness are made explicit by her place within this *Chinoiserie*, the surrounding Oriental setting appearing as an extension of her own being (Tchen 105). The lithograph presents her as dressed in a silk gown with matching trousers. Her hair is tied into a bun and held by two long pins. Tchen sees her hairstyle as typical of Chinese married women from the Qing dynasty (101). Her tiny feet covered in embroidered slippers peek out from her trousers. Her feet are resting on a little pedestal, making them more visible. The Orientalism of her attire, in addition to appealing to the American audience's imagination and desire for wealth,

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<sup>17</sup> Similar objects and pieces of furniture exhibited on Afong Moy's Oriental stage were sold in New York (Haddad 7). Haddad also discusses the importance of interior decoration in the definition of bourgeois women's domesticity and social identity following the 1830s market revolution (11-13).

similarly foregrounds the ethnographic and anthropological nature of the show that also presents, at home, part of the distant world encountered during trade and conquests.

One observer in the *Haverhill Gazette* on November 29, 1834, gives a lengthy portrayal of Afong Moy's accouterment: she

presented herself in the rich costume of a Chinese Lady – an outward mantle of blue silk, sumptuously embroidered, and yellow silk pantalets from beneath the ample folds of which peeped her tiny little feet, not over *four inches* in length ... Her head has a profusion of jet black hair, combed upward from the fine forehead and brunette temples, and filled on the top with bouquets of artificial flowers and large gold pins, which dress we suppose will be henceforward quite the tone. (qtd. in Haddad 15)

The reporter's detailing of her exotic attire conflates her with the surrounding Oriental objects: she appears as yet another luxurious good that American spectators could buy. Furthermore, this reporter marks her racial difference by giving a minute account of her facial and racial features, cataloging her body parts, as Haddad pinpoints, as he would catalog the various objects in the room: "Her features are pleasing, her forehead high and protuberant, and her face round and full with languishing black eyes placed with the peculiar obliquity of the outer angle, which characterizes the Mongolian variety of the human race" (qtd. in Haddad 15).

While her costume and phenotypes were appealing to the American audience, her small feet—four-and-a-half inches in length—were puzzling and shocking, yet mesmerizing, leading to a variety of responses from the American audience wavering between condemnation to erotic appeal. One reporter in the *New York Commercial Advertiser* of November 15, 1834 denounces the torturous aspect of footbinding when commenting on Afong Moy's limping on stage. His repulsion and shock are complemented by his hopes that the Christianization of China would bring the end of such a barbaric custom against the Chinese female population (qtd. in Haddad 14). By invoking China's need of Christianization, the reporter discards the Chinese population as inferior and in need of Western salvation. Indeed, footbinding is here inserted in a broader narrative that vilifies Chinese culture and society through references to this custom's maiming nature and Chinese men's implied brutality toward the female kind. A reporter of the *New Hampshire Patriot*, on November 24, 1834, similarly points to the torturous nature of footbinding, while simultaneously expressing the attractive sight of bound feet: her "little feet are by far the most novel and interesting feature of her appearance, although we confess there is something painful in the reminiscence of the torture she must have endured in infancy" (qtd. in

Haddad 15). Contrastingly, another observer in his article “Extraordinary Arrival: The Young Chinese Lady” highlights Afong Moy’s feet’s “exquisite beauty and diminutiveness” (*Baltimore Patriot*, October 21, 1834 qtd. in Haddad 15), while referring to her as a “perfect little vixen” (qtd. in Haddad 15), foregrounding as well the erotic appeal created by Afong Moy’s *Oriental* features. It is precisely footbinding’s paradoxical nature that appealed to the imagination of the American public.

In addition to being strategically placed among an Oriental setting and made hypervisibly *Chinese*, Afong Moy performed a similarly constructed Chinese identity. Odell in his 1847–48 entry explains how Afong Moy was talking and counting in Chinese as well as eating with chopsticks (V, 398). Twelve years before that, she was said in some newspaper articles dating to March 17, 1835 to be singing, reciting freshly-learned English words, and walking across the stage (Haddad 9). Thanks to her interpreter, Afong Moy could also answer her audience’s questions about various aspects of her life in China and in the United States, as well as about Chinese customs and traditions such as footbinding (*Baltimore Commercial Daily Advertiser*, March 17 1835; qtd. in Haddad 9). The interpreter also occasionally wrote the spectators’ names in Chinese characters for an additional fee as a souvenir of their visits (*Maryland American and Commercial Daily*; qtd. in Haddad 10). He also made sure that Afong Moy did not remain constantly seated and urged her to walk across the stage (*Baltimore Commercial Daily Advertiser*; qtd. in Haddad 9). China was thus constructed in the American audience’s imagination through these limited performances that exoticized the Chinese culture on display.

The Orientalist nature of Afong Moy’s performance was not enough, however, to satisfy her audience. Entertainers were constantly in search of novelty to attract more customers. Within two years, from 1834 to 1836, Afong Moy’s display had transformed from a predominantly ethnographical exhibition of her Oriental Chinese-ness to a more scientific—and arguably freakish—display of her deformed bound feet. Upon arrival, Afong Moy refused to show her feet naked, although she was commonly asked to do so (Haddad 29). By February 1835, she had caved in. A scientific report published in the *Southern Patriot* on February 5 disclosed the exact measurement of her feet and their general appearance. This report followed a special display exclusively organized for an audience of physicians (Haddad 15). Afong Moy refused, however, to expose her feet publically to a wider audience: Charleston’s *Southern Patriot* of May 1, 1835

explains that she did not want to show her naked feet because it would violate her Chinese tradition (Haddad 16).

Forced to comply or attracted by a better income, Afong Moy ultimately agreed to exhibit her feet: by July 1836, the uncovering of her feet was part of the show. The *New York Times* of July 9, 1836 promotes the audience's rare opportunity to go and see her naked bound feet at the Peale's Museum before her supposed departure for China:

Afong's feet are Four Inches and an eighth in length, being about the size of an infant's of one year old. And to add to the interest of the exhibition, the shoe and covering of the foot will be taken off, thereby offering an opportunity of observing their curious method of folding the toes, &c., by actual observation, prove the real size of the foot beyond a doubt. ("Chinese American Women: History of Resilience" n.p.)

This article, in addition to advertising for this *last* show, similarly authenticates her bound feet, here scaled to prove that they were no bigger than a one-year-old infant's feet; a proof ultimately promised in the display of her naked flesh. The ethnographic display of her body on stage amid an Oriental setting thus slowly conflated with developing freak shows exhibiting deviance, deformity and anomalous corporealities.

Although she was never labeled as a freak, this developing freak show culture frames the display of Afong Moy's successor, Pwan-Yekoo, who became the new sensation of the New York stage in 1850. Conversely to Afong Moy who was seen in a variety of venues, ranging from museums to theaters to places of popular entertainment, Pwan-Yekoo was only displayed in P.T. Barnum's Chinese Museum, which opened on April 22, 1850 on 529 Broadway (Tchen 118).<sup>18</sup> In his museum catalog *Ten Thousand Things on China and the Chinese*, Barnum records that this seventeen-year-old girl arrived from Canton to New York in April 1850 on the ship *Ianthe* (6). The *New York Express* of April 22, 1850 mentions her mysterious apparition: "Barnum's enterprise stops short of nothing that is strange or wonderful. How he could tempt a Chinese lady of unquestionable character and position to travel among the 'outside barbarians,' and how he could smuggle her out of that mysterious country, no one can imagine; yet he has done both" (qtd. in Barnum 250). The mystery was part of the show. The lack of knowledge

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<sup>18</sup> Conversely, Afong Moy worked only temporarily for Barnum at the end of her American career. Barnum transformed the dime museums—originally a cheap form of entertainment for the working class—into a popular entertainment for all with the opening of his American Museum located on Broadway, NY in the 1840s. See executive director/curator Kathleen Maher's introduction "The Man, the Myth, the Legend" on the Barnum Museum website.



regarding her life in China and the reasons for her travel contributed, moreover, to the Orientalist fabrication of her identity for the purpose of the show. Note here too the emphasis on Barnum, who is praised for “smuggling” her outside of this “mysterious” country, which emphasizes how American exceptionalism was defined in comparison to and contrast with the exotic Other.

Pwan-Yekoo and her attendants are said, in Barnum’s catalog, to have stopped to New York for two weeks before heading to England (6). The *New York Daily Globe* of April 23, 1850 portrays them as “sojourning” at Barnum’s Chinese Museum, stressing therefore their temporary stay (qtd. in Barnum 206). Tchen denounces Barnum’s hoax. These performers were not going to England and remained exhibited for eight weeks instead of two (121). In a letter to an entrepreneur friend, Barnum reveals his contractual relationship to the so-called Chinese family, who was supposed to stay for six years under his supervision (121). The Chinese family was never staged for six years as planned. They disappeared shortly after their first exhibition in New York. As with Afong Moy, the duration of their stay in the United States remains unknown.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, while Afong Moy was exhibited alone amid an Oriental setting, Pwan-Yekoo was part of a display entitled “the Chinese family,” whose members—Pwan-Yekoo, a maid, a music teacher and his two children—were presented in Barnum’s catalog as “specimen” or “creatures” (6). The Latin etymology of the word “specimen”—*specere*, “to look at” (*OED*)—spells out the ethnographical aspect, if not the freak show nature, of the display. Note also the construction of this Chinese family, whose dissonance with Western conceptions and definitions of *family* emphasizes the gap separating East and West, as well as the theatricality and fakeness of this representation. Moreover, despite the title, the emphasis remained principally on Pwan-Yekoo; her attendants were accessory, as the numerous newspaper clippings advertising *her* display emphasize (Tchen 118).

The act of looking performed by the audience was, in addition, very much influenced by the growing racial and anthropological discourses of the time. Lucius Manilus Sargent, in the second volume of *Dealings with the Dead* (1856), recalls his visit to Barnum’s Chinese Museum

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<sup>19</sup> Pwan-Yekoo’s 1850 exhibition at Barnum’s Chinese Museum is the last recorded display of a footbound woman on the American stage. Orientalist exhibitions of Chinese people remained in vogue, however, with the world’s fairs that developed shortly after, starting with the Philadelphia international exhibition of 1876. For more on world’s fairs, see Robert W. Rydell’s *All the World’s a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Exhibitions 1876–1916* (1987).

and his encounter with the Chinese family, whom he describes principally by their racial phenotypes:

Their features and complexions are Chinese, of course, and cannot be better described than in the words of Sir John Barrow, as applicable to the race: “The narrow, elongated, half-closed eye; the linear and highly-arched eye-brow; the broad root of the nose; the projection of the upper jaw a little beyond the lower; the thin, straggling beard and the body generally free from hair; a high, conical head, and triangular face: and these are the peculiar characteristics which obtained for them, in the *Systema Naturae* of Linnaeus, a place among the varieties of the species, distinguished by the name of *homines monstrosi*.” (398-9)

By quoting writer Sir John Barrow’s long physiological account of Chinese people, Sargent exposes his beliefs in racial hierarchy. By referring to the racial taxonomy of *Hominus monstrosus*, he foregrounds the inferiority and the freakish nature of the Chinese family sojourning at Barnum’s museum. The changing attitude toward Chinese bound-footed women can be seen here in the developing racial discourse framing Pwan-Yekoo’s display, at a time of degrading economic and political relationship between China and the United States, at the dawn of Commodore Perry’s gunboat diplomacy attack on China (1853).

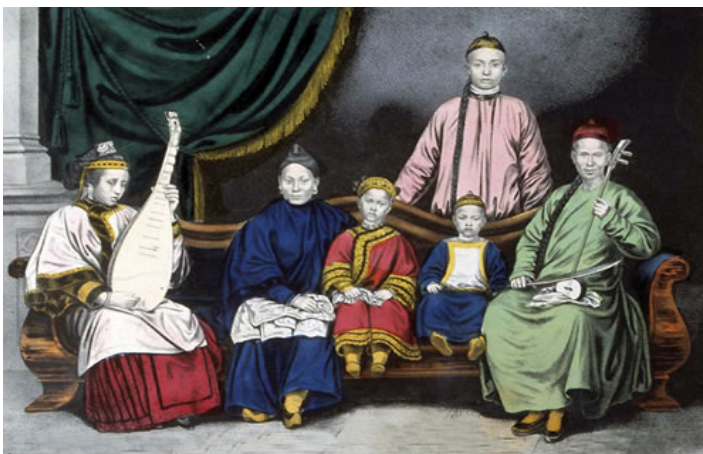


Figure 2: “The Living Chinese” (1850); lithograph by N. Currier. Library of Congress, location number 2012647441. 176 U.S. Copyright Office.

Contrary to the historical records that give invaluable information concerning Afong Moy’s display at various venues, the newspapers advertising for Pwan-Yekoo’s exhibition give little information about the stage organization. A surviving lithograph (figure 2) shows in the forefront a massive sofa on which Pwan-Yekoo, her music master and his two

children are sitting, and behind which the interpreter stands. In the background, draperies and a column can be seen. Yet, the close-up on the characters prevents the viewer from seeing the broader setting. Tchen speculates that “Pwan and her family were probably seated in a room with a certain set repertoire that offered plenty of opportunities of audience interaction” (121). As Barnum’s catalog highlights, the music teacher “at times gratif[ied] the visitors with popular

Chinese songs, as well as manifest[ed] his musical ability in his extempore airs and accompaniments” (6). Moreover, the interpreter who was said to transfer “the unique expressions of these strange Orientals into our own more sober tongue” (6), was portrayed as a cultural and linguistic bridge between Americans and Chinese. Neither focusing on Pwan-Yekoo as such, nor on the Oriental setting surrounding them, this lithograph points indeed to the interactive nature of this exhibition.

Barnum’s emphasis on the Chinese family’s phenotypes, costumes and social standing were also fundamental components of his Orientalist display. Pwan-Yekoo’s aristocratic demeanor, native costumes, beauty and tiny feet played an important role in her sale to the public as a “prepossessing,” “young and vivacious,” “artless,” “refined,” and “delicate” young woman (Barnum 6).<sup>20</sup> As Barnum describes in his catalog:

Miss Pwan-ye-koo is a capital specimen of a Chinese belle. Her feet are only two and a half inches long, and are remarkably symmetrical. Her figure is good, though much concealed by the *bizarre* costume of her country; while her face, for regularity of feature, and a naïve expression of innocent amiability, will bear close comparison with some of the loveliest of our own land. (6)

In Barnum’s words, Pwan-Yekoo was a specimen of a belle—an instantiation of a beauty—not a beauty. She required special attention. Also, her two-and-a-half-inch feet and her “*bizarre* costume” marked her as another type of human species that needed to be studied. Note here the growing scientific/anthropological focus as Barnum invites the public to come and compare Pwan-Yekoo to Western ladies. In the lithograph, her dress is composed of multiple layers of drapery from seemingly various colors and motifs. Two tiny feet are pointing out of her dress. She is wearing jewels—a bracelet on her right hand as well as a pair of earrings. An ornamented

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<sup>20</sup> Barnum’s catalog provides descriptions of the five *family* members included in the display. Sitting next to Pwan-Yekoo (lithograph) is Lum-Akum, her 23 year-old maid whom Barnum describes as “agreeable” and “comely,” as well as being “a fair specimen of the Chinese women of her class;” “quite a study, in her way, for a curious observer” (15). Note here again the use of the term “specimen.” Barnum emphasizes her lower-class status, further represented by her dress: Lum-Akum wears an everyday-wear black dress without motifs, ornaments or jewels. Her feet appearing from underneath her dress are not bound. Pwan-Yekoo’s music professor, Mr. Soo-Chune, is portrayed as being a “gentleman of education and character” as well as “an *artiste* of reputation” and a “master of the Chinese violin and other musical instruments” (Barnum 6). In the lithograph, his dress appears to be simple. He is wearing the traditional Qing queue. Soo-Chune is accompanied by his supposedly two children, Miss Amoon, seven years old, and Master Mun-Chung, five. Barnum defines them as embodying the “perfect novelties, as types of Chinese juvenility” (6). He further states: “Unlike the notions many of us have formed of the rising generation among that odd people, we are compelled to admit that these specimens of ‘young China’ are really pretty, graceful and intelligent. They cannot but please with their bright eyes, light-hearted smiles, lively tongue, and modest behavior” (6). The interpreter Aleet-Mong who stands behind the couch on the lithograph, is not given much attention in Barnum’s account.

headdress adorns her hair. Similarly to Afong Moy, Pwan-Yekoo's *traditional* costume defined her as stereotypically Chinese. Yet, her face bore, in Barnum's view, the naïveté, the innocence and the amiability required of a woman in the West. Pwan-Yekoo's Otherness was made more graspable for a Western audience, as her Orientalism was balanced by her reconfigured humanness. It was this extraordinary combination that Barnum sold.

Her two-and-a-half-inch feet were also a source of mixed scientific attention and wonder. In his recollection of his visit to the Chinese Museum, Sargent commented, in his scientific jargon, on footbinding's paradoxical nature as it crippled the woman's body to enhance her social mobility: "Miss Pwan-Yekoo, like all other Chinese girls, with these crippled feet, walks, with manifest uneasiness and awkwardness, upon her heels. The *os calcis* receives the whole weight of the body" (399). Conversely to other reporters who look at footbinding with fascination, Sargent focuses instead on the mutilation and the physical repercussion that binding had on a woman's body: unable to work because of their mutilated feet, women's domestic usefulness was diminished (399). The focus on mutilation serves here again to highlight the broader barbaric Chinese culture and society in which this tradition developed.

Conversely, a reporter of *The New York Express* of April 22, 1850 depicts Pwan-Yekoo's feet as magical; she was "so pretty, so arch, so lively, and so graceful, while her minute feet are wondrous!" (qtd. in Barnum 205). In his words, she was transformed into the prototypical embodiment of a beauty in Chinese poetry with "cheeks red as the almond-flower, mouth like the peach's bloom, waist slender as the willow-leaf, eyes bright as autumnal ripples, and footsteps like the flowers of the water-lily" (*New York Daily Globe*, April 22, 1850 qtd. in Barnum 205). The succession of similes associating Pwan-Yekoo with imitation of clichéd imagery of Chinese poetry furthers the Orientalization of her body and feet.

For the reporter of the *New York Herald* of April 22, 1850, Pwan-Yekoo's feet were further proof of her social rank and distinction, yet another component of Barnum's display:

The 'Golden lilies,' as the Chinese term the tiny feet of their Chinese ladies of rank and fashion (for poor females in China must have feet suited to walking), are admirably illustrated in the feet of the Chinese belle at the Chinese Museum. We had no idea that a woman of that country could be so good-looking, either. (qtd. in Barnum 205)

In addition to alluding to the crippling aspect of footbinding, the author emphasizes the fascinating nature of these exotic "Golden Lilies," as well as the Chinese Lady's unusual beauty

for her race, here again, eroticizing, fetishizing and Orientalizing her face, body and feet. Because of the conflicting illustrations and understandings of footbinding diffused at the time, Pwan-Yekoo's feet attracted even more.

As with Afong Moy beforehand, Pwan-Yekoo was commonly presented by her respectability, of which her two-and-a-half bound feet were representative.<sup>21</sup> Her feet—whose incredibly small size surpassed the ideal size of three inches in length—distinguished her from Afong Moy, whose four-and-a-half-inch bound feet were not *as* marvelous. Her respectability was associated with her degree of cripple-ness that exceeded that of Afong Moy's. Indeed, in order to increase the sale and promote his new Chinese family as extraordinary, Barnum had to reveal the hoax of Afong Moy's character, whose aristocratic and respectable nature he denounces in 1850 as fake. Barnum presents Pwan-Yekoo as “the first Chinese *lady* that has yet visited Christendom; the only other female ever known to have left the ‘Central Flowery Nation’ in order to visit the ‘outside barbarians’ having been one of apocryphal reputation and position in her own country” (6). As Haddad claims, Barnum cared more about his own profit than about his subjects: “by attacking Afong Moy's credibility, Barnum was sacrificing an older performer, one who had become expendable, to bestow novelty and vitality on his latest attraction” (16). This could also justify Afong Moy's disappearance from museums and local newspapers shortly after 1848.

Contrastingly to Afong Moy who exposed her naked feet to the view of all, Pwan-Yekoo did not uncover her feet but presented a shoe-trial session, once again distinguishing the two women's social status. As Sargent recalls, Pwan-Yekoo's “bare feet are not exhibited; but a model of the foot, two inches and a half in length, on which is a shoe, which is taken off, by the exhibitor, and put upon the real foot of Miss Yekoo, over a shoe, already there” (399). The model of the naked foot could then be observed to see in more detail how the foot was bound. Pwan-Yekoo, as Chinese Cinderella, tried the tiny slipper without uncovering her feet, while the audience marveled to see how perfectly the shoe fitted. Lotus shoes and models of bound feet

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<sup>21</sup> Nine out of the sixteen newspaper excerpts published in Barnum's catalog mention Pwan-Yekoo's bound feet (Tchen 119).

were also exhibited in the museum's general room, further testifying to the American audience's fascination with this disturbing, yet exotic custom.<sup>22</sup>

Pwan-Yekoo's aristocratic character, beyond her bound feet, was commonly cited in local newspapers. Her respectability was often presented in contrast to the invisibility of respectable women in China. The *New York Morning Star* of April 22, 1850 explains Chinese women's concealment: "Asiatic jealousy will not allow the most intimate male friend to enter the 'fragrant apartments,' or apartments of the ladies, in China." Note the Orientalist language used in the supposedly English translation of *women's quarters* to highlight the exoticism of the Chinese language—a technique used as well by Barnum as seen before with the example of "Central Flowery Nation" and "outside barbarians" (6). The reporter continues: "A man closes his door against his own father in that country, in order to keep his wife and daughters from being seen by stranger-eyes" (qtd. in Barnum 205), thus pointing to the confinement and invisibility of Chinese ladies beyond their inner quarters. Jealousy was also erroneously considered in the West, to be a common cause for the origin of footbinding, men confining women at home to prevent them from wandering around (Sargent 400). In addition to defining Barnum's show as exceptional, due to the rare view of respectable women in China, this belief also constructed Chinese men as barbaric, and sexual predators, as they were said to be unable to resist the beauty of their own sons' wives and daughters (Tchen 119), this sexual predatoriness being further emphasized by the incestual desire on which this myth of *Asiatic jealousy* was construed.

Yet, Barnum traveled to this "land of mystery and romance"—an ironic term when read in relation to the incestual desires and jealousies mentioned above—convinced Pwan-Yekoo's father to show him his daughter, as well as "secure[d]" and "coax[ed]" her away from her native country, in spite of prohibitions and penalties" (*New York Tribune* and *New York Daily Globe* of April 22, 1850, qtd. in Barnum 205). These complicated, at times conflicting, yet exotic stories, while attracting people's curiosity,<sup>23</sup> point to their own fictionality, exaggeration and Orientalist construction. Transforming Barnum into a heroic figure defying Chinese customs and traditions, these narratives, in addition to magnifying the show, also presented the changing attitude toward China and its people. While reporters mostly foregrounded Afong Moy's filial piety to her father

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<sup>22</sup> Barnum's catalog lists four artifacts: "691. Shoes for small-footed ladies" that were occasionally worn by Pwan-Yekoo; "692. Clay models of a pair of the 'golden lilies,' one bandaged and the other naked"; "714. Overshoes for ladies with small feet"; and "716. Leather boots for ladies with small feet" (163-4).

<sup>23</sup> About twenty thousand people came to the show within six days (Tchen 118, referring to Barnum).

in need, or her own desire to travel to the United States, Barnum's framing story to Pwan-Yekoo's show demonizes Chinese culture and customs, as well as the patriarchal society in which footbinding took shape. This demonization also reinforced the *necessity* of American intervention in China, and in other countries deemed heathen or uncivilized.

Isaacs's "Age of Respect" gave way in the 1840s to what he calls the "Age of Contempt" between China and the United States (1840–1905) (71). Growing frustration over China's reluctance to open its doors to international trade, the collapse of China to the British Empire after the Opium War (1839–40), as well as the beginning of Chinese immigration and settlement in California led to a growing "feeling of contempt" for the Chinese population (Isaacs 98). This contempt was accelerated by Perry's attack on China by gunboat diplomacy in 1853, forcing China to open international trade. In Isaacs's words, the Chinese thus "came to be viewed in the main by Westerners as inferior people, as victims and subjects, sources of profit, objects of scorn and pity, and ultimately, by the Americans as wards" (96). Afong Moy's and Pwan-Yekoo's exhibitions took place at a transitory time between these periods of respect and contempt, thus escaping the demonized representations of Chinese people and culture in the United States that followed the massive immigration of unskilled Chinese laborers to California in the second half of the nineteenth century. A changing discourse between the framing of Afong Moy's and Pwan-Yekoo's displays can, nevertheless, be observed, as Pwan-Yekoo's Chinese background and culture appear predominantly inferior to the West.

Accordingly, in this time of transition, Afong Moy's and Pwan-Yekoo's displays show, on the one hand, a desire in the United States to exhibit cultural objects and people that differed from mainstream society, and, on the other, an equal desire to expose racial, cultural, and, at times, sexual *deviance*, as suggested not only by the narratives framing these exhibitions, but also by the awkward juxtaposition of various types of curios forming these exhibits—curiosities which did not yet have an ethnographical or anthropological classification. Moreover, the Orientalization of Afong Moy's and Pwan-Yekoo's exhibitions further emphasized the self and other dichotomization on which national consciousness and identity were predicated.<sup>24</sup> By seeing, comparing and contrasting other objects, cultures and even people, Americans developed a sense

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<sup>24</sup> Orientalism that Said defines as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (3) enabled European—and American—culture to gain "in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (3).

of self in response to what they saw. The construction of Afong Moy and Pwan-Yekoo as Orientals thus contributed significantly to the building of the American nation at a time of trade and imperialist conquests.

### ***Footbinding and Western Orientalist Scientific Globalism***

The binary of self and other crucial in Afong Moy's and Pwan-Yekoo's displays also needs to be contextualized in a transnational discourse that considers the instability of national borders in the nineteenth century. Although globalization is a very contemporary discourse, global impulses already impacted the exhibition world of the nineteenth century, and the growing desire of understanding the world culturally and racially. Scientific development in the second half of the nineteenth century led to a growing interest in the human body, creating an equal desire to understand humankind biologically. Not only were artifacts and body parts transported around the world from one medical establishment and/or museum to the next, but populations and cultures were also increasingly compared at a more global scale.

The growing Western desire to understand the world scientifically remained, however, hegemonic and Orientalist in purpose. While this scientific interest in the globe—dominated by the West—meant to better understand worlds, cultures and bodies, it equally contributed to defining a racial hierarchy that Americans used to exclude, marginalize and dehumanize certain populations at home and abroad. Suffice here to point to the enslavement of the African American community, the slaughter of the Native American tribes, the anti-immigration sentiments and exclusion laws against Asian populations that characterized the nineteenth century, as well as the racialization and inferiorization of non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants. The development of eugenics at the end of the century furthered this racial hierarchy and the building of a *fit* American nation.

Americans' involvement abroad, in China, but also in the Philippines presents similar cases of racial discourses that inferiorized the native populations. Missionaries' involvement in China, although advancing the Chinese nation by improving China's general hygiene, equally portrayed Chinese people in their writings as racially inferior, and culturally backward, thus sustaining the white supremacy of the American nation, and justifying the imperialist intervention of the United States in these *backward* countries. The anti-footbinding campaign that Anglo-American missionaries led to abolish the custom—which they saw as religiously



immoral, but especially detrimental to women's health and general living conditions—remains, despite its important contribution to Chinese women's physical and social emancipation, framed in this racialized and Orientalist discourse of inferiority and barbarism.

Moreover, American imperialist missions abroad resulted in the imposition of Western medical discourse and the substitution of other conceptions of body and medicine. As Angela Zito explains, when Anglo-American missionaries faced footbinding in the nineteenth century, Chinese did not have the same understanding and vision of the human body. While Westerners believed that “humans were, in their deepest identities, biologically raced and gendered in ways that could be scientifically demonstrated,” Chinese believed that “bodies were lived within a cosmology of transforming resonances and were thought to be formed of a complex network of energized matter known as *qi*” (“Bound to Be Represented” 31). As a result, for Chinese there was not a “biologically fixed human nature,” but “materializations of dynamically contingent positions both in space and hierarchy” (31). For instance, gender identity, although constructed through a variety of paradigms, was notably understood through the ying-yang interaction. The yin (female) and the yang (male), albeit presented as a binary opposition, never operated on separate fronts but worked in “constant interaction where *yin* merges with *yang* and *yang* with *yin* in an endless dynamism,” as Louie explains (9). This constant interaction thus already opposes the Western binary thinking that separates male and female, as well as points to more fluid and fluctuating gender identities always containing feminine and masculine attributes. Accordingly, advancing China meant, for Anglo-Americans, to medicalize life in China in Western terms (31), and to bring the Chinese nation to a stage of *civilization* and *modernity* akin to the West.

Alongside the desire of understanding the world and the human body globally, came the urge to hierarchize, civilize, treat or even contain certain populations, cultures and bodies. This conflicting scientific impulse is reflected in the space of the museum, a space of contradictions in which the struggles between the global and the local, the cultural and the universal were inscribed and played out.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, as Sharon McDonald describes, museums are places in which “our global and local preoccupations can coalesce” (14). In other words, museum exhibitions, while attempting to bridge the gap between people and cultures, simultaneously reinforce the

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<sup>25</sup> For more on conflicting relations between global and local spaces, see Wilson and Disannayake 1-18.

boundaries separating people culturally, geographically and racially in their cataloging of artifacts, civilization, cultures and people (Lee, *Orientalism* 30-1). This tension can be seen in the context of scientific displays of footbinding, which became more prominent in the second half of the nineteenth century with the amplification of scientific and medical discourses and progress, as well as the establishment of medical museums.



Figure 3: “X-Rays of Bound Feet, China” (between 1905–1923), Frank and Frances Carpenter Collection, Library of Congress; location number 91787056.

With the medicalization and racialization of the body at home and abroad, representations and exhibitions of footbinding in the United States slowly led to scientific exhibitions of deformed bones. The display of Chinese women’s bodies and tiny feet beside other Oriental collectibles in American museums and performance venues were complemented by exhibitions of amputated and preserved bound feet. Merchants and travelers’ accounts of an exotic China were also supplemented by missionaries’ memoirs

and observations about China and its people, doctors’ reports, documentary and clinical photographs as well as newly-discovered X-Rays (figure 3) showcasing the deformed bones of women’s feet and the tortuous process at the core of footbinding.<sup>26</sup> This scientific and medical focus uncovered the deformed physicality of the bound foot, as doctors not only looked inside the shoe, but inside the foot itself.

The collection and circulation of amputated and preserved bound feet accompanied the diffusion of medical reports and photographs. Body parts can be compared to ethnographic objects that Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett sees as “material fragments” that were “accorded a higher quotient of realness” compared to textual documents (30). As she explains, “only the artifacts, the tangible metonyms, are really real. All the rest is mimetic, second order, a representation, an account undeniably of our own making” (30). Detached bound feet were,

<sup>26</sup> Detailed medical descriptions of footbinding were available as early as the 1820s. A case in point is Bransby Blake Cooper’s surgical report dating from March, 5 1829 that was then reproduced in an anonymous article “Small Feet of the Chinese Females; Remarks on the Origin of the Custom of Compressing the Feet; The Extent and Effects of the Practice; With an Anatomical Description of a Small Foot” published in *The Chinese Repository* (April 1835).

indeed, the ultimate proofs of footbinding's physicality and ideal case-studies to present in medical museums. Similarly to lotus shoes and other footbinding artifacts, casts and preserved bound feet were donated to dime, public and medical museums, where they were cataloged and exposed as scientific specimens beside other artifacts.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett also speaks of the collection and exhibition of ethnographic artifacts as an "art of excision, of detachment" (18) that she sees as a "surgical issue," a "cut" (18) that has to be made for the object to be re-contextualized in a setting alien to its original production; a concept dramatized when it comes to the collection and exhibition of body parts. New meaning is created following objects' detachment and fragmentation, as they are inserted in new conceptual spaces in which improbable links are made between artifacts. These links allow visitors to "experience other times, places and other cultural formations" (Karp, "Culture" 18-9) within the walls of museums through a process of "contrast and comparison" that give renewed meaning to these detached ethnographic artifacts and enable new visions of the world and body (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 3). Body parts were not only literarily excised from their original body, but also detached from their larger national, cultural and social context to be examined, measured and classified according to race, gender and other categories such as age and able-bodiedness (Ross 325-6). Although representative of their own kinds, amputated bound feet became fragments of malformation in a particular classification and served the larger normative function of scientific museum displays.

The fragmentation at the core of the act of collecting artifacts, and especially dismembered body parts, speaks also of fetishism. I do not intend fetishism here in the sense of Freud's psychoanalytical castration theory. In the context of collection and material exhibition, fetishism can be understood, as Zito contends, as "a strategy for dealing with the precious, useful fragments of occluded, ungraspable, socially lived wholes" ("Bound to Be Represented" 25).<sup>27</sup> The fetish in its fragmentary form and displacement from its natural context plays a synecdochic and didactic function that universalizes, yet simultaneously reifies, differences. The bound foot in the medical museum, while explaining strange cultural bodily modifications or feet deformities at large, continues to appear *irredeemably* alien (Zito 25). In other words, although its singularity vanishes in the face of categories to privilege the newly created "spatial whole of

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<sup>27</sup> The term fetish derives from the Portuguese *feitiço* that was originally used to describe the objects of African religious worship. See *OED*. See also Zito, "Bound to Be Represented" 24-6.

the collection” over the “individual narratives that ‘lie behind it’” (Stewart 152-3), its corporeal deformity continues to mark the fragmentary body as strange, alien, if not inferior (Zito 38). The fetishization created by the collection, classification and exhibition of body parts in this transnational scientific context was advanced as medicine intersected with anthropology to analyze the embodiment of the malformed, racial, or cultural Other (Ross 325). While body parts were put amid other cultural artifacts/body deformations to better understand the human body, the classification of the museum upheld the racial hierarchy implemented by science.

A few vestiges of the *feet market* that developed in the nineteenth century with Western doctors’ desire to collect, examine and expose bound feet’s corporeal materiality have survived to this day in memoirs, as well as in museum catalogs and archives. Bransby Blake Cooper,<sup>28</sup> a surgeon at a London hospital, wrote in a letter dating to March 5, 1829 about the exciting new specimen to his collection—that of a Chinese woman’s foot:

A specimen of a Chinese foot, the account of which I have the honor to lay before the Royal Society, was removed from the dead body of a female found floating in the river at Canton. ... Without entering into an inquiry whether this curious dissection and, as we should esteem it, hideous deformity, of the Chinese female foot, had its origin in Oriental jealousy, or was the result of an unnatural taste in beauty, I shall contend myself with describing the remarkable deviations from original structure it everywhere represents. (qtd. in Zito 21)

Cooper’s brief speculation on the origin of footbinding highlights, although in passing, his Orientalist gaze and judgment on Chinese customs, tastes and life-style. The “unnatural taste in beauty” and “Oriental jealousy” he evokes recall Barnum’s vision of extremely oppressed and sequestered Chinese women, as well as implicitly foreground Chinese men’s bestiality and sexual predatorship. However, as Zito underlines, Cooper more generally detaches the body “from its social life-world”—a process that she parallels to the excision of the foot from the body. This dismemberment and disconnection amplify as well the fragmentation of this woman’s identity. This *excision* enabled him to focus exclusively on the foot’s deformity, amplifying the commodification of the bound foot and its insertion in a broader discussion of feet’s malformed variants (“Bound to Be Represented” 21).

Likewise, Captain Arthur Cunynghame recalls an English doctor’s urge to bring bound feet back home in his 1845 memoir *The Opium War: Being Recollections of Service*:

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<sup>28</sup> See also footnote 26 of this chapter.

I received a visit on an early day from the doctor to our ship, who was exceedingly anxious to obtain a specimen of a lady's foot, and begged me to assist him in his laudable desire *to forward the ends of science*. A few hours previously, in my rambles, I had seen a young lady laid out in her coffin, immediately behind the room we were living in. Having informed him of this, he proceeded to the spot to procure his prize; and very shortly returned with the young lady's petticoes, wrapped up in his pocket-handkerchief, which some weeks after I saw pickled, after the most approved fashion. (qtd. in Ko, "Footbinding" 430; my emphasis)

This anecdote tells about the violent "dismembering" act of collecting, of "detaching an object from its source of origin," in Dorothy Ko's words ("Footbinding" 431)—here amplified by the actual dismemberment of this deceased woman's body. Although framed in a larger scientific discourse, this amputation, performed to "forward the ends of science," also appears as the doctor's treasure hunting "prize" (1.5). This not only accentuates the objectification of this woman's body and the insertion of her feet as valued objects in the doctor's cabinet of curiosities, but also undermines the scientific underpinning of this dismembering act. Ultimately the English doctor's mutilation of a Chinese woman's dead body, whose feet are stolen—or maybe bought from the family—foregrounds the power imbalance between East and West, as well as the Orientalist impulse of both archeologists and Western physicians who literally put the Chinese body in the service of knowledge.

The catalog of the Warren Anatomical Museum in Boston dating to 1870 also records the presence of amputated bound feet and other footbinding artifacts in its collection of malformed body parts. Item 3211, listed in the first section entitled "National Skulls, Casts of Heads, etc.," of the Miscellany Division gives a detailed account of the deformity of a Chinese woman's foot.<sup>29</sup> Despite its prominent focus on heads and skulls, this section regroups miscellaneous body parts that are not easily classifiable or comparable, which foregrounds the singularity of the bound foot, as it continues to predominantly evade classification:

Foot of a Chinese woman; natural skeleton, and about 5 in. in length. The os calcis makes about a right angle with the rest of the foot; its position is very nearly pendicular, and its form quite irregular outwardly, and at the insertion of the tendo Achilles. The bones are of course, small; but otherwise

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<sup>29</sup> Footbinding specimens have been classified in this miscellaneous category instead of being inserted in the most prominent division of the catalog entitled "Morbid Anatomy." Kaz Ross speaks about these three bound foot specimens in her article "(Hand)Made in China" 325.

the foot is well formed excepting some obliquity of the metaraso-phalangeal articulations (1863).  
(Jackson, *Descriptive Catalogue* 701)

Two other footbinding specimens follow this amputated bound foot—item 3212 “Bones of the mate to the above, separated by maceration. Appearance of os calcis the same,” and item 3213 “Model of the extremely small foot of a Chinese woman, as it appears when dressed,” both dating to 1863 (701). The combination of these three items contrasts the naked bound foot to the bound foot shod in a tiny embroidered slipper—a contrast permeating in contemporary museum displays of footbinding artifacts. The language used in the description of these specimens speaks of the larger medical discourse in which they have been inserted, connections being drawn between feet malformations—human-inflicted or caused by external factors. The bound foot is, therefore, not the focus of interest, the human body at the global scale is. Yet, throughout the catalog, the geographical origin of each body part is highlighted, often being the first or second word listed in each entry. Moreover, the comparative exhibition of the naked amputated foot and the lotus foot shod in an embroidered slipper continues to stress the cultural dimension of

footbinding, as it distinguishes these bound-feet specimens from the other exhibited skulls and body parts that appear in their isolated goriness. Thus classified, yet refusing classification and comparison with other bodily malformations, these bound feet specimens remained quite ambivalent: although used to hierarchize non-Western populations and cultures, they equally disrupted the new scientific order.

The Warren Anatomical Museum was not the only museum to possess preserved bound feet, although it is unknown how many bound feet were collected, preserved and sent across the world in the nineteenth century and how they were framed (Ross 326). The mummified bound foot exhibited at the Mütter Museum in Philadelphia (figure 4) is one of the last known



Figure 4: Chinese Woman's Bound Foot.  
Courtesy of the Mütter Museum.

vestiges of this trend of collecting amputated feet that has survived. It is said that this preserved foot was sent to the United States and donated to the College of Physicians in Philadelphia in 1874 by Dr. Kerr, physician at the Medical Missionary Society's Hospital in Canton, after he received as patient a woman, whose feet had "mortified from cold" and "separated spontaneously." She begged him to reattach them. As medicine did not allow such wonders, Dr. Kerr was left in the possession of the woman's feet.<sup>30</sup> While one foot was sent to the United States, the other foot was given to an officer of the *H.M.S. Challenger* en route to England (exhibition label). Note the co-operation of the bound-footed woman who is said to have given her feet to science; a discourse that significantly contrasts with the previous examples of dismembering dead bodies. The Mütter Museum's bound foot specimen has been exposed since then amid other physical deformities to highlight "the mysteries and beauty of the human body" past and present, and teach about the "history of diagnosis and treatment of disease."<sup>31</sup> The bound foot specimen at the Mütter Museum thus continues to serve a more global purpose as it is meant to teach about the *mysteries* of the human body and humankind. The framing and exhibition of this bound foot during the nineteenth century remains unknown.

Since the nineteenth century, lotus shoes, footbinding artifacts and preserved bound feet that traveled between continents, private collections and museums have become objects of global interest. The contrasting story that mutilated feet and embroidered lotus shoes tell has aroused the interests of people in the West because of their potent conflicting symbolisms of oppression and mutilation, as well as endurance and determination. These artifacts and their conflicting stories continue to appeal as they teach us about humankind, and ourselves, as well as the governing principles that have pushed people across time and space to abide by extreme cultural beliefs and norms. It is this universal message about cultural practices from around the world that museums and narratives about footbinding now record.

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<sup>30</sup> "Grimm's Anatomy," Mütter Museum. Exhibition label. Courtesy of the Mütter Museum. Mrs. Archibald Little recounts the story of the foot specimen in her memoir *In the Land of the Blue Gown* (312-4). Dr. Kerr received as patient a woman whose feet "had mortified off through binding" and which she brought with her as she "wanted the foreign doctor, who could do such wonders, to fasten them on her again" (312). Beverly Jackson, retells Little's story somewhat differently in *Splendid Slippers*: "in 1874 at a missionary hospital in Canton, Dr. J.G. Kerr received a female patient whose feet had frozen and were sloughed off due to dry gangrene. After finally convincing the distraught woman that her feet could not be reattached, he was presented with the grisly specimens, one of which resides in Great Britain, and the other in the United States" (134). Ko notes the two versions' difference in "Footbinding in the Museum" (431n6).

<sup>31</sup> For further references, see the Mütter Museum's mission statement, as well as the summary of the "Grimm's Anatomy" exhibition on their webpage.

Indeed, recent and/or contemporary museum exhibitions of footbinding artifacts continue to focus on the physicality of footbinding and approach the custom from a series of contrasts and comparisons linking this rite to other cultural practices worldwide. Influenced by feminism, and its discussion of crippling beauty ideals and cultural rituals, recent exhibitions present footbinding amid other cultural practices that have altered the body in the name of beauty across time and space.<sup>32</sup> More than teaching about footbinding—beyond brief introductions of this custom in China—the comparative theme and the medical focus bridge the gap between East and West and offer a universal discourse on the body.

The Mütter museum presents such a discourse. Dr. Kerr’s nineteenth-century preserved bound foot is still on display. It has been temporarily included in the exhibition “Grimm’s Anatomy: Magic and Medicine” on view since September 2012. This exhibition, organized for the bicentennial anniversary of the Grimm brothers’ fairy-tale collection *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (1812) brings together the rare illustrated editions of the Grimm’s fairy tales and the “real-world counterparts” to fairy-tale physically-deformed bodies “injured through acts of violence, healed or harmed by medicinal potions, or altered by magical transformations.”<sup>33</sup> The cross-disciplinary connection between medicine and fairy tales complements nineteenth-century medical discussion of footbinding by calling attention to other global discourses that have shaped understanding of footbinding through time, while equally reminding of cabinets of curiosities,<sup>34</sup> and the grotesque exhibitions of the nineteenth-century freak show culture. Contextualized within a discussion of the Grimm’s “Aschenputtel,” the preserved bound foot makes explicit the analogy between footbinding and crippling beauty ideals across cultures through the dual motifs of Cinderella’s tiny foot and the stepsisters’ self-mutilation.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> See for example the permanent exhibition of lotus shoes as part of the Shoe Museum of the Temple University School of Podiatric Medicine in Philadelphia (TUSPM); the special exhibition “Body Art: Marks of Identity” that was on view at the American Museum of National History between November 1999 and May 2000; the Historical Collection Online Exhibit “Reshaping the Body: Clothing and Cultural Practice” at the Claude Moore Health Sciences Library at the University of Virginia; or the special exhibition “Extreme Beauty: The Body Transformed” seen at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET) in New York between December 2001 and March 2002.

<sup>33</sup> “Grimm’s Anatomy” online exhibition description.

<sup>34</sup> This is furthered by the Museum’s “Guess what is on the Curator’s Series”—episodes analyzing chosen “mystery objects.” The preserved bound foot has been analyzed in one of these episodes.

<sup>35</sup> The Mütter Museum’s association of the Cinderella story with footbinding is not new. See Angela Carter’s “Ashputtle or the Mother’s Ghost” in her posthumous collection *American Ghosts and Other World Wonders* (1993), as well as Donna Jo Napoli’s juvenile novel *Bound* (2004). See Roxane Hughes’s “Connecting East and West in Donna Jo Napoli’s *Bound*.” *Cinderella Across Cultures: New Directions and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Ed. Martine Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère, Gillian Lathey, and Monika Wozniak. Wayne UP. 232-52.



More than for the universal message it may convey, this preserved bound foot continues to *appeal* for its *repulsive* gory, and grotesque mutilated physicality that reifies the mutilation at the roots of footbinding. The combined repulsion and appeal for footbinding illustrate the ambivalence at the heart of the Orientalist discourses that permeate footbinding exhibitions in the West; an ambivalence that complicates the system of dichotomization on which it is based (self. vs. Other; East vs. West, etc.) and points to the possible fluctuation within Orientalism itself. Yet, this ambivalence remains in tune with the larger Western Orientalist agenda as these mixed feelings toward the Chinese female body eroticize and fetishize it, while casting it in a distant and frozen barbaric past.

Moreover, the message of these exhibitions focused on beauty ideals across borders—as well as many contemporary discussions of footbinding—is one of female victimization and male pathologization. Chinese footbound women are not only portrayed as victims of an unjust patriarchal and feudal system broadly speaking, but especially of men’s sexual predatorial desires or “Oriental jealousy.” Female resistance and agency are often removed from the discussion. As Zito points out, these discourses are not empowering for Chinese (bound-footed) women, but empower the West because it provides “others to save” (“Bound to Be Represented” 35).<sup>36</sup> Yet, by foregrounding the primitivity and barbarity of these Other cultures to save, Western societies continue to mask their own oppressive heteronormative ideals under hegemonic discourses of salvation. Indeed, representations of footbinding in their museum or discursive forms often continue to position Chinese women’s fetishized bodies as serviceable to Western empowerment, thus focusing predominantly on footbinding’s symbolism of oppression and mutilation, while taking the resilience of footbinding over the centuries as further proof of Chinese primitivism and inferiority.<sup>37</sup> As such, despite the globalist impulse of science,

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<sup>36</sup> Zito makes this case regarding both Anglo-American missionaries and cultural feminists: “In crusading against footbinding, Christian women could displace ‘more direct self-referential feminism’ away from themselves—where it surely would have caused trouble at home—onto a Chinese cause. Their inability to confront the problematic of their own status nonetheless empowered them as agents of capitalist, imperialist empire and progress. Cultural feminists, by blaming women’s oppression solely upon patriarchally motivated bodily violations like footbinding, can disengage from the necessity to confront the material legacy of imperialist capitalism—they can ignore racism and poverty—and empower themselves as feminists of a certain sort” (“Bound to Be Represented” 35).

<sup>37</sup> Ko in her numerous books, as well as in her exhibition “Every Step a Lotus: Shoes in the Lives of Women in Late Imperial China” on view at the Bata Museum in Toronto from January 2001 to June 2002, as well as Wang in her study *Aching for Beauty* have opposed this rhetoric of victimization to propose reparative histories of footbinding centered around the women who practiced this custom for centuries. However, despite the reparative function of

ethnography, anthropology, cultural studies and feminism, footbinding representations in the United States persist in telling the story of the West, while Orientalizing, fetishizing and relegating China once again to an ambivalently exotic, yet unappealing past.

Yet, despite the predominant focus on footbinding's maiming nature and oppressive patriarchal roots in Western discourses, Chinese women refuse to be saved. The endurance and resilience of Chinese women with literal or figurative bound feet in the United States resurfaces in Chinese American women's fight against Orientalist stereotypes notably representations of Chinese women as exotic and erotic, yet malleable, serviceable and submissive China Dolls. This battle started in the nineteenth century as Chinese immigrants and the forming Chinese diasporic community confronted anti-Chinese sentiments, racial discrimination, segregation, and exclusion laws. However, Chinese women's actions against stereotypes, discrimination and injustice are often masked in narratives of victimization that hide Chinese immigrant women's agency in the propagation *and* deconstruction of these stereotypes as they have fought to circumvent exclusion laws and eke out a living in the United States since the mid-nineteenth century. It is to Chinese American women's—and to the Chinese American community's—ambivalent use, response to, and vision of footbinding in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that I now turn. This ambivalent response goes beyond Orientalism's inherent ambivalence, but captures instead the discourses of resistance and subversion that took shape within and against Orientalism as the Chinese American community appropriated stereotypes for their own ends, despite the processes of gendering and racialization they inevitably contributed to upholding.

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these narratives, the fetishization of Chinese women's bodies and feet remain prominent, even if used as a means of empowerment, as Zito notes in the case of Wang's book ("Bound to Be Represented" 36-7).



## CHAPTER 2 – CONSTRUCTING CHINESE AMERICA: BETWEEN SELF- AND DE-ORIENTALIZATION

When Ah Toy, the first Chinese female immigrant, arrived in San Francisco in the late 1840s, the American Orientalist appeal for Chinese bound-footed women was fading. With the massive immigration of unskilled Chinese laborers, and the increasing smuggling of Chinese women for prostitution, Chinese anti-sentiments developed on the West coast. Negative, and at times ambivalent, stereotypes of Chinese immigrants—male and female—were propagated to emphasize their status as unwanted and unassimilable foreigners. While Chinese women were predominantly portrayed as prostitutes and associated with venereal disease despite their initial exotic appeal, Chinese men were sexually demonized, and emasculated, if not castrated in American discourses and representations. In this hostile environment, how did the Chinese American community develop and cope with discriminatory and exclusion laws? How did it acquire a sense of cultural self?

Footbinding played an important role in Chinese women's immigration throughout the nineteenth century. Believed to be a symbol of social standing in the second half of the nineteenth century, footbinding became increasingly used at the U.S. border in the context of exclusion laws as an apparatus to define and separate Chinese middle/upper-class women from smuggled prostitutes (see Luibhéid, Lee, "Defying" and Yung, *Unbound Feet*). Also considered as a debilitating custom hindering women's movement, footbinding appealed to American officials because it ensured, in their view, the confinement and segregation of Chinese women to the domestic sphere (Scanland n.p.). Footbinding was successively used, in the early decades of the twentieth century, as a controlling device at the Immigration Station on Angel Island (1910–1943) to verify Chinese immigrants' social background and identity in the wake of a black market of identity papers following the San Francisco earthquake of 1906.

While footbinding was fundamental in the immigration of Chinese women and men during the exclusion era, how did this custom evolve in the United States and what did it come to symbolize for the forming Chinese American community? Ambivalent narratives of footbinding accompany the development of the Chinese American community from the 1850s to the early decades of the twentieth century wavering between self-Orientalization and de-Orientalization,

as well as between cultural maintenance and rejection in the face of the community's modernization and Westernization. Immigration records, personal files, newspaper clippings, archived images and photographs, contemporary museum reconstructions of Chinese American history and other historical scholarships attest to the diasporic community's conflicting responses. While emphasizing their general battle against exclusion, poverty, discrimination, and offensive stereotyping, they equally point to their conflicting self-construction in a hostile environment. The Chinese American ambivalent visions of, and reactions to footbinding at the turn of the twentieth century, when read in the backdrop of the restrictive laws regulating their lives, thus highlight the role of the Chinese American community in the propagation *and* deconstruction of Orientalist stereotypes in their fight for acceptance and recognition, as well as in their concurrent cultural negotiation and self-assertion. This combined self- and de-Orientalizing narratives constitute the beginning of what I have labeled *ambivalent Orientalism* in the introduction of this work; an ambivalent Orientalism that not only revises the objectification and silencing of *Oriental* Others in Western discourses, but equally revises persisting boundaries of inside and outside, East and West. This chapter thus illuminates the first responses of the *Oriental* Others from *within* the West, who, with their insider, yet outsider, voices started to talk back.

### ***From Orientalization to Demonization: Prostitution, Anti-Chinese Sentiments and Footbinding***

The stereotype of Chinese footbound women as rare exotic curiosities seen with Afong Moy's and Pwan-Yekoo's exhibitions on the East Coast was expanded in the early years of the Gold Rush, when the first Chinese women arrived in San Francisco in the late 1840s before the massive immigration of Chinese laborers. The ethnographic and scientific exhibition of bound-footed women in museums and other performance venues was replaced by Chinese women's sexual display as bachelor societies of miners and other workers formed on the West Coast. Although footbinding continued to appeal to a white male audience, Chinese women's sexuality fascinated even more, as myths regarding Asian women's horizontal vaginal openings (Okimoto 1999) were circulated in the United States. This new interest in sexuality marks as well the construction of male and female sexualities as "contested terrain[s]" (Lee, *Orientalism* 116-7) on which racial discourses became predominantly based in the second half of the nineteenth century. Chinese women's intimate parts thus complemented their bound feet in constructing them as

exotic and sensuous bodies to be gazed upon, as can be seen through the example of Ah Toy, one of the most sensational Chinese women of the Gold Rush era.

Ah Toy is said to have sailed to America of her own free will to “better her condition,” as she told Judge George Baker during her first court appearance (Gentry 59).<sup>1</sup> Taking advantage of her racial difference and of the myths circulating among Westerners concerning Asian women’s genitals, Ah Toy started a “peep show” business (Pryor 36).<sup>2</sup> As Gary Okihiro explains “pandering to white men’s racial and sexual fantasy, Ah Toy charged them for looking at her body and charged them even more for having sex with a Chinese woman or a racialized woman with allegedly different sex parts and hence talents” (99). Men’s fascination for Ah Toy’s self-exhibitionism contributed to her financial gain: within a year of her arrival, she had moved from the status of prostitute to that of a renowned courtesan (Yung, *Unbound Feet* 33).<sup>3</sup>

Her self-exhibitionism was complemented by her self-Orientalization: her *traditional* costume and the Oriental setting of her brothel attracted white customers. Nell Kimball, a white madam of San Francisco contemporary to Ah Toy, describes the “racial illusion” that Ah Toy created around her business. She portrays her house as symbolizing “a white man’s idea of China, all in musk, sandalwood, teak, silk hangings, gods, scrolls and wall paintings.” She also mentions how “six to twenty-four girls in Oriental costumes, hair piled up and shiny, ready to be treated as

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<sup>1</sup> Lucie Cheng Hirata, Gary Okihiro and Benson Tong have followed Curt Gentry’s claim. Michael Rutter and Alton Pryor argue instead that Ah Toy was forced to sail to America but freed herself on the ship before disembarking on American shore. Whereas Gentry bases his analysis on local newspaper articles that appeared at the time, Rutter’s and Pryor’s sources remain unclear and differ from one another. Pryor argues that “Ah Toy sailed to California with her husband in 1849 aboard a China Clipper ship,” but that her husband died at sea (36). Ah Toy became the captain’s mistress. By covering her with gold, the captain helped her buy her freedom and establish her own business in San Francisco (36). Rutter stipulates instead that Ah Toy might have been smuggled by brokers for prostitution (140-1). Like Pryor, Rutter claims that Ah Toy became the mistress of the ship captain, but does not mention her husband. He argues that Ah Toy escaped the horrors of repeated rapes by crew members on the ship by seducing the captain and by moving to his quarters. Thanks to the captain who gave her gold, she “managed to escape the brutal treatment on the ship—and the ignominy of being sold on the Barracoon, the notorious auction block” (141). These conflicting stories point to the unreliability and Orientalist overtone of these academic sources, as well as the persisting obscurity surrounding Ah Toy’s life.

<sup>2</sup> Iris Chang states that Ah Toy “began her career as a loungei in an alleyway shanty” (87). Tong explains the concept of loungei as denoting a “woman always holding her legs up” and referring, therefore, to Ah Toy’s prostitution in the first year of her arrival (*Unsubmissive* 29).

<sup>3</sup> Ah Toy imported Chinese girls (as young as 11) under the pretense that they were to marry rich husbands (Pryor 37). Two women were added to her establishment in 1850 (Gentry 60). White customers were fundamental in her success. As Herbert Asbury recounts: “Ah Toy soon became amorously involved with several white men of more or less wealth and prominence and as a result of their benefactions was able to buy her freedom and establish herself in business as an importer of girls for the bagnio trade” (172). Her business was spared during the Vigilance Committee’s investigation of Chinese prostitution precisely because she was under the protection of Vigilante brothel inspector, John A. Clarke (Yung, *Unbound Feet* 34). Ah Toy’s amorous involvement with several white men may explain why she managed to move from a position of exploited to that of an exploiter (172).

slave or toy” were waiting in the parlor (qtd. in Okihiro 99). The description of Ah Toy’s bawdy house and clothing echoes the constructed Orientalism of Afong Moy’s and Pwan-Yekoo’s stage appearances. However, Ah Toy’s agency in this Orientalization needs to be emphasized—although it also reflects the limited actions she had as a Chinese woman in mid-nineteenth-century San Francisco. While Afong Moy’s and Pwan-Yekoo’s exhibitions were mediated by entertainers, Ah Toy’s business was the product of her own work,<sup>4</sup> as she took advantage of the American taste for Oriental otherness to make a profit in this foreign land. Indeed, Ah Toy did not subvert Orientalist stereotypes, but used them for her own self-assertion: her profits depended on the fetishization, eroticization and Orientalization of her culture.

Ah Toy’s attire was made sensational during one of her numerous court appearances, when she filed a complaint against some of her customers whom she said had given her brass filings instead of gold (Gentry 59). Curt Gentry explains how she entered the court “dressed in an apricot satin jacket and willow-green pantaloons, with a colorful pair of *tabis* on her small tightly bound feet. Her hair was arranged in the traditional *chignon*, her pencil thin black eyebrows contrasting exotically with her white, rice-powered cheeks” (59). Combined with her *traditional chignon* and her *exotic* make-up, Ah Toy’s bound feet shod in colorful *tabis* further her Orientalist construction, *tabis* being Japanese socks with a separation for the big toe (*OED*); socks that contrast with the lotus shoes a bound-footed women wore. It is unclear, however, if the term *tabis* is Gentry’s or if it was used by reporters contemporary to Ah Toy.

A drawing of Ah Toy (figure 1) representing her Orientalization that might have originally appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle* can be found in Judy Yung’s *Chinese Women of America* (1986). Unfortunately, Yung does not provide details concerning its date and publication. This illustration situates Ah Toy within an Oriental setting exemplified by a Chinese lantern hanging from the ceiling as well as screens in the background, which recalls the Oriental setting in which Afong Moy was exhibited. In the background, dressed-up white men standing at

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<sup>4</sup> Sargent in his second volume of *Dealings with the Dead* hints at the limited agency that Pwan-Yekoo might have had in her display. He recounts her indisposition and lack of cooperation in protest against her bad treatment, as she was promised a room in a hotel, but was forced to sleep at the show venue: “Upon my first visit to Pwan-Yekoo and her suite, in connection with other visitors, I was not admitted for nearly two hours, after the appointed time. Ample sleeping arrangements had not been made, for these Celestials; and, for one night, at least, they had been packed, like a crate of China ware, in a closet, or small apartment, contiguous to the hall of exhibition. Yekoo was indignant, and refuses to show her ‘golden lilies.’ By dint of long importunity, she appeared, but in no gentle humor” (401).

her door are looking inside the room waiting to receive her attention. Ah Toy, dressed in *Oriental* costume, lies on a sofa in the middle of the room, a fan in hand, and her head turned toward the viewer. Her racial phenotypes are exaggerated: her mouth, nose and eyebrows are big, while her hands look like animal paws. Her hair is tied in two buns covering her ears. Her right leg slightly bent reveals her foot shod in a platform shoe. Her foot is small proportionally to the



Figure 1: Ah Toy, *San Francisco Chronicle*, mid-1800s.  
Yung. *Chinese Women*. 17.

rest of her body, but does not appear bound. Her platform shoes evoke the Manchu shoe style created by natural-footed Manchu ladies in imitation of Han lotus shoes during the Qing dynasty. Although Ah Toy is said to have had bound feet, this caricature emphasizes the ambiguity surrounding her feet. The illustrator seems to have marked her feet as stereotypically *Chinese*, the drawing

alluding to both Han women's small feet and Manchu women's shoe style. Despite this ambiguous portrayal, Ah Toy's small *Chinese* feet catch the viewer's attention and tell about their role in the exoticization and eroticization of her body. Indeed, this illustration is rife with erotic connotation. The presence of the customers in the background peering inside the room emphasizes the sexual nature of Ah Toy's business. Likewise, her reclining posture invites customers' and readers' gaze onto her body. Even her slightly bent right leg is suggestive of her erotic self-exhibition.

The increasing smuggling of Chinese women for prostitution gave rise in the United States to the creation of the stereotype of the Chinese woman as a prostitute (Yung, *Chinese Women* 14). Ah Toy partook in the development of this stereotype, as she sold her own body to white and Chinese men, and imported Chinese women to work in her bawdy house. However, Ah Toy also contrasts with this stereotype that predominantly portrays Chinese prostitutes as smuggled, submissive, subjugated and exploited. As Robert G. Lee argues, "the Chinese prostitute embodied the available and mute but proletarianized sexuality that mirrored the exoticized female long displayed in the Western literary tradition of Orientalism" (*Orientalists*



88).<sup>5</sup> Conversely, the various sources recording Ah Toy's life point to her agency in the creation of her business and in her self-assertion and self-Orientalization, as well as to her vocality as she subversively used the court to settle her problems and denounce injustices at a time when women were predominantly marginalized from the legal realm. Her agency and voice were made possible by her extraordinariness, as her arrival preceded the arrival of Chinese women to California. Her agency is represented in the illustration by her own dominating and imposing position, but also by her gaze, looking straight at the imagined audience.

The status distinguishing the smuggled prostitute from the courtesan in the early 1850s slowly collapsed as Chinese societies (tongs) came to monopolize the sex business in Chinatowns.<sup>6</sup> Ah Toy's establishment was deeply affected by the tongs, to whom she had to make frequent payments as early as 1851 in order to keep it running (Tong, *Unsubmissive* 11). Likewise, Ah Toy's reputation was increasingly tarnished among the white population of San Francisco, as anti-Chinese sentiments developed.<sup>7</sup> Her numerous appearances in court to settle her problems—while exceptional for her time—point to the hostility she faced from both mainstream society and the Chinese male community, whose control of the sexual industry in their bachelor societies counteracted their increasing emasculation in the United States, as they were not only deprived of familial and sexual ties, but also of rights, social status and positions of power. This also shows Ah Toy's strong will, agency and personal fight against an unjust sexist local system.

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<sup>5</sup> Lee further explains: "When the Chinese woman was portrayed at all, she was portrayed as victimized, passive, and silent. . . . The voicelessness of the Chinese woman in American popular culture served the purposes not only of her exploiters but also of her would-be rescuers" (*Orientalism* 91).

<sup>6</sup> As Tong explains, "the arrival of new prostitutes controlled by male-dominated groups meant the beginning of the end of the period of laissez-faire, and it became increasingly rare for Chinese prostitutes to operate as free entrepreneurs" (*Unsubmissive* 11).

<sup>7</sup> Some reports of the time condemned the immoral nature of Ah Toy's business. Frank Soulé—a local literary figure—and his compatriots John H. Gibbon and James Nisbert wrote about the debauchery, infamy and plague of Ah Toy in 1855 in *The Annals of San Francisco*: "Everybody knew that famous or infamous character, who was alternately the laughing-stock and the plague of the place. Her advices home seem to have encouraged the sex to visit so delightful a spot as San Francisco, and by and by, notwithstanding all the efforts of the male Chinese to keep back their countrywomen, great numbers of the latter flocked the city. It is perhaps only necessary to say that they are the most indecent and shameless part of the population, without dwelling more particularly upon their manners and customs" (384). Soulé went as far as blaming Ah Toy "for the immigration of several hundred Chinese prostitutes in 1852" (Tong, *Unsubmissive* 9). As Gentry observes, Soulé was "strongly anti-Chinese, but his accusations against Ah Toy were not entirely without foundation" (63). Gentry tells how Ah Toy became "an active agent for other Chinese houses, attending each new showing at the barracoon, at the same time expanding her establishment" (63).

While Ah Toy appeared in court of her own volition between 1850 and 1854, she was subsequently arrested several times between 1854 and 1859 for protecting her profession and trade from the hands of white supremacists and tong leaders (Stephens 165). Only once was she *called* to court in 1850 to defend herself against some neighbors' complaint that she was a public nuisance (Levy, *They Saw the Elephant* 167-8). The judge dismissed the charges (167-8). Conversely, in 1854 and the years that followed, she was "arrested, convicted, and fined for keeping a disorderly house" a few times, as Gentry explains (64). In 1859, she was also "arrested and fined for beating one of her girls" (64). Ah Toy similarly suffered repetitive physical harassment that slowly led to the dissolution of her house (Tong, *Unsubmissive* 11). Despite the early success of her self-Orientalization and self-exhibitionism, she was increasingly demonized by both Chinese and mainstream societies, appearing in ambivalent terms as a desirable exotic Other, yet an undesirable threat to be contained. The pressure of the tongs, the strong opposition against her business, and the numerous arrests and fines paid for minor offenses led to her disappearance from San Francisco by the early 1860s (Tong 12).

Her decline might also have been precipitated by the intensified beliefs that Chinese prostitutes were contagious and a threat for a rising generation of healthy young white men, and for the general fate of the white nation (Luibhéid 34). Chinese women were censured by Euro-Americans for their "sanitary evils" and were perceived as a "syphilitic menace" (Tong, *Unsubmissive* 130; see Lee, *Orientalism* 90-1).<sup>8</sup> As early as the 1860s, the white population vocally opposed Chinese prostitution. Upper-class Protestant women combatted the immorality of this unchristian profession and began to appeal, in Huping Ling's words, "for the elimination of this 'social evil' and the restriction of the entry of Chinese immigrant women" (*Surviving* 11). While actions taken against Chinese prostitution meant to stop the sex trafficking of women and children, these actions were also upholding racial discrimination. Chinese women were removed from main streets and relocated to designated areas along with prostitutes of Mexican and African descent, whereas white prostitutes were allowed to work in brothels located in the major

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<sup>8</sup> General Vallejo in San Francisco saw Chinese immigration "as very harmful to the moral and material development of the country, to the spread of the white race and to the healthfulness of San Francisco, the spot in which were congregated most of the Chinese women, who, it seems, had made it a duty to keep the hospitals always filled with the syphilitics" (qtd. in Gentry 62). Mary Coolidge demystifies, in her innovative work on Chinese Immigration (1909), the association of Chinese immigrants with venereal disease: Chinese "were exceptionally free from venereal diseases partly because of their generally cleanly habits of body; and from bacterial diseases because they rarely drank unboiled water" (416).

streets of San Francisco (Tong, *Unsubmissive* 111, 114). The segregation of Chinese and other non-white prostitutes thus had yet another function: to separate and *protect* the white population from the threat and contamination of miscegenation.

This predominant segregation of non-white immigrant populations accompanied the consolidation of a racial hierarchy that coincided with the scientific theories of race, such as Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection, genetic theories<sup>9</sup> and germ theory.<sup>10</sup> People were increasingly divided by race, biological capabilities, phases of civilization and economic developments (Jacobson 50; see also Luibhéid 37). Indeed, the body became a cultural and social construction representing the "social system," the "physical body mirroring the boundaries of the social body" (Lee, *Orientalism* 32; referring to Douglas, *Purity* 116). This racial hierarchy led to racist representations of humankind on the basis of phenotypes, capabilities, and heredity, but also to the surveillance and policing of the population deemed racially inferior and menacing to America's "superior blood" (Jacobson 156). Chinese workers and prostitutes were thus deemed inferior on the basis of their degrading culture, work, and *low* racial genes. Anglo-American beliefs in Chinese inferiority was reflected in the surveillance, segregation, and institutional incarceration of Chinese bodies, as well as in the scientific and medical condemnation of Chinese prostitutes as a reified threat to "the supremacy and perpetuity of the 'white race'" (Luibhéid 37). This medical condemnation is also proffered in the anti-miscegenation laws that took shape with the abolition of slavery, laws preventing non-white men, Chinese men included, from having intercourse with white women.

The transformation of the Chinese woman into the stereotypical figure of the prostitute, as well as into the metonymic representation of a contagious venereal disease, shows how imbricated discourses of race, sexuality and scientific racism shaped and regulated Chinese immigration since the second part of the nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup> This stereotype of Chinese *filthy* femininity went hand in hand with stereotypical representations of Chinese men as sexual predators to white women that accompanied other representations of Chinese men as emasculated, if not castrated altogether in the context of their economic exploitation. Unable to

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<sup>9</sup> Genetic theories believed in a racial hierarchy predicated on one's genes and biological heredity (Jacobson 50).

<sup>10</sup> As Luibhéid explains, germ theory contends that "racial groups carried distinct germs to which they were immune but others were not" (37).

<sup>11</sup> The deployment of a similar rhetoric of "racial hygiene" (Jacobson 56) can be seen in the condemnation of native populations abroad for their "presumed filthiness, their ignorance, or their treachery" typical of American imperialist conquest narratives (Jacobson 111).

cure this collective Chinese *disease*, Americans prohibited and closely watched the entrance of Chinese women *and* Chinese laborers, culminating with the Exclusion Act of 1882.

While Chinese women's sexuality and bodies became the center of state and government attention, their bound feet, although left in the background, also led to grotesque caricatures. As early as 1858, sensational descriptions of Chinese ladies in local newspapers were replaced by contemptuous portrayals of their racial and cultural appearances. Such is the case of an article published in the *Harper's Weekly* on January 30, 1858 that depicts "celestial ladies," as Yung notes, "with their supposedly grotesque hair styles, bound feet, and manner of dress" (*Chinese Women* 17). The author provides a critical reading of Chinese women's racial phenotypes and exoticism: "The taste for the baboon-like faces of Hong Kong women is, I fancy, like that for mangoes, an acquired one. I have learned to like mangoes; but my tailor's wife [who is Chinese] still excites in me only unmitigated disgust" (*Harper's Weekly*, Philip Choy Collection qtd. in Yung, *Chinese Women* 17). The reporter objectifies and dehumanizes Chinese women by comparing them to baboons, whose phenotypes "disgust," and to exotic mangoes, whose taste equally repulses until one *learns* to appreciate their exoticism. This description emphasizes Chinese "insurmountable cultural difference" in Lee's terms (*Oriental*s 35), or their "excess of culture" (36) that marked them apart from the normative social body. Furthermore, the imbricated lexical fields of food and trade contextualize Chinese women once again within a broader intermingled discourse of scientific racism, transnational commerce and sexual consumption.

The image complementing the article exaggerates Chinese racial and cultural features (figure 2). A Chinese woman dressed in an ample long-sleeved dress with equally ample trousers appears in the forefront. A pair of disproportionately small pointed shoes peeks out of her trousers, explaining the use of a cane for support—a cane replaced by a more Oriental and exotic umbrella. Her racial phenotypes (face and hair) are exaggerated: her eyes are extremely slanted, her nose flat and wide, her lips swollen. Her hair tied in a type of bun is disproportionately and grotesquely big, almost pulling her head backward. Her hyperbolic *ape-like* phenotypes resemble offensive caricatures of women of African descent. By equating Chinese immigrants with African Americans at the dawn of the Civil War, this illustration amplifies the anti-Chinese sentiments intensified by the rising fear of the Yellow Peril. Also, by lumping together Chinese and African stereotypes, this drawing marks the non-white body as hypervisibly *Other*.



Figure 2: *Harper's Weekly*, January 30, 1858.  
Yung's *Chinese Women in America* 17.

This woman is accompanied by a barefooted servant carrying a type of Oriental basket. Her hair is tied in a ponytail. Her phenotypes are more neutral except for her lips that are big compared to the rest of the face. Her facial expression, however, denotes anger, as her eyebrows appear somewhat frown, which reminds subsequent stereotypes of Chinese characters as evil (e.g. Dragon Lady, Fu Manchu). Her bare feet contrast with the Chinese woman's bound feet, which speaks of the social status of the Chinese woman in the forefront. Indeed, the woman's bound feet and ability to afford a servant point to her respectable status.

A man, dressed in a similar long-sleeved dress atop ample trousers, and wearing a queue—the hairstyle imposed on Chinese men by the Manchu-led Qing dynasty—follows the servant. Whereas his face appears more feminine and delicate than the two women's, his queue identifies him as Chinese and *male*. Yet, this hairstyle ironically resembles the female servant's ponytail, thus similarly emasculating him in the eyes of American beholders. The queue was a source of contempt in the United States. As Lee explains, because American men had short hair (except for Native Americans), “the Chinese males’ practice of wearing their hair long and in a braid was perceived as sexually and racially ambiguous and therefore dangerous” (*Orientalism* 39). The queue was indeed a target of “public attack” on Chinese men in California (41). The illustration thus appears as a statement of Chinese men's ambiguous sexuality *and* emasculation,<sup>12</sup> a statement ironically emphasized in this drawing by the more matriarchal Chinese family depicted, the Chinese lady dominating the picture despite her bound feet. This drawing thus points to the intertwining of stereotypes of masculinity and femininity in depicting a sexually deviant or repulsive Chinese culture, and

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<sup>12</sup> As Lee explains as well, the Chinese body was often constructed as a “third sex” and “Oriental sexuality” as “ambiguous, inscrutable and hermaphroditic” conversely to the “emergent heterosexual and dimorphic Order” (*Orientalism* 85).

constitutes one example of the unfavorable representations of Chinese immigrants—male and female—diffused in the United States in the context of the growing Yellow Peril.

***Exclusion Laws and Surveillance Apparatus: Footbinding at the U.S. Border***

The early attempt at containing the sexual threat represented by Chinese prostitutes in segregated spaces was not enough to assuage the anxiety of the white population as anti-Chinese sentiments intensified in the United States. This fear of the Yellow Peril led to the creation of laws restricting Chinese immigrants' entrance into the United States, as well as limiting their rights of action on American soil. With the increasing smuggling of young Chinese women for the purpose of prostitution, laws implemented between the 1860s and 1880s sought an end to this sex trafficking. In March 1866, the "Act for the Suppression of Chinese House of Ill Fame" proclaimed that "all houses of ill fame, kept, managed, inhabited or used *by Chinese women* for the purpose of common prostitution are hereby declared to be public nuisances" (Hittell 251, my emphasis). In March 1870, the "Act to Prevent the Kidnapping and Importation of Mongolian, Chinese and Japanese Females, for Criminal and Demoralizing Purposes" was passed to stop the smuggling of Asian women. A change in rhetoric can be observed as Asian women move from perpetrators to victims. No longer focusing on houses of ill fame, the American government reacted against the more important problem behind these brothels: the trafficking of women and children. The act stated that all traffickers involved in bringing over "women kidnapped in China" who were then "deported at a tender age without their consent and against their will" were to be fined and/or imprisoned (Hittell 253). This change in rhetoric also emphasized Chinese men's immorality, sexual predatoriness and oppressive patriarchal system. This trafficking was more clearly forbidden in 1875 with the Page Act preventing Asian women's entrance for prostitution, and more generally forbidding the smuggling of Chinese laborers against their consent for forced labor and servitude. The hypervisibility of Chinese women (prostitutes) in these legal documents also contributed to erasing the racial and sexual exploitation of Chinese male laborers in the United States who were deprived of their reproductive abilities and rights, and whose bodies were used and exploited to build an industrial U.S. nation.

The belief that all Chinese women were imported by force and for shameful purposes not only led to the creation of the stereotype of Chinese women as prostitutes permeating the second half of the nineteenth century (Yung, *Chinese Women* 14), but also to the intense scrutiny of

Chinese women at the border (Gyory 71). Although the percentage of Chinese women in San Francisco defined as prostitutes in the population Census of 1870 is as high as 70%, Gregory Anthony Peffer argues that the Census might have exaggerated this number and locates the percentage of Chinese prostitutes closer to 50 (Abrams 653). Though the number of Chinese prostitutes remains high in both cases, records show the presence of Chinese women in the domestic realm as servants, as well as in laundries, restaurants, clothing businesses, and mines (see Tong, *Unsubmissive* 95, table 2). Some records also mention the presence of Chinese women accompanying their husbands in their travels to the United States, as well as the reunion of hundreds of Chinese families by 1876 (Takaki, *A Different Mirror* 210-1). Family reunification remains minimal, however, proportionally to the number of Chinese men residing in the United States, and difficult following the Page Age, which exacerbated the gender imbalance within the diasporic community.

The scrutiny of Chinese women's immigration during the intensification of the anti-Chinese movement had a double purpose. While it meant to tackle sex trafficking and slavery in the anti-slavery Civil War context, it also masked anti-Chinese immigration sentiment under a discourse targeting Chinese women's sexuality. The Burlingame Treaty signed in 1868 between China and the United States encouraged Chinese immigration to the United States, while it allowed American missionaries to diffuse their Christian message in China.<sup>13</sup> As Kerry Abrams contends, "targeting women whose sexual behavior and familial structure fell outside of an acceptable standard simply did not appear to be a restriction of immigration" (644). It however "prevented the development of Chinese families and culture" (649), addressed the threat posed by Chinese reproduction (648), and ultimately kept the Chinese population under control (643). As such, Chinese male workers were ideally kept as temporary sojourners, as well as castrated. Indeed as David Eng underlines, "the U.S. exclusion and miscegenation laws emasculated Chinese men by restricting their access to heterosexual norms and ideals" (58), transforming Chinatowns into "'queer' spaces barred from normative (hetero)sexual reproduction, nuclear family formations and entitlements to community" (loc423).

By the late 1870s, the Burlingame Treaty was revised due to increasing anti-Chinese sentiments. Chinese immigration to the United States was hindered with the passage of the

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<sup>13</sup> See Schrecker, "For the Equality of Men" 9-34 and "The Burlingame-Seward Treaty, 1868" n.p.

Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 that extended exclusion laws to all working-class laborers of Chinese descent (“Burlingame-Seward” n.p.). Moving away from an exclusive focus on Chinese women’s sexuality, the Exclusion Act limited the entry to middle- and upper-class Chinese. As Madeline Hsu explains: “Between 1882 and 1943, Chinese could legally enter the United States only if they could document their status as one of the tightly defined ‘exempt’ classes: merchants, family members of merchants, diplomats and their dependents, tourists and teachers and students” (31). As a result of these strict exclusion laws, Chinese women only accounted for 0.3 percent of Chinese immigrants admitted at the U.S. border in the 1880s, and 0.7 percent in the early 1900s (Lee, “Defying” 9-10).<sup>14</sup>

During the exclusion era, footbinding played a crucial role at the border in identifying respectable Chinese women. As Judy Yung explains, “immigration officials operated on the premise that every Chinese woman was seeking admission on false pretenses and that each was a potential prostitute until proven otherwise” (*Unbound Feet* 23-4). In addition to questioning newly arrived female immigrants and scrutinizing their biographical data, officials looked at women’s bodies and physiognomies to determine their sexual and social respectability, as well as the legality of their status. As Eithne Luibhéid observes, not only “scientific racism and popular prejudice facilitated the assumption that [female] bodies that ‘looked’ Chinese were likely to be involved in prostitution,” but also that prostitutes’ bodies had “distinctive marks” that would easily set them apart from respectable women (48). Archived immigrant case files, testimonies before Congress and the numerous questions about women’s feet found in immigration records, as Luibhéid points out (49), show that bound feet were commonly used to determine Chinese female applicants’ respectability and sexual virtue at the U.S. border from the 1870s onward.

However, more than a symbol of respectability, footbinding was, for immigration officials, a controlling device ensuring Chinese women’s confinement in their domestic sphere. Yung reports one immigration official’s comment on footbinding: “There has never come to this

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<sup>14</sup> Chinese female immigrants made up 9.7 percent of the total Chinese population of immigrants entering in 1910 (Lee, “Defying” 9). Over the years, more women entered thanks to their court appearances to contest their exclusion, the development of a market of false identity papers to circumvent the exclusion laws, as well as an increase in schooling and employment opportunities for Chinese women in the United States (10). However, the bulk of women entering the United States during the exclusion era were mostly wives of merchants, as most women were “not eligible to enter independently,” as Lee explains (10). Statistically 2,107 women entered independently and 5,702 women entered into the United States as dependents between 1910 and 1924 (10). Lee also notes that from 1910 to 1924, 98 percent of all merchants’ wives were admitted, reflecting the immigration pattern changing from temporal work toward settlement (12). For more statistics on the Chinese immigrant population see Chan, “Against all Odds.”



port, I believe, a bound footed woman who was found to be of immoral character, this condition of affair being due, it is stated, to the fact that such women, and especially those in the interior, are necessarily confined to their home and seldom frequent the city districts” (*Unbound Feet* 24). J.M. Scanland, an American reporter of the time, similarly equates footbinding’s confinement with gentility on the premise that a woman could not be sold into slavery, as her feet—markers of her “gentle birth”—“save[d] her from servitude or a life of shame” (5). The equation of bound feet with social standing and confinement is reminiscent of early immigration discourses, as seen with Afong Moy and Pwan-Yekoo, when footbinding was admired because bound-footed women were rarely seen in port cities. Yet, this emphatic association of gentility with confinement equally stems, I believe, from the growing medical interest in the bound foot sustained by the anti-footbinding campaign. This predominant use of footbinding at the border occurred at a time of increasing circulation of medical reports and photographs of bound feet attesting to the physical mutilation at the origins of this practice. This medical focus on footbound women’s deformed and crippled feet might have contributed to immigration officials’ equation of footbinding with disability and immobility.

Chinese female immigrant candidates sustained the equation of footbinding with high social status. As Erika Lee asserts, “because immigration officials expected merchant families to possess fine clothing, a respectable manner, and especially, in the case of women, bound feet ... women applying as merchants’ wives learned to highlight those traits” (“Defying” 17). In her archival research, Lee came across the file of Gee See, a merchant’s wife residing in Los Angeles, who applied for readmission into the United States after a trip to China (17). Gee See is described in the written statement as a “small footed woman or bound-footed woman” (qtd. on 17). Her file includes a photograph of her entire body and an X-ray of her bound feet “distinctly” showing “the position of the bones and their abnormally small size” (U.S. report, qtd. on 17).<sup>15</sup> The photograph and X-Ray thus helped immigration officials read Gee See’s body as *admissible*, but show as well the agency Chinese women had in using footbinding as a marker of their respectability to enhance their chances to enter the United States.

Chinese immigrant women’s agency in the emphatic exhibition of their bound feet in immigration files is furthered if we consider the deceptive equation of footbinding with gentility

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<sup>15</sup> File 4098, Oct. 15, 1901, Chinese General Correspondence (Lee, “Defying” 74n243).

in the nineteenth century. Historical records show that footbinding was no longer restricted to upper classes, but had spread to all social classes by the beginning of the Qing dynasty (Ko, *Cinderella* 177). Indeed, footbinding was no longer a symbol of social status, but a bodily practice enhancing women's chances to marry into a better family. The possibility of encountering a Chinese prostitute with bound feet at the border and on American soil was therefore not erased. Footbinding might have thus played a strategic role for some Chinese women to circumvent exclusion laws, and fool U.S. officials into believing that they were from wealthy families. Officials' effort to control the border and regulate Chinese women's entry by prohibiting the smuggling of Chinese women for illicit purposes, but also by banning working-class women from immigrating altogether, were therefore thwarted as strategies were constantly established to circumvent exclusion laws.

However, with the social and political reforms occurring in China in the early decades of the twentieth century, the few women who migrated to the United States in the first half of the twentieth century were less likely to have bound feet than their predecessors arriving between 1882 and 1900. Lee's research shows that 60% of Chinese women admitted into the United States between 1910 and 1924 were wives of U.S. citizens (2,848 for a total of 9,565 admissions), and merchant wives (2,756). The other 40 percent of female admissions consisted of U.S. citizens (1,580), merchants' daughters (522), students (469), returning laborers (185), teachers (29), and returning merchants (29) (Table 1.2 Chinese Women Admitted by Class, 1910–1924, "Defying" 11). Considering the important number of merchants' wives and daughters, Chinese female immigrants were more likely to be from a middle-class background, and therefore even less likely to have kept their feet bound by the time they reached the freshly-open Immigration Station on Angel Island, since urban families had already predominantly discontinued footbinding in Republican China.<sup>16</sup>

With changing attitudes toward footbinding in China and the United States, this custom was no longer used to distinguish respectable women from immoral ones at the immigration station on Angel Island, but continued to play a role in the verification of Chinese immigrants' identities and stories across the gender line. Opened twenty-eight years after the passage of the Exclusion Act, and four years after the earthquake and fires that struck San Francisco in 1906,

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<sup>16</sup> See the section on Chinese revolutionary women's writings in chapter 3 of this work.

the Immigration Station located on Angel Island in the San Francisco Bay sought to stop illegal Asian immigration. A generation of *paper* sons and daughters followed the earthquake as birth records were burnt. Taking advantage of this natural catastrophe, many Chinese immigrants claimed U.S. citizenship to travel more easily between the United States and China and to bring more Chinese immigrants over, leading to the development of a black market of identity papers.<sup>17</sup>

To stop this illegal trade of identity papers, as well as this new wave of illegal immigration, Chinese immigrants were detained for days, weeks, months, or even years at the immigration station, before being allowed in or deported. They were interrogated extensively on topics that were tangentially related to the immigrant's application. Officials repetitively asked applicants minute questions about their family, daily life, village, houses and acquaintances (Lai, Lim and Yung 20). Questions about the bound-footed women of the family and village were recurrent in the interrogation of male and female applicants alike, as it gave clues on immigrants' family's social background, and contributed to entrapping them if their answers did not match with their peers' or their previous testimonies.<sup>18</sup>

Footbinding continues to play an important role at the United States Immigration Station Museum (USIS) in the reconstruction of Chinese immigration history through Angel Island's gates. Although owned by the State of California, USIS is predominantly curated and preserved by Asian American scholars and historians. Retracing the overall history of Chinese immigrants at the detention center and showcasing the poems that Chinese detainees carved on the walls, the general history room features explanation panels, a table with immigration files and identity papers, as well as a reconstructed set of bunk beds hinting at immigrants' lack of intimacy. A suitcase filled with immigrants' typical belongings lies on the lower tier of the beds, while laundry hangs from the upper reaches. Two pairs of tiny slippers enclosed in a plexiglass box are

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<sup>17</sup> For more information concerning *paper* sons and daughters, as well as the establishment of the immigration station on Angel Island, see Lai, Lim and Yung's *Island*; as well as USIS webpage, *Angel Island Conservancy*.

<sup>18</sup> Similar questions were already asked at the border to define the validity of immigrants' story and legal status before the establishment of the detention center on Angel Island. Lee gives the example of Fong Tim who was asked about his family and trip to China upon arrival in 1899. Fong Tim's friends were similarly interrogated as they were "expected to know every minute detail about the Fong's family and were carefully scrutinized" (Lee, "Defying" 16). "What kind of feet has Fong Tim's mother?" was one of the numerous questions asked to push the witnesses to show doubts and/or give inexact answers (16). See testimony of Fong Tim, December 1, 1899, File 34240/8-19, Chinese Arrivals; and the testimony of Wong Hong and Chew Dong Ngim, December 8, 1899, File 34240/8-19, Chinese Arrival Files, San Francisco (66n242 and 67n243).

displayed on the middle tier (figure 3) with a descriptive brochure providing a historical and cultural context to footbinding, as well as pictures of women's feet—shod and naked.

Combined with the colossal display of Chinese detainees' carved poems on the barracks' walls as well as the reconstructed history of Chinese immigration, the lotus shoes on display are dissociated from the female body that used to shoe them to tell a grand narrative of Chinese immigration in the first half of the twentieth century; a history that remains, however, extremely gendered. While the general room hints at Chinese immigrants' cultural legacy through the combination of Chinese male detainees' poems allusive to a masculine literary tradition and Chinese women's handmade embroidered shoes, the rest of the exhibition reproduces the gender segregation of the Immigration Station. Chinese men's and women's belongings are exhibited in their separate quarters. In contrast to Chinese men who occupied one bedroom, Chinese women shared their room with other female immigrants, mostly from Korea and Japan.



Figure 3: Chinese barrack, room 105, United States Museum Immigration Station. My photograph, March 2012.

USIS has represented this shared female occupation by exhibiting female immigrants' typical clothing and belongings amid lines of bunk beds, in what used to be the women's room. A pair of lotus slippers is equally featured in one of the bunk beds in the backroom of this female quarter (figure 4). Quite hidden from view, this pair of lotus slippers might easily escape the viewers' attention, conversely to the lotus shoes displayed in the middle of the general history room. Less refined and bigger in size than the lotus shoes displayed in the general history room, these slippers have two potential meanings. On the one hand, they might allude to the lower status of the woman who wore them, as lower-class women's bound feet were not as tightly bound as their middle- or upper-class counterparts. On the other, these slippers, bigger than ideal



Figure 4: Chinese barrack, women's room. United States Museum Immigration Station. My photographs, October 2016.

three-inch lotus shoes, yet still small in size, could have been worn by a woman who unbound her feet, which would coincide with the social and cultural reforms taking place in China in the early nineteenth century.<sup>19</sup> In other words, these more ordinary, bigger and unornamented slippers better illustrate the social and cultural identity of the women who passed through Angel Island's doors in the early 1900s, compared to the ideal golden lotus shoes displayed in the general history room of the museum. This explains, in my opinion, the inclusion of these simpler slippers in the reconstructed female quarters of the museum's exhibition.

In contrast, the ideal lotus shoes exhibited in the general history room, more than representing women's belongings or identities, serve to foreground the grand history of Chinese immigration over the specific experience of female detainees. Ben Fenkell, lead park interpreter for the U.S. Immigration Station, emphasizes the significance of footbinding in

the history of Chinese immigration at the detention center. In a personal communication, Fenkell notes that these pairs of lotus shoes were included in the general history room not only to point out "the social classes of people who were and weren't processed [on site], footbinding being a symbol of wealth and affluence," but also the role that footbinding played in detainees' interrogation, as "the question of an immigrant's relative back home having bound feet was

<sup>19</sup> The intricacies of the unbinding process as well as the social and cultural reforms that took shape at the turn of the twentieth century in China will be discussed at more length in chapter 3 of this work.

fairly common.”<sup>20</sup> The Immigration Station’s lotus shoes thus tell about the Chinese immigrants—male and female—who passed through Angel Island between 1910 and 1943, while hinting at U.S. officials’ perception and understanding—as distorted as they may be—of Chinese culture, family and lifestyle in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Exhibited in this historical framework, the Immigration Station’s lotus shoes tell as well an ambivalent story of mobility and immobility. While footbinding was used to determine Chinese immigrants’ entrance into the United States, its symbolisms of mutilation, immobility and confinement<sup>21</sup> resonate strongly with Chinese immigrants’ own experience of detention and imprisonment at the Station. Reading footbinding’s confining nature alongside the carved poems that convey Chinese detainees’ frustration, anger and desire to break free from the walls that kept them prisoners, allows for a deeper understanding of Chinese immigrants’ condition at the Immigration Station. Indeterminately held in an overcrowded and constricted space at America’s gate, Chinese immigrants were far from mobile. Confined inside their inner and gender-segregated quarters, applicants’ physical mobility was mostly contained within the space of their barracks, or, at best, the limits of the fenced outdoors park. If fences were not enough, the island itself ensured immigrants’ isolation and inescapability.

The symbolism of the crippling of the female body under an oppressive patriarchal regime often conferred to footbinding in our contemporary era can also infer our understanding of the presence of lotus shoes in the general history room at the Immigration Station. Footbinding figuratively connotes the disabling and inhuman experience of Chinese immigrants at the detention center. They were medically examined upon arrival (*Island 14*), separated from their family and/or loved ones, repetitively interrogated, kept in unsanitary overcrowded communal spaces, confined to a limited space, mistreated and dehumanized. Immigrants thus confronted the disabling and racist American laws that not only strictly regulated Chinese immigration, but also Chinese immigrants’ movement in the United States. Ultimately, by approaching Chinese immigrants’ disabling experience through the motif of footbinding, the museum curators wink at Chinese men’s experience of emasculation in the United States

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<sup>20</sup> Grant Din, Community Director of the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation, passed along my questions regarding the presence of lotus shoes at USIS to Ben Fenkell, whose personal answer was cited by Din in a personal correspondence dating from January 16, 2015.

<sup>21</sup> Although footbinding did not immobilize the women who practiced it, it substantially altered their mobility at home, at work and within the society in which they lived.

following their detention, as they were often forced to take on women's labor, and ridiculed for their more feminine appearance that contrasted with American ideals of masculinity. Crossing symbolic gender boundaries and the physical gender segregation of the Immigration Station, these pairs of shoes thus point to the imbricated processes of racialization and gendering that affected Chinese immigrants, male and female, at the U.S. border and on American soil; oppressive mechanisms that led to their confinement, segregation, symbolic mutilation and gender displacement upon arrival and settlement.

Accordingly, by alluding to the meaning conferred to footbinding in the interrogation room, as well as by hinting at footbinding's multiple symbolic layers of social standing, immobility and crippling femininity, the exhibition of lotus shoes at the Immigration Station intertwines the cultural tradition of footbinding with the history of Chinese immigration to preserve, remember and share "the rich stories and personal journeys of thousands of immigrants."<sup>22</sup> The visitors familiar with both the historical use of footbinding in the interrogation of Chinese subjects and footbinding's persisting symbolism of crippling femininity will understand the museum's attempt at reflecting on the processes of interrogation and detention at the Station through the display of lotus shoes. They will grasp the historical and symbolic implication of these shoes beyond their past cultural values and significance, and beyond their gender referentiality.

For visitors unaware of the function of footbinding in Chinese immigration, the presence of the shoes might be unnoticed or might perhaps emphasize applicants' Chinese culture or legacy and offers, in Fenkell's words, an "opportunity to interpret unique cultural traditions that are often misunderstood." Indeed, the descriptive brochure, which provides a concise history of footbinding—if read by visitors—would enable them to learn more about this custom's historical development and cultural significance over the centuries.<sup>23</sup> Beyond this broader history of footbinding, the exhibition of lotus shoes remains framed in the historical and symbolic context of Chinese immigrants' disabling interrogation and general experience at the detention center, thus carrying symbolic and subversive meaning.

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<sup>22</sup> See the Angel Island Immigration Foundation's mission stated on their official website.

<sup>23</sup> Despite the display of a few photographs of naked bound feet, this brochure presents a neutral historical presentation that surpasses the Orientalism of the pictures shown.

***Between Self- and De-Orientalization: Chinese American Ambivalent Responses to Footbinding***

Most Chinese female immigrants, regardless of their social background, discontinued the custom once settled on American shores in order to adjust to the new demands of their host country. The conditions they encountered upon arrival rendered their life on bound feet difficult. Yung describes the disillusionment of her great grandmother who returned to China, finding her life in the United States unbearable on bound feet: “Even though she had status and the means to live well, Great-Grandmother, who had bound feet, found life in America inconvenient, alienating and harried. Her domestic life was quite different from her husband’s public life ... she remained sequestered at home, raising their children with the help of a mui tsai” (*Unbound Feet* 2). Contrary to Yung’s great-grandmother who kept her feet bound and returned to China, many Chinese women loosened their feet to adapt to their new environment. As Chinese immigrant families’ income was low, wives and daughters were often needed at work to support the economy of the family. Footbinding thus became unsustainable for Chinese immigrant women who had to step in and help their male counterparts.

The process of unbinding or the discontinuation of footbinding, as well as Chinese women’s stepping outside of the domestic sphere to help fathers and husbands earn a living, magnify the emasculation and/or castration of Chinese men in the United States. Pushed to menial “‘feminized’ professions” (Eng loc408) and deprived of legal privileges, Chinese men were doubly emasculated: through their economic exploitation and embrace of female labor, and through their inability to provide for their family as breadwinners. In this context, unbinding, more than attesting Chinese women immigrants’ liberation and emancipation, testifies to the redefinition of Chinese gender roles in diasporic contexts, but also to the invisible white patriarchal norms regulating the lives of Chinese men and women alike.

Yet, by unbinding their feet or discontinuing this custom, Chinese women deconstructed indirectly what the American government had strived to accomplish. While officials sought to confine Chinese women deemed respectable to their domestic sphere, transforming them into invisible inhabitants of Chinatown, Chinese women across the social divides loosened or unbound their feet, stopped perpetuating the custom, and participated in the formation and assertion of a Chinese American community and identity, while actively seeking to improve Chinese women’s condition in their society (see Yung, *Unbound Feet* 7). Even the women who



did not or could not unbind their feet, did not remain sequestered at home, as officials had hoped, but stepped out of the domestic realm (figure 5).

As a result, the number of Chinese American women binding their feet in the early twentieth century was dwindling. The interviews of 165 Chinese Americans residing in Los Angeles conducted in the 1970s by the UCLA Asian American Studies Center in collaboration with the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California show the scarcity of bound-footed women in California in the early decades of the twentieth century. Only nine interviewees mentioned the practice of footbinding and only six said that their mothers had their feet bound at a young age. Four interviewees mention how their mothers had had their feet bound in China, three out of which unbound their feet before or after coming to the United States. Louise Larson recalls how her mother had her feet bound at a young age, but stopped binding because she was “ashamed of her bound feet” (interview 15, 2). She did not specify, however, if she unbound her feet before or after migrating to the United States in 1902. Alice Hum’s mother had her feet bound in China, but unbound in America for unspecified reasons (interview 104, 1). Bessie Jeong’s mother also had her feet bound in China and unbound when she came to the United States. However, her mother regained neither the natural shape of her feet, nor their normal function. She could not walk without her bandages and shoes (interview 157). Conversely, Ray Lue did not specify in his interview if his mother unbound or kept her feet bound when she settled in the United States (interview 81, 4).

Only two interviewees specified that their American-born mothers had their feet bound even though they were born and grew up in the United States. It is the case of Victor Quan, whose mother had her feet bound as a child because her family was conservative. Since the family was quite wealthy, they could afford a maid. As a result, Quan’s mother did not have to work. She unbound her feet, however, at the collapse of the Qing dynasty in the 1910s. The unbinding of her feet coincides with the family’s ideological adherence to the newly established republican government (interview 26, 6).<sup>24</sup> Ora Yuen also mentioned in her interview how her mother, who was born in San Francisco to a wealthy family, had her feet bound and led a conservative life at home raising children (interview 40, 1-6). She did not specify if her mother

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<sup>24</sup> *Southern California American Oral History Project: Cumulative Index*, 1982. Courtesy of the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California.

ever unbound her feet. In both cases, footbinding is correlated to wealth, as both families *could afford* for them to stay at home.



Figure 6: “Chinese Girl with Bound Feet,” San Francisco. Photograph by Isiah W. Taber, late 1800s. The Virtual Museum of the City of San Francisco

Although rarely practiced, footbinding did not completely disappear from the Californian scene in the early twentieth century. Some families persisted in propagating this tradition within the diasporic community out of cultural conservatism or economic despair (figures 6 and 7). The Chinese ambassador’s wife, Mrs. Wu Tingfang, expressed, during her visit in San Francisco in 1902, her unpleasant surprise to see that footbinding was still practiced in the United States. She was quoted saying in an article published in the *Chung Sai Yat Po* (San Francisco’s Chinese newspaper) on February 19, 1902 that it was “quite unthinkable that footbinding, long considered an evil practice in China, [was] still in vogue in the United States” (trans. and qtd. in Yung, “Social Awakening” 83).<sup>25</sup> Her

strong reaction points to the forming cultural gap between mainland China and the American diasporic community in terms of their practices and ideologies at a time of important political, cultural and ideological reforms in China. While Chinese reformers were striving to modernize and Westernize the Chinese nation, some members of the diasporic community held onto cultural traditions and beliefs.

J.M. Scanland, in his article “Footbinding in Chinatown: Late Edict of the Empress will Have no Effect” published in the *San Francisco Chronicle* of April 19, 1903 also emphasizes the persistence of the custom on American shore as he records the presence of footbinders in San Francisco: “There are several old women in Chinatown who follow this as a profession, and when the feet are skillfully bandaged they say there is no pain whatever. But, some of these women are evidently not skillful, judging from reports that reach the ears of the missionaries” (5). The need of footbinders in San Francisco’s Chinatown, despite the anti-footbinding edict passed

<sup>25</sup> Wendy Rouse Jorae also mentions in *The Children of Chinatown* that “in 1899, the Reverend Dr. Wilson of the Methodist Church and the Reverend Dr. Locke identified at least twenty girls with bound feet in [San Francisco] Chinatown” (60), to their utmost horror.

in 1902 on the mainland, attests to the persistence of the custom on the West Coast. However, considering the footbinders' old age, this profession was on the decline. Scanland also sarcastically denounces the torturous nature of this tradition, while devaluing the footbinders' supposed skills to reshape girls' feet *painlessly*.

Similar to old women who—although preserving a past cultural tradition—made a profit through the practice of footbinding, some immigrant women were said to bind their daughters' feet to display them to a curious audience to make ends meet. In this case, the persistence of footbinding surpasses its symbolism of wealth and social standing: no longer practiced because families could afford to bind their daughters' feet, footbinding was a means of subsistence. As Scanland states: "Some of the poorer class, who bandage the feet of their girls, make more money by exhibiting these feet than they lose from the inability of the girls to work. Any one with a morbid curiosity can see a stunted foot for 28 cents, and in the tourist season business is lively" (5). Although Scanland does not give a sense of proportion regarding how many young bound-footed girls were exhibited in San Francisco Chinatown, his emphasis on the liveliness of the business during tourist season points to the interest American spectators had in bound feet, but also to the freakish nature of the business. The self-Orientalization and self-exhibitionism of these poor Chinese immigrant families recall the strategies used by Ah Toy in the 1840s to sell her body to make a living. These cases of footbinding speak indeed of the racial and sexual exploitation of Chinese immigrants, as these women were left to use their bodies, or their daughters' bodies to eke out a living and appeal to the sexual fantasy of the white viewer. Note here too how Scanland demystifies the equation of footbinding with social status previously seen with U.S. officials' attempt at distinguishing the wife from the prostitute. Indeed, footbinding reached two extremes: the wealthiest and the lowest of Chinese immigrant families at the turn of the twentieth century.

While footbinding was favored for its symbolic states or *exploited* for economic reasons by some Chinese immigrants across the social divides, educated Chinese Americans more generally opposed footbinding and self-Orientalizing displays. An article published in the *Chung Sai Yat Po* on June 6, 1904 strongly responds to the exhibition of a Chinese woman with bound

feet during the St. Louis World's Fair started in April 1904 (Yung, "Social Awakening" 83).<sup>26</sup> The author's condemnation of the Chinese entrepreneur responsible for organizing such a display resonates with the contempt expressed by the Chinese American population in reaction to the content of the Chinese Village at the World's Fair that they denounced as "magnifying the 'ugly faces' of China" with their sculptures of "Chinese coolies, prisoners, prostitutes, beggars, women with bound feet and opium smokers" (Xie, "World's Fair" n.p.). These stereotypical representations of Chinese culture and people continued, in their views, to define and demonize China as barbaric and backward, and to sustain the pathologization of Chinese immigrants in U.S. discourses.

The St. Louis World's Fair also exhibited lotus shoes to "showcase the sophistication of traditional handicraft," in Ko's words (*Every Step a Lotus* 146). Yet, far from being considered as sophisticated by the Chinese diasporic community, the display of shoes impacted on their condemnation of old Chinese practices as national disgraces (Ko 146-7; 3n151). At a time of national reforms and modernization in China, lotus shoes and bound feet no longer represented the Chinese nation, but continued to locate China in a distant and barbaric past. Chinese American reaction toward the spectacle of what they labeled China's weakness and evils speaks of their attempt at presenting a more astute image of a modern China away from old customs and beliefs that they saw as detrimental not only to China's international relations, but also to their self-image and self-definition in a predominantly anti-Chinese America.

Although the United States offered new possibilities for Chinese women and influenced Chinese immigrants' self-development, its racial discrimination and disenfranchisement of the Chinese diasporic population spurred them to turn to China's national movement to find a political voice.<sup>27</sup> As Yong Chen argues, "while Chinese American ethnic identity was undoubtedly influenced by American anti-Chinese hostility, it was not merely a result of racial formation and transformation in the New World environment; rather it was a complex process

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<sup>26</sup> The display of bound-footed women during World's Fairs or similar events was not uncommon. Mae Ngai draws attention to the display of one woman, Toy Shee, at the Chicago Village during the Chicago Fair in 1895, as well as to the exhibition of 34 Chinese women in native costumes during the Cotton States Exhibition in Atlanta the same year. For both occasions, their tiny feet attracted the curiosity of Euro-Americans. See "The Chinese Village" in her *The Unlucky Ones*.

<sup>27</sup> The nationalist movement was started in diaspora: Chinese scholars who benefitted from an education abroad became leaders in the fight against the Qing empire, culminating with U.S.-educated Sun Yat-sen who led the Revolution of 1911.

that intersected with developments and dynamics taking place in a transpacific context” (“Understanding” 160). Indeed, the rise of a Chinese American ethnic consciousness needs to be re-contextualized within this transnational framework. By trying to change China into a modern and strong nation, the Chinese American population was hoping to tackle their own discrimination in the United States that they saw as intrinsically connected to Western perceptions of China as backward and barbaric (160).

The daily newspaper *Chung Sai Yat Po*, created by the Chinese Presbyterian minister Ng Poon Chew, played a significant role in developing a Chinese American transnational political and cultural ethnic consciousness. The newspaper’s mission was two-fold. On the one hand, it sought to “rally support from American Chinese for the reform programs in China,” and to foster their fight against American anti-immigration laws, civil rights and citizenship (Chen, “Republicanism” 178). On the other, influenced by “American republicanism, Christianity and Western middle-class ideology” (Yung, “Social Awakening” 82), the newspaper used the model of the Western woman to advocate the need to educate and free the Chinese woman from oppressive cultural traditions. Indeed, concerned with the need to reform the Chinese nation and its feudal cultural practices, the *Chung Sai Yat Po* supported Chinese women’s emancipation both in China and the United States,<sup>28</sup> as each woman was seen as a mother who would one day raise daughters and sons to become respectable citizens of the Chinese nation (Kuo 10).<sup>29</sup>

As a result, the newspaper’s views remained quite conservative as Chinese women’s place was still predominantly seen as being within the home. As Yung explains, Ng believed that “women should have the right to education, livelihood, and free choice of marriage, but that a woman’s proper place was in the home as a faithful wife and mother” (82). This enduring belief in traditional separated gender spheres of private vs. public might also speak of Chinese men’s double endeavor in the early twentieth century to change American visions of Chinese-ness, and

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<sup>28</sup> Other Chinese newspapers based in the United States opposed Chinese women’s emancipation movement. The *Sai Gat Yat Po* (*Chinese World Daily*), a newspaper sponsored by the *Baohanghui* banking and investment programs in Chinese America (Chen, “Republicanism” 177), defended even more traditional gender roles and Confucian values.

<sup>29</sup> This echoes the concept of republican motherhood that took shape during the American Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century. See Kerber, Linda. “The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment—An American Perspective.” *American Quarterly* 28. 2 (Summer, 1976): 187-205; Zagari, Rosemarie. “Morals, Manners, and the Republican Mother.” *American Quarterly* 44.2 (June 1992): 192-215; and Robbins, Sarah. “‘The Future Good and Great of our Land:’ Republican Mothers, Female Authors, and Domesticated Literacy in Antebellum New England.” *New England Quarterly* 75.4 (2002): 562-591, among others.

to regain a sense of masculinity which had been co-dependent on the representations and positions of their female counterparts in the American imagination since the mid-nineteenth century. Yet, Ng's conservative view on women's place in society did not prevent him from encouraging women's moral and intellectual education, their free marriage and their physical liberation from constraining cultural rites such as footbinding, spurring the Chinese American community to rally support for the Chinese emancipation movement that accompanied the nationalist movement in the early decades of the twentieth century.

As a result, the *Chung Sai Yat Po* published about 66 editorials and 550 articles on women between 1900 and 1911, "26 of which reflected the voices of Chinese women themselves," Yung states ("Social Awakening" 83). These various articles addressed four main issues, as Yung explains, "(1) the elimination of 'barbaric' practices harmful to women, such as polygamy, slavery, arranged marriages and especially footbinding; (2) education for women; (3) women's rights; and (4) women's role in national salvation" (83). Anglo-American constant criticism of Chinese heathenism and barbarism encouraged Ng and his Chinese American contemporaries to advocate the eradication of these Chinese practices that they saw as detrimental to their self-image in the United States.

Footbinding—due to its hyperbolic visibility—was a recurrent topic of contempt in the *Chung Sai Yat Po* from 1902 onward, coinciding with the anti-footbinding edict passed in China the same year. At least ten articles dealing with the crippling effect of footbinding made the front page of the *Chung Sai Yat Po* between 1906 and 1910 (Kuo 7). In her "Social Awakening," Yung provides many examples of the newspaper's criticism of the practice and its advocacy for its abolition both in China<sup>30</sup> and the United States on the grounds of its harm to a woman's health and body, as well as its unnaturalness and barbarism (84).<sup>31</sup> As the author of an article "On the Relations between Footbinding and Female Education" published on February 13 and 14, 1906 discusses, "for education to spread more massively, women's schools are needed. For women's schools to be established, footbinding has first to be abolished" (qtd. in Kuo 11, my translation). Indeed, physical mobility and intellectual advancement were seen as intrinsically linked.

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<sup>30</sup> See for example the issues of September 5, 1906; September 26, 1906; October 2, 1907 and January 1, 1908.

<sup>31</sup> The issues of July 27, 1904; February 13, 1906; January 2, 1907; and December 9, 1907 discuss the imperial order against footbinding passed in 1902.

Idealizing revolutionary unbound-footed Chinese feminists of the time, such as Zhang Zhujun, Xue Jinqin (Sieh King King) and Qiu Jin, the *Chung Sai Yat Po* regularly reproduced or commented on, and supported, revolutionary women's works and speeches given in China and the United States to promote Chinese women's emancipation. Zhang Zhujun and Qiu Jin never made it to the United States, but Xue Jinqin gave a few speeches about the necessity of abolishing old Chinese practices in San Francisco—two in 1902 and one in 1903—that were all mentioned in the *Chung Sai Yat Po* (Yung, "Social Awakening" 93). These Chinese female revolutionaries were acclaimed by the Chinese American population and became "role models" for Chinese American women (91). As these feminists unbound their feet and preached for the unbinding of all Chinese women's feet and lives as well as for the liberation of the Chinese nation from feudalism, Chinese American women joined in the fight against footbinding and similar constraining rites. Unbinding became an important motto of Chinese feminist's nationalism and women's emancipation. As will be discussed in chapter 3, unbinding came to symbolize Chinese women's liberation from constraining patriarchal and feudal systems and represented their "agency-in-the-making" (Yan 43) despite the physical limitation of the unbinding process. Unbinding did not have, however, the same impact among Chinese American women, as most were natural-footed or had already unbound long before Chinese revolutionaries in order to adapt to the demands of American economy. Instead of unbinding their feet, Chinese American women *unbound* their bodies and their voices, to borrow Yung's terminology (see her book *Unbound Voices* 1999). By supporting the abolition of footbinding and the modernization/Westernization of the Chinese nation, the Chinese diasporic community thus played a crucial role in the dismantling of the Qing dynasty, in the Revolution of 1911, as well as in Chinese women's emancipation movement.

The *Chung Sai Yat Po* also idealized Western democracy, and used it to promote the need to reform Chinese society and to build a strong and respectable Chinese American community. Western democracy, characterized by its emancipatory progress and equality, was opposed to China's feudalism, backwardness and oppressive gendered rites (Kuo 12). Chinese women were thus read in opposition to Western women, who were held up as models to follow. An article entitled "Discussion on Whether the Evil Practice of Footbinding Should Be Changed" published on December 9, 1907 compares Chinese to American women: as American women "stopped worrying about sweeping the floors of their family homes on a daily basis, one day Chinese

women may also stop binding their feet” (qtd. in Kuo 12, my translation). In other words, the author implies that if Western women managed to break free from constraining chores that confined them to the domestic sphere, so would Chinese women find liberation from physical mutilation and its crippling consequences on their daily lives. This analogy is misleading, however, as white women in the early twentieth century were far from being emancipated and were still predominantly responsible for the domestic sphere. This article thus points to the author’s idealization of mainstream society, whose democracy and gender equality are here magnified, and whose hegemonic and governing ideals of white masculinity are once again made invisible. The author also refers to how Chinese women’s small steps and difficulty in walking were unwelcomed by Western women. Once again footbinding was taken as the proof of the immorality of Chinese customs and the fall of the Chinese nation (10).

Opposing Chinese old-fashioned customs was also crucial for the Chinese American community whose self-image depended on the general reception and vision of China’s politics and culture. Overseas Chinese, exposed to a broader range of experiences needed to embrace this new educational trend in order to reach out to the world (Kuo 10). The involvement of the Chinese American community in the reformation of the Chinese nation, as well as their prevalent condemnation of footbinding as a barbaric custom accompanied their effort at finding integration and recognition in mainstream society in the early twentieth century. As it contributed to depicting Chinese Americans as inassimilable, the practice of footbinding became in their views a disclaimer of a feudal past. The Chinese American community’s effort to fight against these markers of national and cultural disgraces represents a major attempt at *de-Orientalizing* their cross-cultural identity in the backdrop of American racism, gendering and xenophobia.

It has to be noted, however, that the Chinese American supporters of the nationalist movement and anti-footbinding campaign seen through the articles published in the *Chung Sat Yat Po* are part of a privileged class of literate immigrants. Their views and involvement in Chinese politics cannot be used, therefore, to represent the entire Chinese American community. As seen with the poor Chinese families who bound their daughters’ feet to eke out a living, Chinese American ambivalent reactions to footbinding was also a matter of education, class, economic opportunities, and gender. While the perpetrators of footbinding were identified as women in the few sources analyzed, the editors and authors of these political articles were predominantly male (only 26 out of 550 articles reflected women’s views). This gender



distinction notably points to the gender imbalance of and the role division governing the Chinese American community in the early twentieth century, but also foregrounds the importance of footbinding abolition in Chinese American educated men's discourse. Although it can be seen as supporting the nationalist movement happening in China, this male anti-footbinding discourse says something more in the diasporic context. Symbol of a barbaric Chinese culture, as well as a deviant and bestial patriarchal system in Western eyes, footbinding was detrimental to Chinese American men's endeavor to redefine their masculinity and identity against devaluing stereotypes of sexual deviancy and emasculation to ultimately regain the rights and recognition they deserved. Accordingly, the Chinese American heterogeneous and multifaceted responses to footbinding in the early twentieth century oscillating between self-Orientalization and de-Orientalization reflected the larger conflicts of the Chinese American community across the gender line, footbinding having become, in the diasporic context, as much a symbol of Chinese male pathologization as of Chinese women's oppression under patriarchy.

### ***Footbinding Now: Cultural Legacy and Chinese American Museums***

Created by the Chinese American community since the early 1960s,<sup>32</sup> Chinese American museums and historical societies are communal sites of historical and cultural preservation in which memorabilia, memories and families' histories are shared by the members of the community and put together to retrace their history and construct their cultural legacy. Donated by members of the Chinese American community, lotus shoes are seen as cultural objects worthy of preservation in the community's historical and cultural museums. However, these artifacts rarely make it past the archives' section. As Michael Ames contends, "a work of art that never gets hung in major art galleries is art that is likely to be forgotten. Images and records that are relegated to the closed storerooms of a museum are relegated to obscurity" (22-3). As a result, although lotus shoes are preserved within the walls of the museum, they do not act as common vestiges of Chinese American history and cultural legacy in the space of the contemporary Chinese American museum. Their place in the archives continues, to a certain extent, the Chinese American community's de-Orientalizing strategy started in the early twentieth century.

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<sup>32</sup> The Chinese Historical Society of America (San Francisco) was the first to be founded in 1963, followed by the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California in 1975 and the Museum of Chinese in America (New York) in 1980. The other museums were established between the mid-1990s and the early 2000s. See their respective websites.

This de-Orientalizing strategy is more apparent when the relegation of lotus shoes to the storage room is read in contrast to the proliferation of footbinding exhibitions in the United States in a variety of museums and contexts since the turn of the twenty-first century, notably in some museum exhibitions touching on Chinese American history. This is the case, for instance, of the ongoing exhibition “America on the Move” at the National Museum of American History, which features a lotus shoe in a section dealing with foreign laborers’ contribution to American industrialization in the late nineteenth century. The exhibition itself retraces the development of the means of transportation that changed the landscape and life in the United States, as it enabled people and goods to move from one city to another in a shorter amount of time. The exhibition offers a closer look at the people who participated in the development of American roads and means of production, from the immigrants who came as seasonal workers, to the people who benefitted from transportation within the United States.<sup>33</sup>

A lone lotus shoe has been featured in the section devoted to foreign laborers entitled “Delivering the Goods: Watsonville, California 1895.” This section brings visitors from Santa Cruz to Watsonville, which the development of the railways had transformed into a “center of produce farming” (exhibition online description), as the railways linked farms across the country. This increase in agricultural production enabled by the development of the railroad, brought many immigrants to Watsonville, where communities of Chinese, Japanese, Filipino and Mexican laborers developed. The exhibition’s lotus shoe is featured in the small presentation of the Chinese community of Watsonville and appears among other everyday domestic items, such as chopsticks, serving bowls, storage jars, a bamboo cooking ladle, a rice bowl, a whisk for cleaning pots, an inkstone and a writing brush, dominoes, and a kidney-pill box.

The context in which the lotus shoe has been included differs substantially from the Angel Island Immigration Station’s. However, the way this lotus shoe is presented and the symbolism it is conferred recall USIS’s representation of immigrants processed at the Immigration Station through footbinding’s historical significance for the Chinese immigrant community. The Watsonville shoe is similarly framed within a larger history of immigration from the Gold Rush to the 1890s, shedding light on the gender imbalance of the Chinese workers

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<sup>33</sup> Many thanks to Franklin Odo for putting me in contact with Noriko Sanefuji, curatorial assistant at the National Museum of American History, and to Sanefuji herself for pointing me to the display of lotus shoes in their ongoing exhibition “America on the Move.” See the exhibition’s official website for this and further references to the exhibition.

involved in the construction of the railroad and in agriculture. Chinese women were rare finds in these bachelor societies that formed on the West Coast. Being the only representative object of Chinese women's presence in the developing agriculture center of Watsonville, this lone lotus shoe emphasizes the scarcity of Chinese women in these bachelor societies, while reducing Chinese female immigrants once again to the confining custom of footbinding.

In addition to epitomizing this gender imbalance, the lone exhibited lotus shoe speaks of the social status of the few women who were granted entrance in the aftermath of the Exclusion Act of 1882. Contrasting with Chinese male laborers working in strawberry fields and the basic everyday utility tools used, the shoe stands for the wealth of these few women who made it to the United States towards the end of the nineteenth century, only a small number of whom had and kept their feet bound upon arrival. Accordingly, in the context of the exhibition's exploration of America's movement, the slipper tells a paradoxical story. While the shoe speaks of Chinese women's upper status and privileged entrance into the United States during exclusion laws, it also foregrounds women's scarcity, isolation, confinement and predominant invisibility in the United States.



Figure 8: Courtesy of the San Diego Chinese Historical Museum, 2014.

Chinese American museums and historical societies' relegation of lotus shoes to the storage rooms furthers the isolation and invisibility of Chinese bound-footed women in the United States, as well as emphasizes their predominant erasure from Chinese American history altogether. Out of the eight Chinese American museums and historical societies in the United States only the San Diego Chinese Historical Museum (SDCHM) has lotus shoes permanently on display (figure 7). Indeed, the Chinese Historical Society of America (CHSA) in San Francisco, the Chinese American Museum of Los Angeles (CAMLA), Chicago's Chinese American Museum (CCA) and the Museum of Chinese in America (MoCA) in

New York City possess in their archives at least a lotus shoe, if not a couple of pairs, that have for the most part never been exhibited.

Community members donated the pairs of lotus shoes found in the SDCHM exhibition room (figure 8). They are displayed among Manchu platform slippers, textile works and old Chinese coins. No textual introduction frames their display beyond the mention of the donor's name. Exhibited in the context of the museum's mission to "collect, preserve and share the Chinese American experience and Chinese history, culture and art to educate our diverse community and its visitors" (online mission statement), these lotus shoes and various slippers instruct on Chinese culture and art, as well as offer a glimpse at the attire and shoes that Chinese women brought to the United States. Indeed, the focus is on the artistic beauty of the shoes more than on their historical significance. Yet, despite this artistic focus, the shoes' awkward juxtaposition to coins sustains a certain Orientalist perspective, in my opinion, as these artifacts are lumped together to represent a past Chinese culture, recalling the lotus shoes that American merchants brought back from China and which were exhibited amid a variety of other memorabilia in American museums in the early nineteenth century. It is indeed this lumping together of Chinese objects to broadly symbolize Chinese culture that deprives footbinding and lotus shoes of subversive potential in the context of this museum display.

Contrastingly, the temporary inclusion of a lotus shoe at the MoCA in New York City confers a more delineated historical meaning to this shoe in the context of its special exhibition on Chinese women's experience entitled "Where is Home: Chinese in the Americas" that was on view in 2008.<sup>34</sup> It was included in the section entitled "Women's Voices," which retraced Chinese female immigrants' development in America. The lotus shoe was handmade by Mrs. Chu Foke before she left for the United States, but she unbound her feet upon arrival. Marilyn Chou, her granddaughter, donated her grandmother's shoe to MoCa and shared her memory of her grandmother's permanently deformed feet:

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<sup>34</sup> I contacted the following museums and historical societies in September 2014: San Francisco's Chinese Historical Society of America (CHSA), the Chinese American Museum of Los Angeles (CAMLA), the San Diego Chinese Historical Museum (SDCHM), Marysville's Chinese American Museum of Northern California, Chicago's Chinese American Museum (CCA), the Chinese Historical Society of New England (CHSNE), as well as the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California (CHSSC). I also did research at the Museum of Chinese in the America in New York City (MoCA) in March 2014 with the help of Yue Ma. The Chinese Historical Society of New England did not answer. The Chinese American Museum of Northern California, and the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California do not possess any lotus shoes or footbinding artifacts.

I remember feeling the pain of seeing how Grandma's feet were so disfigured from having her toes broken under her feet when they were first bound. When she went out, she wore specially made black leather shoes tailored to her club-shaped foot. She never complained of the pain, but I could tell that walking on the uneven cobblestone streets was particularly difficult. In those days, Mott Street was all cobblestone. (Lee, *Where Is Home* 21)

Chou's testimony foregrounds the cultural clash between the first generation of immigrants and their American born descendants, as well as the progress that women of Chinese descent made from their early immigration to the building of a Chinese American community. Although footbinding is presented as part of Chinese American women's matrilineal legacy, it is also depicted as an ancient cultural tradition of which American-born Chinese women were exempt, highlighting the formation of Chinese American women's own modern cultural traditions. Traveling from China to the United States, as well as from the private home to the collective space of the museum, Mrs. Chu's shoe thus tells about the evolution of cultural traditions when transplanted to different grounds, and about the MoCa's emphasis on forging cultural dialogue. By sharing her memory of her grandmother's deformed feet with the museum's diverse visitors, Chou brings to life her ancestor's story, while remembering a cultural tradition of the past.

However, while footbinding has become an Orientalist epitome of Chinese women's legacy in the American mind,<sup>35</sup> it remains a minimal part of Chinese American exhibitions; a marginal addition to permanent collections related to Chinese immigrants' history and cultural heritage. Connected to China, more than to Chinese America, lotus shoes and other footbinding artifacts have therefore a limited place in Chinese American museums. In an e-mail exchange dating to October 10, 2014, Brian Tom—founder of the Chinese American Museum of Northern California—shared with me his disbelief in the prevalence of footbinding in the United States and rightly stipulated that the majority of footbound women in America had their feet bound in China. Brian Tom is probably not alone in looking at footbinding and its cultural legacy with distance in the context of Chinese America.

The limited place of footbinding in Chinese American museums might also stem from the disturbing visuality of the lotus shoe itself. While it is an object of art that testifies to Chinese women's embroidery skills, its extreme smallness—no longer imagined but made hypervisibly real—horrifies as it concretizes the mutilation required for a natural foot to wear it. If inserted in

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<sup>35</sup> See fn. 19 of the introduction of this work for a list of the numerous exhibitions of lotus shoes and other artifacts in American museums at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Chinese American museums and historical societies, the lotus shoe would therefore tell a story of mutilation and oppression more than narrate the story of the community's achievements. The absence of footbinding in most Chinese American museums' permanent exhibitions is therefore significant, as their relegation to the storage room proclaims an *unbinding* from past customs that harmed Chinese women and the Chinese American community symbolically, as seen before. By thus omitting to exhibit Chinese cultural aspects that have become the focus of Orientalist scrutiny across the globe and topic of contested discourses, these museums respond to the pervading Orientalization of Chinese history and culture in the United States that continues to negatively affect the Chinese American community, while distinguishing Chinese American historical and cultural past from China's.

Yet, an *unbinding* from past customs and problematic cultural and gender aspects does not automatically mean successful liberation and de-Orientalization. Exclusion also denotes shame and taboo more than liberation from the ghosts of the past. In this respect, perhaps displaying lotus shoes in subversive contexts, as did USIS with its insertion of lotus shoes amid its general history room, might at the end be more effective than omitting the problem altogether. When reconfigured in transgressive contexts, the hypervisible shoe also has the power to talk back and make visible debilitating processes of gendering and racialization with which the Chinese American community has had to grapple since the mid-nineteenth century. I would therefore call for more subversive representations of footbinding in the space of the museum; imaginative representations that would use the lotus shoes' ambivalence of beauty and mutilation not to Orientalize Chinese culture and Chinese women bodies all over again, but to reconfigure them subversively by using the unruly viscosity of the beautiful yet disturbing shoe to transgress normative boundaries and interrogate social, gender and cultural practices.

Yet, the contemporary erasure of footbinding artifacts in Chinese American museums, when read in juxtaposition to the rare cases of inclusion of lotus shoes in more subversive exhibitions, such as at the Angel Island Immigration Station, recalls the ambivalent function that this custom had in Chinatowns for the Chinese American community in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Not only did Chinese immigrants use footbinding for their own ends to eke out a living or sustain their social status, but they also vocally opposed this custom in their attempt at abolishing it altogether. Thus wavering between exclusion and inclusion, cultural maintenance and assimilation, as well as Orientalization and de-Orientalization, the bound feet

and lotus shoes of Chinese America reveal a complex and ambivalent history of footbinding in contexts of migration and diasporic identity/community formations. Pointing to the Orientalist mechanisms of oppression, racialization and gendering, as well as the community's ambivalent internalization and opposition of said mechanisms, this ambivalent history paves the way for the equally ambivalent trope of footbinding that developed in Chinese American literature in the 1970s. This trope, although it resonates with the conflicting contemporary museum representations of footbinding artifacts—or lack thereof—that permeate Chinese America, brings footbinding to more subversive grounds as lotus shoes and mutilated feet enter the realm of the imaginary.

## **PART II**

# **SUBVERTING BINARIES: WRITING AND STAGING FOOTBINDING AT CULTURAL, GENERIC AND GENDER CROSSROADS**





### CHAPTER 3 – VOICES FROM PAST AND PRESENT: FOOTBOUND WOMEN’S CONFLICTING TEXTUAL AND ORAL HISTORIES

Footbound women have rarely written about footbinding, since its development and spread. Contemporary understanding of footbinding predominantly stems from Chinese male scholars’ writings on its origins, symbolism and demise and on Western missionaries’ accounts (Ko, *Teachers* 169). By looking at texts written by bound-footed women from the seventeenth to the early-twentieth centuries, and complementing them with more recent oral testimonies, this chapter voices women’s ambivalent experience and discourse about footbinding over time beyond male writings. While seventeenth-century women writers shed light on the role of footbinding in their self-definition as upper-class women, early-twentieth-century revolutionary women condemned the custom and advocated China’s modernization and women’s emancipation. Although these textual histories underline the historical development of this tradition from praise to condemnation, put in motion by the Westernization of China, this ambivalence permeates the last footbound women’s recent oral testimonies beyond the demise of this custom. This complicates revolutionary women’s association of footbinding with oppression and unbinding with liberation and sets the stage for a more complex understanding of the footbinding and unbinding tropes deployed by Chinese American women at the end of the twentieth century.

The written sources left by bound-footed women are scarce and insufficient to define the scope of Chinese women’s footbinding experience across time and space. The rarity of women’s writings on footbinding principally derives from a high illiteracy rate among Chinese women until the mid-twentieth century. As Evelyn Rawski shows in *Education and Popular Literacy in Ch’ing China*, although 30 to 45 percent of Chinese men were literate in the late nineteenth century, only 2 to 10 percent of women knew how to read and write (140). While the literacy rate was as high as 80 percent in cities, it was extremely low, if not inexistent, in rural areas (23, 10-2, 17). The illiteracy rate among Chinese women was therefore tremendous before the twentieth

century.<sup>1</sup> The few female writers whose works have survived to this day are, therefore, not representative of the Chinese female population, but constitute a small group of elite women, most of whom were living in the prosperous area of Jiangnan in the Jiangsu province during the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912) dynasties (Mann 4).

As Lily Xiao Hong Lee and Sue Wiles express in the preface to the fourth volume of the *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Women Series*, it is “somewhat surprising that only a handful of women, and these few lived during the Ming dynasty, made any mention of bound feet” in their writings, footbinding being “a fact of life for women of the gentry throughout at least the Song and Ming dynasties” (xi). Ko similarly emphasizes in *Teachers of the Inner Chambers* the central role of footbinding in gentry women’s lives, self-definition and personal relationships (169), but explains its marginality in women’s writings as resulting from the oral transmission of practices governing women’s lives (*Teachers* 169). Lee and Wiles speculate that it might also have been by choice or because of a certain censorship that women “refrained” from writing about footbinding (xi). Susan Mann concurs: “perhaps it was not considered aesthetically or intellectually appropriate to mention footbinding in genteel company; perhaps the poetic vocabulary of elite women writers erased this form of bodily experience from their writing. There were after all, no classical precedents for it” (56). The appeal of the bound foot lied principally in its concealment: “visual representation of the bound foot, even fully shod, was provocative to Chinese eyes,” as Ko states (*Cinderella* 41), and textual exposure of bound feet was, as a result, equally inadequate for “respectable discourse” (143).<sup>2</sup> Tied to a code of respectability and vivid defenders of Confucian precepts, the few gentry women and courtesans who wrote about footbinding did not spell out their binding practices, but conveyed in their poetry their admiration for their bound feet, as well as their feminine values and daily routines.

While seventeenth-century poems identify the value women attributed to footbinding, early-twentieth-century women writings reflect the changing attitude toward footbinding at a

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Woodside criticizes Rawski’s neglect of sociolinguistic diglossia patterns in her approach to literacy, as she merges together the “diverse skills of scholars, merchants, estate managers, and peasants” (26). For Elisabeth Kaske, Rawski’s data does not distinguish between a vernacular and a classical literacy (33-5).

<sup>2</sup> Footbinding was rarely addressed in official genres, such as “public history, local gazetteers and didactic texts” before the nineteenth century but appeared principally “in the form of jotting in notation books” (Ko, *Cinderella* 110-1). Naked bound feet were even taboos in Chinese *ars erotica* until the nineteenth century (41). A few exceptions were found, such as the anonymous novel *Jinpingmei* (1618) and Li Yu’s *Rou Putuan* (1657), whose indecency and obscenity led to their censorship. These two works, which were highly subversive of Confucian morality, made footbinding intrinsic to the sexual scenes depicted.

time of national, political and social reforms. Chinese women's anti-footbinding rhetoric echoes Chinese literati and reformers' nationalist agenda leading to the Revolution of 1911 and the collapse of the Qing dynasty. Chinese male reformers made the women's question an integral part of their call for reforms and socio-cultural changes, as they saw feudal customs as a hindrance to the modernization of the Chinese nation deemed backward and uncivilized abroad. Women writers' political texts present, however, the development of a feminist voice in which unbinding becomes not only a priority, but also an important metaphor for women's liberation beyond nationalism. Associated with a woman's freedom from the manacles of feudalism and misogyny, unbinding epitomizes women's first steps in their emancipation from the bonds of patriarchy, and contributes to forging a feminist consciousness.

However, female revolutionaries' feminist agenda expressed through this literal and metaphorical unbinding remains limited when counterpoised to footbound women's ambivalent descriptions of the unbinding process. Concluding with footbound women's oral testimonies on their resistance to unbind and failed unbinding experiences, this chapter complicates the footbinding/unbinding dichotomy diffused in female revolutionaries' works. It points instead to Chinese women's contrasting visions of footbinding, and to the ambivalent function this custom has had in their lives over the centuries. By demystifying unbinding's liberatory function, these recent testimonies thus pave the way for a more complex reading of footbinding and unbinding metaphors in the transnational context of Chinese American literature.

### ***Defining Femininity: Footbinding in Late-Ming Women's Writings***

Literary and artistic developments in the lower Yangzi area during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) were linked to the economic prosperity of the region. The Jiangsu province, encompassing the urban centers of Suzhou, Nanjing and Yangzhou, and especially the Jiangnan region below the Yangzi River,<sup>3</sup> had been a major economic and artistic center since the construction of the Grand Canal linking the Yangzi River to the Yellow River in the fifth century B.C.E.<sup>4</sup> With the rise of a mercantile class during the Song dynasty (960–1279), Jiangsu became a major trade center in

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<sup>3</sup> The seventeenth-century Jiangnan region mainly included the southern part of Jiangsu province around the Yangzi delta, the southern area of Anhui province, the Northern part of Jiangxi province as well as the Northern part of Zhejiang province. See the map in Ko, *Teachers* xvi.

<sup>4</sup> The Canal was extended to Beijing in the early seventh century C.E. See Ebrey, *Illustrated History* 115-6.

China, attracting gentry families to the area.<sup>5</sup> The constant flooding of the Yellow River and a succession of wars up to the collapse of the Song dynasty however damaged the Grand Canal (Bowman 105). Its renovations, conducted during the Ming dynasty when the empire's capital moved from Nanjing to Beijing, brought renewed prosperity to Jiangsu and its major urban centers (Brook 74-5).

As a result of the economic prosperity of the region, the literacy rate in the province was high compared to the rest of the country,<sup>6</sup> which led to the blossoming of the publishing industry during the Ming and Qing dynasties. The basic education of middle and upper classes led to the propagation of a vernacular literature (Ebrey, *Illustrated History* 202-3; 201), consisting mostly of novels targeting a wider and diverse audience (Egerton viii). The rise of a female literature coincides with the development of this vernacular literature. No longer restrained to male literati, literature and its publishing world slowly opened to elite women to whom more education opportunities were offered (Ko, *Teachers* 11-2),<sup>7</sup> and to courtesans who received a better literary and artistic education (264). These educated women wrote poems in imitation of and in response to classical literature and popular romantic fictions, where they gave unprecedented insight into their lives, routines, values, relationships and self-definitions as women.

While Confucianism was prominent among the elite class of the Jiangsu province in late Ming and early Qing times, it gradually opened to negotiation, leading to the redefinition of boundaries between literati and popular culture (Ebrey, *Illustrated History* 201), private and public realms, as well as female and male spheres (Ko, *Teachers* 17). It was believed before the late Ming that women's words had to remain within their inner chambers (Mann 119). The

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<sup>5</sup> Accelerated economic growth took shape in the Tang dynasty (618–907) as the Grand Canal now connected North and South, and as more extensive sea routes developed, leading to the expansion of international trade (Ebrey, *Illustrated History* 108, 199-20). See Frederick Fu Hung and Victor C. Falkenheim's Jiangsu entry in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (accessed on 20 Aug. 2014).

<sup>6</sup> A recent study on the impact of education on the economy of the Jiangnan region in Ming and Qing times bases its analysis on 215 rural villages in the southern Jiangsu province. This study, as Renshu Wu and Lingling Lian point out, "indicates that 40 percent of villagers between the ages of 19 and 70 had some degree of reading ability," making of the Jiangnan region an economic and literary haven from the Ming dynasty onward (252).

<sup>7</sup> The earliest records of women's poems published in literary anthologies date back to the sixth century. Xiaorong Li explains in *Women's Poetry of Late Imperial China* that ten out of eight-hundred poems of the classical anthology *New Songs from a Jade Terrace* compiled by Xu Ling (507-583) were said to be written by women (22). Li, however, remains cautious regarding the gender identity of these authors, as these female writers could be constructed female voices created by male writers (22). The inclusion of women's poems in anthologies compiled by male and female writers more generally proliferated in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. *The Anthology of Correct Beginnings by Inner-Chamber Talents of the Present Dynasty* published in the 1830s is representative of the diffusion of women's work in late imperial time (see Li, *Women's Poetry* 18, 67).

domain of *wen*—“literary high culture”—was a male domain from which women were excluded (119). In other words, by publishing and starting a conversation with male literati, women transgressed the separated domains of domesticity and *wen* (119), thus blurring spatial and gender boundaries. The *Three Obediences*<sup>8</sup> continued, however, to dictate gentry women’s lives, as they followed father, husband, and son (Ko, *Teachers* 257). Handiwork and embroidery performed in their inner quarters similarly remained their main sources of occupation.

This new vernacular literature also led to the development of a courtesan culture (Ebrey, *Illustrated History* 203).<sup>9</sup> The end of the Ming dynasty saw an unparalleled fascination and demand for courtesans, testifying to their literati clientele’s flourishing economic resources (Ko, *Teachers* 256), but also to courtesans’ role in expanding male elites’ artistic and literary circles. Better educated and well versed, courtesans were increasingly invited to join literati’s celebrations in private homes not just as entertainers, but as “artistic equals” (Ko 256; see also Ebrey 203).<sup>10</sup> In addition to becoming more intrusive into the private sphere (256),<sup>11</sup> this Courtesan culture altered interactions between men and women, as well between gentry women and courtesans who developed new friendships and bonds despite their separate social class and sphere, and their rivalry for elite men (see Ko 256, 259, 266).

This increasing female companionship between gentry women and courtesans is reflected in women’s literature of the late Ming and early Qing. Educated women not only spent more time together in literary circles, but sent each other poems, which complemented the common

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<sup>8</sup> The *Three Obediences* is a fundamental Confucian moral principle regarding women’s role in society defined in the classical text *Yili (Ceremonies and Rites)* dating from the Zhou dynasty (c. 1046 B.C.E.–256 B.C.E.). This code made women dependent on men (Taylor and Choy 496).

<sup>9</sup> This courtesan culture declined in the early Qing dynasty, as the Qing government ended the “tradition of maintaining official prostitutes in the capital and the provinces” (Ko, *Teachers* 256). The entertaining business became privatized, and therefore substantially reduced. Fortunate courtesans married off as wives or concubines (256). It also led to the renewed division between courtesans—relegated to the entertainment house—and educated gentry women—relegated to the inner quarters (Mann 53). Gentry women writers thus replaced courtesans as “centers of literati culture” (53). See also Mann 121-42.

<sup>10</sup> The entertainment house developed over the centuries as a space in which “examination candidates were initiated into the tastes and manners of the power elite, where new songs and tunes were rehearsed” (Ko, *Teachers* 255). The entertainment house thus brought together “the public and private lives of the male elites,” and made music and poetry “the vocabulary of social interaction” over the centuries (255). In contrast to the gender-segregated domestic realm of elite homes, the entertainment house was a more ambivalent place where strict codes, and gender roles were redefined.

<sup>11</sup> The intrusion of courtesans in the domestic sphere, as well as the new bonds forming among gentry women and courtesans was fostered by a society increasingly on the move. As Ko states: “Whereas gentry wives accompanied husbands on their bureaucratic travels, courtesans and professional writers endured the travails of journey as a necessary condition of their jobs. On the roads these women were by and large dependent on men for introduction, expenses, and shelter, although occasionally patron’s wives also extended them hospitality” (*Teachers* 279).

exchange of handmade shoes among female relatives and friends (Ko, *Teachers* 150, 170, 171). In addition to writing to one another, women also wrote about one another, about the female body and their shared sense of womanhood. Poems expressing women's feelings and emotions, daily routines and activities, values and beliefs, nostalgia and melancholy dominated this new female canon.

Footbinding impacted gentry women's and courtesans' lives and identity in the seventeenth century. While footbinding became an important ethnic marker in the Song dynasty (960–1279) when China increasingly competed with its northern rivals (Turks, Khitans, Mongols and Jurchens),<sup>12</sup> it also became a “powerful statemen[t] of femininity,” as Ebrey contends (“Women, Marriage” 220). The female body had to be marked as distinctively female—or as more “delicate, reticent, and stationary” (221)—at a time when stronger gender boundaries were needed to differentiate the new masculine—yet quite effeminate—ideal of the scholar/literati rising during the Song dynasty (221).<sup>13</sup> Footbinding thus served to carve the “doctrine of separate spheres” between male and female onto the female body at a young age, as Ko explains (*Teachers* 149).<sup>14</sup> Through bodily modification, as well as spatial confinement and gender/ethnic distinction, footbinding contributed to “inculcating the Confucian notions of ideal womanhood in countless women,” as Ko states (150). Yet, by appropriating it as a marker of ethnic, feminine, and gentile identity, women developed a female culture around it that bound mothers and daughters, as well as women across generations (149-50). With the propagation of this practice, men developed an erotic taste for bound feet, which highlighted, in their eyes, a woman's sensuousness and desirability, transforming footbinding into both a gentile and erotic marker (Ko, *Teachers* 263). Footbinding's ambivalent meaning and function thus came to amplify as well the different position gentry women and courtesans occupied within their patriarchal societies (wives

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<sup>12</sup> Ethnic differentiation was reinforced by footbinding: this custom accentuated the gender segregation practiced by Chinese in contrast to their Northern neighbors (Ebrey, *Illustrated History* 221).

<sup>13</sup> Ko notes a similar need to emphasize ethnic and gender difference following the Manchu conquest of China marking the beginning of the Qing dynasty (*Teachers* 148-9).

<sup>14</sup> Ko explains that footbinding, which was started around the age of 6, coincided with “the age of reason for sons,” a time in which “boys moved out of the women's quarters to enroll in lineage schools or begin instruction with private tutors” (*Teachers* 149). Boys and girls were thus taught to behave and look differently (149).

vs. entertainers) in the seventeenth century,<sup>15</sup> while simultaneously foregrounding the similar principles governing their lives as women (see Ko, *Teachers* 263-4).

Late-Ming women's poetic references to footbinding—although scarce—echo literati's poetic imagery of bound feet's elegance, beauty and refinement, but also depart from this male footbinding poetry and reveal women's everyday routines, interactions, and valued notions of feminine beauty, grace and gentility.<sup>16</sup> The praising tone and sense of pride permeating their poetic depictions of footbinding complicate our current and predominant equation of this custom with women's repression, confinement and subjugation *only*. Seventeenth-century women's perspectives deconstruct the depiction of women as victims of a timeless patriarchal and barbaric China, and revise contemporary claims that footbinding immobilized and confined women to their domestic space (Ko, *Teachers* 148). Women's allusions to footbinding underline instead the centrality of this custom in their lives as women (Ko 169), their agency in the practice of this rite, and their physical and social mobility beyond the domestic sphere, as women travelled alongside their husbands and formed, as Ko states, "long-distance social networks" with male and female literati (148). More than an intertextual reference to classical poetry, footbinding in women's writings thus serves as a marker of female identity and pride, as well as a communicative link between women beyond inner quarters.<sup>17</sup>

Late-Ming female poets' references to lotus shoes and steps point to the prevalence of handiwork, embroidery and shoemaking in a woman's lives, as well as to the role of shoes and poems in consolidating female friendships and bonds. Wang Wei (ca. 1600–ca. 1647), a

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<sup>15</sup> Bound feet played a dual role in courtesans' lives. While footbinding defined courtesans' identity as women and contributed to distinguishing their bodies from the ones of lower prostitutes (Ko, *Teachers* 171), this rite also strengthened their sexual positionality as it catered to male erotic desires.

<sup>16</sup> Women's references to footbinding were scarce before the Ming Dynasty in Jiangsu and neighboring regions. The poetries of Zheng Yunduan (1327–56) and Zhao Luanluan (1341–67) present rare cases in point. In her poem "Song for a Landscape Screen," Zheng contemplates the beautiful landscape imprinted on a piece of silk, and opposes the freedom suggested by this landscape to her confinement amplified by her footbinding. The poem concludes: "But this body is destined to age in the inner chambers, / I hate that there is no chance to go seeking hidden places. / This life has been consigned to cloth socks and grass slippers, / Long I face this painting with these useless, deep regrets" (trans. Peter S. Sturman; Chang and Saussy P.24.I. 133). Conversely, Zhao Luanluan has been credited with a series of five poems praising a woman's body, each focusing on a different body part—hair, eyebrow, mouth, fingers and breast—and upholding the beauty, gracefulness and sensuality of the female body (Jeanne Larsen; Chang and Saussy 76-7). Li Zhen—her biographer—adds a sixth poem entitled "Fragrant Hook" to this series (Chen, "Zhao" 616): "Light, light the spring cloud gently hovering over the 'shoot,' / Graciously, graciously is the 'cone' seen in the late-night moon. / When is it seen under the long flowered skirt? / Only when she alights from the swing" (trans. Lily Xiao Hong Lee; Chen, "Zhao" 616).

<sup>17</sup> Educated women also commonly exchanged verses with male literati.



courtesan from the Yangzhou area, expresses her nostalgic memory of the time spent with her female companions in her poem “Meeting Someone in Early Autumn, Missing My Female Companions for the First Time.” References to bound feet amplify the persona’s nostalgia and solitude, while also outlining feminine markers.<sup>18</sup>

I recall that in the past, every year before the Autumn Equinox,  
During the dawn coiffure the yard was filled with dense mist.  
Before the stairs we stamped our vermilion silk slippers softly;  
Inside the window we sewed white silk skirts together.  
When midnight singing was done we yet entertained the moon;  
When the day’s meditation was over we felt enlightened by the passing clouds.  
Now, as I pick emerald and gaze by the brook,  
The cool dewdrops fall like beads, rousing ripples.

(trans. Chang; Chang and Saussy P.62.13, 325)

The woman’s day Wang describes is structured by sewing and embroidering in daytime followed by singing and meditation at night. The persona remembers as well the walk she had with her female companions at dawn. The oxymoronic reference to these women *softly stamping* their vermilion silk slippers refers to the delicacy of their steps and shoes made of silk, as well as to the heaviness of their walking due to the numerous steps simultaneously taken. This oxymoron amplifies the persona’s loneliness as she contemplates the brook alone in nostalgic reminiscence of her female companions. The last couplet presents a change in focus from the “we” to the “I,” and from the female circle’s activities to the persona’s solitary study of nature. The simile of the “cool dewdrops” monotonously “fall[ing] like beads, rousing ripples” draws attention to the sound of nature surrounding her now that her companions are gone, and contrasts with the women’s previous *soft stamping*.

The nostalgic tone of Wang Wei’s poem needs to be contextualized in Ming travel culture (Ko, *Teachers* 279, 282-5; see Mann 31-7). As gentry wives and privileged courtesans followed husbands or elite men in their travels or seasonal relocations to different palaces, their interactions with female friends, relatives and companions were sporadic, and unstable. The

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<sup>18</sup> Gentry wife Ma Ruren similarly celebrates gentility, handiwork and companionship in her poem “Xie Jie,” written to a friend who sent her a pair of shoes: “Tiny petals of golden lotus falling into the Jade Pond, / Imagining you, embroidering in the inner chambers, / Your skillful handiwork laboriously sent from afar, / Dare I tread onto balconies wet with dew?” (trans. and qtd. in Ko, *Teachers* 170).

emotional and physical longing for female companionship expressed in this poem exposes women's traumatic separation, and isolation. As a result, the communicative function of shoes and poems exchanged between female friends is made all the more symbolic in bridging the geographical gap separating them, and in providing temporary comfort to their loneliness.

References to bound feet in other late-Ming educated women's works stress the importance of footbinding in defining a woman's feminine beauty. For many of them, appearance or exterior beauty was "an expression of admirable inner qualities," as Ko explains (*Teachers* 166), such as "inner moral strength and intelligence" (168). Early seventeenth-century poet and courtesan Ma Ruyu celebrates in her poem entitled "Kicking the Leather Ball" the gracefulness of bound feet—key aspects of her feminine appearance:

Her dainty waist sways with gentle force,  
Swirling red dust brushes her plumed garment.  
By moon-covering cloud coiffure a single star pin dangles,  
Under pomegranate skirts a pair of phoenixes fly.

(trans. Chang; Chang and Saussy P.63.1, 329)

The persona kicking the leather ball takes part in a form of entertainment involving bodily mobility and strength, which demystifies the immobility often attributed to footbound women. The metaphoric association of bound feet with flying phoenixes, and the oxymoronic "gentle force" with which her waist moves when walking foreground, moreover, the sensual strength of this woman kicking the ball. Her gracefulness, epitomized by the delicate flying movement of her feet, thus respects codes of femininity and gentility. Ma's celebration of bound feet's delicacy and agility is almost endowed with erotic admiration, echoing male poets' erotic/sensual descriptions of bound feet, but also pointing to women's own appreciation for their feet.

Gentry women's and courtesans' celebratory, sensual, and intimate references to bound feet—verging on the erotic—not only disclose the "physical longing" felt by these women in each other's absence, exacerbated by the travelling culture of the late Ming dynasty, but also the "friendship-love continuum," as Ko calls it (*Teachers* 266), that developed among women. The erotic connotations of some of these poems hint indeed at the homoerotic bonds that might have formed in the intimate space of women's inner quarters, and in literary and artistic circles.

The poems that Xu Yuan (1573-1620), prominent female poet of Suzhou and wife of poet Fan Yunlin, wrote for courtesans and singing girls provide cases in point. Her poetry celebrates

the eroticism of the female body and bound feet's gracefulness. Xu's popularity was not hindered by the homoerotic aspect of her work, as Ko explains, as her "friendship with courtesans and singing girls, as documented by her poetry, attracted no overt comment from her respectable readers" (*Teachers* 270). Seventeenth-century women were not prevented "from seeking pleasure in each other's company" as long as they "fulfilled their familial duties" (271). The subversive character of her poetry, more than stemming from the homoerotic appeal to the female body infusing her poems, is thus created by an unsettling juxtaposition of "vulgar colloquial expressions" and "lofty moral ideals," as Ko concludes (267).

Xu's series of five regulated verses devoted to Xue Susu (Ko, *Teachers* 267), courtesan and painter of the late Ming, offers an example of her poetic and erotic admiration for the female body. Xu praises and admires Xue's ambivalent and androgynous figure, whose beauty arises from her combined masculinity and femininity, as well as her traditional bound feet juxtaposed to her accomplishments in military and archery arts (268):

So tender are the curves of your soles, they make the *lotus* grow beneath your steps as you walk,  
So well girdled is your waist that you could dance on *palm*. ...  
A *flower* goddess with a *chivalrous* mind, your spirit can be confined by no means. ...  
A traveller holding the Longwen Sword and talking about *hunting tigers*,  
You have in your mind the wisdom to *command an army* like Xue Song's *one hundred thousand warriors*.<sup>19</sup> (qtd. in Berg 111, my emphasis)

This poem celebrates Xue's feminine body as embodied by her gracious tiny feet and shoes whose footsteps metaphorically and punningly make lotus grow—poetic images recalling literati's clichéd bound-feet metaphors. This first line also associates Xue with mythical Yao Niang—beloved consort of Emperor Li Yu of the Tang dynasty. In the account of twelfth-century poet Zhang Bangji, Yao Niang was said to have bound her feet in the "shape of the new moon" (Wang, *Aching* 31) and to leave lotus blossoms with her steps (see Ko, *Every Steps* 32-4). The voyeuristic male gaze hinted at through these clichéd poetic references is replaced, however, by the celebratory stance of a gentry woman, whose admiration for the female body is hard to

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<sup>19</sup> Xu compares Xue to Xue Song, an army commander who served as model for the literary figure of Xue Gang in the popular novel *Xue Gang Rebels against the Tang Dynasty* (Berg 111). For more on intertextual and historical references, see Ko, *Teachers* 267-8.

conceal. These poetic allusions to lotus shoes and feet are complemented by a lexicon of flowers, which furthers the elegance and delicacy of the courtesan's feminine beauty.

The lexical field of nature is counterpoised in the second part of the poem to Xue's masculine attributes represented by her military and martial abilities, which are linked to her mind and spirit—not to her body. She is not only endowed with a “chivalrous” and wise mind, but also with a wandering spirit, amplifying her strength, wisdom and martial skills, as well as her courteousness and gallantry. This ambivalent description points to the liminal position courtesans inhabited at the confine of “the seemingly incompatible worlds of the private woman and the public man” (Ko, *Teachers* 258). Xu's poem precisely praises the duality and ambiguity of the courtesan figure who combines attributes of both worlds. Embodying “feminine charms and literati refinement,” as Ko argues, the courtesan “made a mockery of the supposedly distinct male and female spheres in the ideal world of Confucian precepts” (258). Gentry women might have looked at this ambivalence as enabling and desirable in the context of their restricted lives. The female gaze that frames this poem thus highlights the homoerotic desires and bonds that formed between gentry women and courtesans, but also gentry women's envy, admiration, if not desirability for a new femininity transcending strict boundaries between domestic and *wen*, private and public, female and male—thus foreshadowing twentieth-century revolutionary women's embrace of a more masculine warrior identity. This female gaze, despite its attraction for the masculine, continues, however, to celebrate bound feet as markers of a woman's beauty, delicacy, gentility and identity.

The complexity of elite women's world and growing ambivalent position at the junction of the public and the private, the male and the female, the erotic and the virtuous in late Ming dynasty can better be inferred in Ye Xiaoluan's poem “Feet” and the companionate response of Shen Yixiu, her mother.<sup>20</sup> Women's ambivalent position is mirrored by the ambivalent place conferred to bound feet in their writings—wavering between men's erotic admiration and women's markers of female identity. Versed in literature since a young age, Shen Yixiu (1590–1635) was a writer, poet and essayist whose work was anthologized at her death by her husband and famous scholar Ye Shaoyuan (1589–1648). She is mostly remembered for her “intimate literary interaction with her daughters”—Ye Wanwan, Ye Xiaowan and Ye Xiaoluan—and her

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<sup>20</sup> These two poems have been discussed at length by Ko (*Teachers* 166-69) and Wang (*Aching* 150-54).

“moving accounts of their premature deaths” (Ling, “Shen Yixi” 353). She was also among the first female editors in China to compile women’s poems and lyrics in her anthology *Thoughts of One Far Away* (*Yiren Si*) (Ling, “Shen Yixi” 356). As Ling Hon Lam observes, Shen was thus representative of a “new model of domestic life and femininity” (353).

Her youngest daughter Ye Xiaoluan (1616–1632) was a promising poet since the age of twelve. Despite her early death, Ye left numerous poems and lyrics, as well as a small body of prose (Ling, “Ye Xiaoluan” 554). While Shen Yixiu’s poetry is conservative in tone and subject, Ye Xiaoluan’s poems are daring and critical of the Chinese classical poetic tradition dominated by men. Her poetry satirizes male poetic writing praising women’s bodies (554). In imitation of a sixth-century poet famous for fetishizing women’s hair, Ye wrote a set of nine poems, eight among which are devoted to a different body part, the ninth rejoicing in the beauty of the female body as a whole (555).

Her poem, entitled “Feet” is part of this satiric series. While imitating and gently mocking male poets’ enticement for bound feet, Ye also captures her admiration and fascination for women’s feet and elegant tiny shoes (Ko, *Teachers* 168):

They say lotuses blossom as she moves her feet,  
But they can’t be seen underneath her skirt.  
Her jade toes so tiny and slender,  
Imprinting her fragrant name as she pauses.  
Her pure chiffon skirt swirls in a dance,  
Steadfast as the new moon.  
Her light silk garment sways in soft, flowing motions,  
As she kicks her jade hook halfway up.  
[Consort Yan] left her stocking behind at Mawei,  
Adding to the remorse of the Tang emperor,  
At the banks of River Luo the goddess treads elegantly,  
Bringing sadness to Cao Zhi.

(trans. Ko 168)

The opening line and its emphatic “They say” inscribes Ye’s poem within a male poetic tradition from which she distances herself. The third person plural remains undefined, however. As Wang Ping hypothesizes, this pronoun could relate to the two male figures cited at the end of the poem, Tang Emperor Xuan Zong and third-century poet Cao Zhi (*Aching* 151). Twelfth-century literati Zhang Bangji could be added to Wang’s list. Zhang’s fictional account of Emperor Li Yu of the Tang dynasty is hinted at in Ye’s opening reference to Yao Niang—Li Yu’s concubine and first

literary figure to practice a type of footbinding. Allusions to these male literati and emperors contribute to defining this poetic tradition as predominantly male.

This generic “they” is opposed to an equally undefined female pronoun “her.” The anaphoric “her” at the beginning of the three central couplets—as it appears in Ko’s English translation—reinforces this opposition between the male gaze exemplified by the “they” and the object of the gaze, the “her,” whose feet are fetishized and transformed into the object of men’s fascination. The objectification of the female figure is amplified by the fragmentation of her body represented through the description of her feet and lower garments—“feet” (l. 1), “skirt” (2), “jade toes” (3), “pure chiffon skirt” (5), “light garment” (7), “jade hook” (8), “stocking” (9).

The power differential opposing male and female figures as voyeurs and objects is revised, however, if we consider the agency of these mythical figures in enticing men. As seen above, Ye hints, in the opening lines, at the most famous myth of origin for the custom of footbinding—a myth widely cited in Chinese literature. Last Tang Emperor Li Yu is said to have made a six-foot-high stage in the shape of a lotus for his favorite concubine, Yao Niang, to dance on (Wang, *Aching* 31). As seen with Xu Yuan’s poetry, the lotus blossoms that Yao Niang was said to leave on the ground (See Ko, *Every Step* 32-34) are alluded to in Ye’s opening line; a clichéd poetic reference, which Ye gently mocks. Indeed, Ye rewrites Yao Niang’s objectification in Zhang Bangji’s account and male poetry more generally. Not described as an agent in Zhang’s tale, Yao Niang is said to reproduce Emperor Li Yu’s desires both by binding her feet and in dancing on the lotus stage he created for her. Ye subverts this gender hierarchy by conferring power to Yao Niang whose mesmerizing beauty and lotus feet destabilize men.

In the last four verses, Ye turns to Yang Guifei and the Goddess of the River Luo. Yang Guifei (719–56), the favorite consort of the Tang Emperor Xuan Zong was forced into exile when a rebellion struck the empire. The Emperor’s troops, who found her at Mawei, blamed her for the rebellion and demanded her death (Ko, *Cinderella* 114). The Song version of Yang Guifei’s story recounts that she left a three-inch sock at Mawei that was found by a local woman who later exhibited it for a fee (Wang, *Aching* 30). This refashioned Song story confers three-inch golden feet to Consort Yang, although it is now commonly agreed among footbinding scholars that Tang women had natural feet (Ko, *Teachers* 326n67; Levy, *Chinese Footbinding* 38). This story of Consort Yang as a “femme fatale” that was widely circulated in China, as Ko

explains (*Cinderella* 114), did not escape the attention of Ye who uses it as a historical marker of the attraction created by bound feet.<sup>21</sup>

Ye ultimately approaches the despair of Emperor Xuan Zong at his beloved consort's death through Cao Zhi's mythical story of the Goddess of the Luo River who was said to walk on water without wetting her feet (Ko, *Teachers* 326n68). Although this Goddess had natural feet and was not linked to footbinding in the literary tradition (326n68), Ye's reference to this mythical figure accentuates the literary illustrations of Chinese women's graceful steps and gait, and their mesmerizing effect on male onlookers. Although not directly mentioned, the Goddess of the River Luo and her ability to tread on water act here as implicit metaphor for bound-footed women's aesthetic lotus steps and their symbolism of idealized femininity, gentility and virtue. Ye thus emphasizes the powerful position of these concubines and mythical figures as "female charmer[s], who either brought down kingdoms or became the muse for male poets," in Wang's words (*Aching* 151).

As she touches upon a poetic tradition that confers divine nature to the female body, Ye also conveys her own "fascination with the enchantment of the female body," as Ko states (*Teachers* 167). Aware of the beauty and power of a woman's feet, Ye nuances this male-dominated gaze by hinting at gentry women's self-consciousness and pride in their feet. In addition to pointing to literary imageries well known to both literati and footbinding connoisseurs, Ye plays with the widespread metaphors used in male writings to describe bound feet such as "lotus blossom," "jade hook," "jade toes" and the fragrant steps they leave on the ground. However, as Wang asserts, by combining these terms with a more extensive lexicon of nature, Ye revitalizes an older poetic tradition of linked verse known as *lianzhu* or "linked pearl"<sup>22</sup> to alter these clichéd terms, and propose innovative ways of writing a woman's physical body (*Aching* 151; see also Ko, *Teachers* 167).

Wang also perceives a double entendre behind Ye's new *female* lexicon. The jade toes "imprinting" the woman's name where she stops can be read as a "bold act of defiance against the conventional male poetics, which sexualizes the female body as passive, erotic" (152). By inferring power to a woman's feet that remain hidden from men's views despite what *they say* or

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<sup>21</sup> For more on Yang Guifei's transformation into a *femme fatale* in later myths see Fan-Pen Chen. "Problems of Chinese Historiography as Seen in the Official Records on Yang Kuei-fei." *T'ang Studies* 8-9 (1990-1): 83-96.

<sup>22</sup> This pattern was created by Liu Xiaochuo in the early sixth century (Wang, *Aching* 151).

imagine—“They say lotuses blossom as she moves her feet, / *But* they can’t be seen underneath her skirt” (1-2, my emphasis)—Ye foregrounds a woman’s assertive steps to which men are blind because of their erotic attraction. The same could be said for Ye’s description of the woman kicking “her jade hook halfway up” (8). If footsteps act as metaphors for a woman’s writing, a foot’s upward kick could be seen as yet another symbol of defiance against a male dominated literary tradition and as a movement of female assertion. This act of defiance read between the lines also complicates the objectification of the female body seen in the anaphoric opposition of the male “they” and the “her” at the beginning of the poem. The pronoun “her” is opposed from the start to the subject “she” who “moves her feet” (1), “pauses” (4) and “kicks” (8). This generic female figure is also in command of both the sensual movement of her feet and men’s enticement. The female figure, more than a passive object of the male gaze, is made an active agent in the sustainment of men’s erotic desire. The double meaning attributed to this imagery discloses therefore Ye’s self-assertion as a female poet and as a woman (Wang, *Aching* 152). Similarly, as Ko observes, the numerous historical and literary references permeating her poem enabled her—and her mother in her response poem—to “indulge in small talk on seduction and other-sex related subjects while still sounding respectable” (*Teachers* 169). These historical and poetic references, by showing Ye’s knowledge of the poetic tradition, thus mask the sensual, if not erotic connotation of her poem. Seen in this light, the female body and bound feet become muses to her own writing. With her *jade toes*, distinctive markers of her femininity, she writes her own name in the figurative landscape of male poetry.

It is also through a language of the body that Shen Yixiu answers her daughter’s poem “Feet,” amplifying the importance bound feet had in the definition of a seventeenth-century gentry woman’s feminine beauty and identity:

They say she leaves her footprint on the green moss lightly,  
 Only as she stands alone, lost in thought.  
 He hears the tinkling of jade ornaments from afar,  
 Only because she shifts her bound feet slightly.  
 The slender, slender feet, creating lotuses at every step,  
 The Duke of Donghun cannot but be indulgent.  
 The slim, slim socks as they move,  
 Inspire the pity of Cao Zhi in his verse.  
 As spring befalls the emperor’s garden,  
 The fallen petals make a fitting companion.  
 As she walks the treasure house in the moon,



The fragrant greens become more lovely.

(qtd. and trans. in Ko, *Teachers* 169)

Starting with the same emphatic beginning “They say,” Shen’s poem places the description of the elegance of a gentry woman’s bound feet within the same male poetic tradition that gazes in admiration at the female body. The beauty and grace conferred to bound feet appear through the repetitions of the adjectives “slender” (l.5) and “slim” (l.7) epitomizing bound feet’s refinement and thinness. Their gracefulness is also highlighted by the lotus steps they leave behind, inscribing slight footprints on the green moss and making the “fragrant greens” more “lovely” (l.12) as they mingle with fallen petals. These elegant footsteps are complemented by a description of the sensuous move of bound feet under a woman’s skirt, whose tinkling can be heard from afar by the alert male lover. This resonates with Ye’s focus on the delicacy of bound-footed women’s movements.

Bound feet also have a mesmerizing effect on the implicit male figures. As Ko argues, Shen’s description of bound feet’s movements serves as a provocative connection between the woman and her lover (*Teachers* 169). The Duke of Donghun, Southern Qi Emperor Xiao Baojuan (*Teachers* 326n72), is used as an example of this special link that tied men to their beautiful beloved companions. Legend has it that he created “golden lotus pedestals in his garden” for his “favorite consort Pan to walk on,” as Ko explains (326n72). His indulgence in his concubine’s beauty and comfort cost him his life as he was killed by a rival (326n72). This intertextual reference intimates the power that women, and by extension footbound women, could have on men, as well as the power that gentry women saw in their bound feet. By dwelling on the weakness of Xiao Baojun who could not *but* be indulgent, Shen tells about footbound women’s provocative pride in their own feet.

Yet, the footsteps that leave a mark on green moss when the woman is alone and lost in thoughts problematize what seems to be a charming description of a footbound woman’s gait. Wang sees this opening allusion to footsteps as Shen’s response to her daughter’s poetic imagery of her desire to metaphorically inscribe her fragrant name with her jade toes. She reads Shen’s footprints on the green moss as a warning addressed to her daughter not only against the loneliness a woman may feel waiting for her husband/lover to return, but also against the “fragile and erasable” nature of both the female body and her writing in a male dominated society (*Aching* 152). The oxymoronic fallen petals in the rising spring equally alert the young poetess to

the ephemerality of a woman's talent and beauty (153). Likewise, the slim and slender bound feet covered by the silky veil of a woman's skirt despite their gracefulness are paradoxically destined to remain hidden to attract, referring yet again to the metaphorical slenderness of a woman's talent in this male-dominated world. The undefined male subject introduced in the third verse hears the woman's movement from afar *only* because of the sound that her covered feet produce under the ornamented skirt. It is not the footsteps that imprint a woman's figurative name on the ground, Shen warns her daughter, but the hidden feet under her dress. Shen's subtle nuance between footsteps and bound feet serves again to remind Ye of the nature of their patriarchal society in which a woman's beauty and bound feet predominate over her talent. Accordingly, it is through metaphors related to the common practice and language of footbinding shared by gentry women in the inner chambers that mother and daughter communicate about their position as women and writers. While Ye celebrates the beauty of the female body and expresses her hope of adding her name to the Chinese literary tradition, Shen cautions her daughter about the power and limitations that a woman will find in a patriarchal society.

It is by using terms and practices drawn from their everyday life that educated women have developed a female poetics revolving around footbinding to assert, as Wang claims, "their new womanhood and self-pride, their ambition and emotion" (*Aching* 154; see also *Ko Teachers* 166) within and away from the male poetics dominating Chinese literature. They underlined the values women attributed to handiwork, shoes, and bound feet that not only marked their higher social rank, their femininity and female identity, but also conveyed their celebratory pride—verging on the erotic at times—of their bound feet. Writing their social experiences among female kin and friends, as well as writing their bodies, these women writers thus conveyed what it meant to be a woman of an elite family or a favored courtesan in the seventeenth-century privileged Jiangsu province.

### ***Feminist Unbinding in Late Imperial China***

The economic crisis and resulting increase in taxes, as well as famines and other natural disasters weakened the Ming dynasty at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Prone to internal upheavals and foreign invasion, this weakened Ming China fell prey to Manchuria, giving rise to

the Qing dynasty in 1644 (Spence 21).<sup>23</sup> While the Manchus kept the Han Confucian bureaucratic government, and the imperial examination system, they revoked certain cultural aspects to enforce theirs. Han and Manchu attires and cultural symbols were opposed, in defense of their respective cultural identities and political allegiances (Ko, “Body as Attire” 10). Men were forced to wear the queue, a Manchu hairstyle that violated the Confucian dictate of filial piety valued by Han Chinese that said that their body, skin and hair were given by their parents and were not to be damaged (De Bary and Bloom 326).<sup>24</sup> Although Han Chinese first refused, they slowly adopted the queue, which became a symbol of Han submission to their conquerors by the end of the 1650s.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, Manchu leaders passed a series of regulations banning footbinding, even before the establishment of the Qing dynasty. In 1636, Manchu leader Hung Taiji declared: “All Han people – be they official or commoner, male or female, their clothes and adornments will have to conform to Manchu styles. Males are not allowed to fashion wide collars and sleeves; females are not allowed to comb up their hair nor bind their feet” (qtd. in Ko, “Body as Attire” 16). A second ban reiterating the above prohibitions was passed in vain in 1638. Manchu Emperor Kangxi ordained the last decree against footbinding in 1664 (22), which was yet again futile as the Ministry of Rites urged the Emperor to repeal this ban (27n34). Conversely to the implementation of the queue hairstyle, these anti-footbinding edicts did not succeed, but led to the amplification of the custom. It transformed from a “high urban fashion” to “a customary practice expected of the average woman” in the eighteenth century onward, and became a marker of Han Chinese identity (Ko, *Cinderella* 132). The edict further failed when Manchu women began to imitate footbinding. Forbidden to adopt the custom, Manchu women made narrow shoes on tiny platforms to hide their natural feet and give them a semblance of smallness (Mann 27).

Although footbinding was valued and praised in the eighteenth century, negative perceptions of this custom took shape with the shifting social and cultural values brought by the

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<sup>23</sup> See also Ebrey’s *Illustrated History* 164-85 and 220-61.

<sup>24</sup> According to the *Classic of Filiality (Xiaojing)* dating from the Warring States Period (475–221 B.C.E.), “our body, skin and hair are all received from our parents; we dare not injure them. This is the first priority in filial duty” (qtd. in De Bary and Bloom 326). Reading footbinding in this light would complicate the argument that has been repetitively made regarding footbinding as a Confucian tradition—a topic that exceeds the goal of this work.

<sup>25</sup> See Wakeman, *The Great Enterprise* (1985).

rise of the Qing dynasty.<sup>26</sup> A wave of eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century liberal thinkers denounced the practice's atrocity, as well as promoted certain social reforms, anticipating the nationalist movement of the early twentieth century. Increasingly troubled by feudal practices such as footbinding, women's chastity and strict widowhood that kept women bound, these progressive writers addressed women's restricted social status and position. Yuan Mei (1716–98), Qian Yong (1759–1844), Li Ruzhen (1763–1830), Yu Zhengxie (1775–1840) and Gong Zizhen (1792–1841) are part of this first generation of male anti-footbinding scholars. Men's opposition against footbinding remained unmatched by their female counterparts.<sup>27</sup> Only at the turn of the twentieth century did Chinese women start to voice their discontent about footbinding.

The first and second Opium Wars (1839–42; 1856–60) opposing the Chinese to the British opened Chinese ports to international trade, forcing China's economy, society and culture to adapt to the pressure and demand of this new global and capitalist market, causing many upheavals within the Chinese nation (e.g. Taiping rebellion of the 1860s)<sup>28</sup> (Liu, Karl and Ko 28). The opening of China to foreign powers also brought along Anglo-American Christian missionaries whose goal was to Christianize the Chinese population, and to modernize China by abolishing rituals that they deemed unchristian, backward and barbaric. This fostered the beginning of China's self-strengthening movement.<sup>29</sup>

The humiliating defeat of the Chinese navy in the Sino-Japanese War (1894–95) to their “historically-weaker” Japanese questioned the global position of China among rising empires (e.g. Japan, United States), and marked a turning point in its desire of modernization, further fueled at home by an increasing animosity against the Manchu-led Qing dynasty, and the overwhelming presence of foreigners in China (Liu, Karl and Ko 29).<sup>30</sup> Reforming China and its dynastic government in the aftermath of the Sino-Japanese War became a top priority for

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<sup>26</sup> Mann explains how the Manchu conquest “marked a cultural disruption that transformed gender relations” (7) and affected women's writings and voices. A more developed publishing industry furthered opportunities for women to enter public life (10).

<sup>27</sup> Mann alludes to “passionate outbursts” found in “records of young married women's lives” published during the eighteenth century, which included “reactions against footbinding and the painful end of childhood play” (63). Her lack of reference and dates make these texts impossible to retrace.

<sup>28</sup> Ono Kazuko describes the horror created among women in Jiangnan during the Taiping Rebellion, as they were forced to unbind their feet and even work in the field at times (qtd. in Mann 222). Reaction to the Taiping Rebellion led Chinese elites to reinforce conservative ideals of womanhood defined by bound feet, sequestration, domesticity—in an ultimate wave of opposition and expression of Han identity (222).

<sup>29</sup> The self-strengthening movement, i.e. the internal efforts at developing and industrializing China, was known as “modernization” in the second-half of the nineteenth century (Liu, Karl and Ko 30).

<sup>30</sup> For a more detailed historical context of the period, see Liu, Karl and Ko 28-48.

Chinese officials who launched a series of reforms from 1895 to 1898, which were opposed, however, by Empress Dowager Cixi.<sup>31</sup> Despite their failures, these reforms put in motion the revolutionary movement against the Manchu government that led to its collapse with the Revolution of 1911 and the establishment of the Republic of China.

It is during the reform movement of 1895–98 that women’s social position was again approached. Two key political and literary figures, Kang Youwei (1858–1927) and Liang Qichao (1873–1929) saw women’s conditions as linked to the modernization of the Chinese nation. They believed that women’s lack of education and rights, as well as the embrace of certain rites, such as footbinding, hindered the development of China.<sup>32</sup> The footbound woman symbolized, in their eyes, “China’s lack of military strength, lack of economic productivity and dissipation into individual erotic pleasures” (Broadwin 427). In a letter to the Empress, Kang Youwei articulates men’s growing humiliation regarding women’s footbinding: “For some time now, foreigners have taken photographs to circulate among themselves and laugh at our barbaric ways. But the most appalling and the most humiliating is the binding of our women’s feet. For that your servants feel deeply ashamed” (qtd. in Jackson, *Splendid Slippers* 146). As Lydia Liu, Rebecca Karl and Dorothy Ko allege, these new progressive male thinkers were caught in a dilemma. They saw their masculinity suffer when compared to the hypermasculine colonial and imperial military powers of the West, while they were simultaneously blamed for enslaving their women and held responsible for other subjugating patriarchal practices (6). In order to change Western visions of the Chinese nation, Chinese male reformers called for socio-cultural reforms, notably related to women’s physical health.<sup>33</sup> Women were gradually encouraged to unbind their feet,

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<sup>31</sup> Twenty-six-year-old Emperor Guangxu, during what is known as the Hundred Days’ Reform, agreed to a number of political reforms regarding aspects of the Qing government. However, the conservative Empress Dowager suppressed the Emperor’s effort, removed him from the throne and regained power over the government (Jackson, *Splendid Slippers* 146-7).

<sup>32</sup> Liang Qichao was very critical of women. He criticized their “idle” life conditions, denying any types of labor they performed in the domestic realm (embroidery, sewing, shoe making), or in agriculture. He described them as consumers of men’s productivity, and denied their literary achievements that he defined as “nothing more than several stanzas of ditties upon the beauty of the wind and moon, verses describing the flowers and the grasses, or poems lamenting the passage of spring or loss of a friend” (38). Women’s education was needed, he claimed, to remedy for China’s “national weakness” (190). Footbinding—this “form of hardship” or “means of torture” “by which [a woman’s] limbs are broken and her flesh made to fester”—crippled women and prevented their education from flourishing (202). Liang’s interest in emancipating women—starting with the liberation of their feet—was thus primarily geared to protect education and the nation, more than women (195). See his essay “On Women’s Education” (1897).

<sup>33</sup> Jin Tianhe, in his essay “The Women’s Bell” (1903), exposes the roots of women’s oppression and promotes women’s rights, the redefinition of gender roles as well as intellectual and physical education. For him, education as

and to seek an education at the intellectual and physical levels. However, Chinese reformers' steps taken toward women's emancipation remained limited, as their goal was first and foremost to develop a strong nation capable of rivaling with international powers. Women thus remained pawns in the larger nationalist agenda.<sup>34</sup>

Some educated women joined Chinese reformers' fight for the modernization of the Chinese nation. In her study *Chinese Women Writers and the Feminist Imagination, 1905–1948* Yan Haiping retraces Chinese women's feminist agenda beyond male reformers' nationalism. By contributing to modernizing the Chinese nation, women developed a feminist consciousness and worked for Chinese women's emancipation from feudal and patriarchal control beyond their male counterparts' nationalist agenda. Women started to express themselves publicly by establishing women's societies, schools, newspapers and journals, and by seeking an education abroad (Yan 5).<sup>35</sup> "They were no longer 'talented women' (*cainü*) housed in the cloistered inner chambers (*guifang*) of the gentry family with however extensive a reach over literary venues," Yan explains (13). They had become instead "'learned' and 'learning' women whose effort amounted to a revolutionary program to remake themselves and their social relations" (13). Furthermore, as Mann points out, Chinese women developed a feminism beyond the "education and values imported from the West" (222), as Chinese women had started to redefine gender roles, as well as cultural and political ideals, before the nineteenth century and beyond the *unbinding* from their physical restriction accompanying the nationalist movement. Mann urges us to reconsider the importance played by women in Chinese politics before the twentieth century and the necessity to go beyond the Western Orientalist construct of "civil society" predicated on the separation of private and public spheres, of domesticity and politics (223).

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well as a new sense of household management based on raising children, ensuring hygiene and managing its economy, law and employment were key to changing a woman's moral character (217). Associated with opium smoking, footbinding was, for him, not only upholding the separation between men and women, but also "turning China into a land of beasts and demons" and "speeding up the loss of our spirit and soul" (222).

<sup>34</sup> He-Yin Zhen (1884–1920), a radical feminist and anarchist also known as He Ban and He Zhen, was very critical of male reformers' feminist agenda: "By transplanting this system [of women's freedom adopted by Americans, Europeans and Japanese] into the lives of their wives and daughters, by prohibiting the practice of footbinding, and by enrolling them in schools to receive basic education," she said, "these men think they will be applauded by the whole world for having joined the ranks of civilized nations" ("On the Question of Women's Liberation," qtd. in Liu, Karl and Ko 60). He-Yin saw Chinese men's endeavor at improving women's condition as a self-gratifying job meant to show to other international powers how well *men* fared in modernizing the Chinese nation and in controlling their women. This type of liberation, she argued, although improving women's general condition, did not subvert the patriarchal system that had enslaved women for centuries. Instead, it promoted men's names and reputation and turned women into men's "private property" (60).

<sup>35</sup> Chinese women also looked at women's achievements abroad for inspiration (Yan 23).

The Revolution, however, provided women with a new vocabulary to talk about their bodies and lives. As Wang Zheng contends, this “new language enabled them to reexamine their own and other women’s lives,” and denounce as oppression “what was then considered normal or ‘woman’s fate’” (16). This new vocabulary, encompassing terms such as “women’s oppression,” “human rights,” “equality,” or “independence,” created new female subjectivities (Wang, *Women* 209, 210). Although it has been said that women in the early decades of the twentieth century were emulating male reformist discourses and thus upholding the patriarchal habits of objectifying and silencing women, women were “not passively made by male discourses,” as Wang further defends (*Women* 61; see also Yue 47-65). Conversely, they used this new language to challenge Confucian ethics and the position of women in society, to strengthen society and defend their human rights, as well as to propagate new feminine ideals (16).

Revolutionary women’s remaking started at the physical level with the reconfiguration of their bodies (Yan 10). Many female writers of the time portrayed the literal crippling of their bodies, notably the mutilation and pain inflicted by footbinding. In contrast to male reformers, who “enlisted such ‘crippled body as an expression of the mental or cognitive state of the ‘traditional Chinese woman,’” as Yan states (15), Chinese women focused instead on the “bodily suffering” provoked by this crippling (15). Opposing male reformers and literati’s depictions of women as intellectually weak—which continued Confucian beliefs instead of subverting them—Chinese women spoke up regarding what it meant to be a woman confined physically and socially, thus denouncing the injustices perpetuated against the female sex. By drawing on and depicting their experience of pain, women writers thus conveyed a stronger and more vivid message regarding their life condition and the urgency of their agenda.

The unbinding of their feet played a key role in their physical, intellectual, and national transfiguration at the literal and metaphorical levels. Unbinding was both a nationalist and feminist agenda: while bound feet presented China as barbaric outside of its national borders, it impaired women’s physical mobility. Both nationalist and feminist writers saw unbinding as a necessary step in modernizing China and improving Chinese women’s social role. For revolutionary women, unbinding had yet another significance, however, as it literally meant altering their body, visibly re-making their female and social identity, and changing their lives accordingly (Yan 10, 42-3). As such, footbinding became testimony of their suffering in a sexist

and imperial society, while unbinding came to denote their bodily refashioning in a time of revolution, despite the irreversibility of footbinding and the torturous unbinding process.<sup>36</sup> The new feminine ideal of a masculine and heroic woman fighting for the Chinese nation thus replaced seventeenth-century gentry women's admiration and celebration of their bound feet.<sup>37</sup>

The importance of unbinding in early feminist women's lives and works can be seen with the example of Qiu Jin (1875–1907)—an emblematic revolutionary figure. Qiu was born in a scholarly family who bound her feet at a young age, taught her sewing and embroidery as well as classical Chinese literature.<sup>38</sup> After marrying in 1903, Qiu became involved in Beijing's radical nationalist movement. Unsatisfied by her arranged marriage, Qiu left her husband and children, unbound her feet and went to Japan to further her education and take part in the growing revolutionary movement. Qiu contributed many articles about women's emancipation to revolutionary journals. She was arrested and beheaded in 1907 for participating in a conspiracy to overthrow the Qing government. Her position as a revolutionary woman fighting and dying for the good of the nation granted her the title of martyr among her peers and the next generation of nationalist advocates.

Yan emphasizes the role played by unbinding in Qiu's physical, intellectual and social transformation preceding her journey to Japan:

On 23 February 1904, during her second year as a Beijing gentry official's wife in the twenty-ninth year of her life as a woman with bound feet, Qiu Jin did the unthinkable. She unbound her feet, took off her embroidered Chinese style short coat and long skirt and donned a Western-style male jacket and trousers. The extant photograph of her in such guise shows that the jacket and trousers are a bit large, and she also complemented this new arrangement with a bow tie on her neck, a peaked cap on her hand, and a pair of leather men's shoes for her feet. (37)

This photograph portrays Qiu's radical alteration from Chinese woman to Western man in the last years of her life. By unbinding her feet and donning Western men's attire, as well as by appearing publically in her new dress, Qiu mocks the gender system governing Chinese society, breaking free from the female identity she had previously embraced, while simultaneously supporting the Westernization of China. Her rebellion against arranged marriage and feudal

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<sup>36</sup> The symbolic function conferred to footbinding and unbinding gave birth to the dichotomy of footbinding and unbinding later found in the works of Chinese American women writers.

<sup>37</sup> Wang calls "mulan heroism" a woman's ability to fight for national independence alongside men (*Women* 350).

<sup>38</sup> For a more detailed biography, see Dooling and Torgeson 39-42; Chang and Saussy 632-4; and Yan 33-68.



family system shortly followed her cross-dressing, as she abandoned her family to go to Japan to join in the fight against the Qing dynasty. Yan reads Qiu's physical alteration as an "invention," "an imaginative survival" "creating possibilities" of self-assertion in this still highly patriarchal nationalist movement (40).

Yet, Qiu's physical transformation remained limited, I would claim. Her transfiguration from woman to man—more than subverting an oppressive patriarchy—erased her femininity and female identity altogether while upholding masculinity. Likewise, her embrace of Western masculinity and her resulting rejection of her Chinese cultural background deeply contrasts with her political resistance against foreign domination in China. Moreover, the liberation provided by the unbinding of her feet can be questioned. As Yan observes, "while most of her life was fixed in gendered bondage, those unbound feet never fit her men's shoes in modern style and were always hurting when she was on the move" (45). The unbinding of her feet—although a marker of her rebellion against strict gender codes—did not free her crippled body. As Yan notes, Qiu's "foot-prints were written, with, literally, 'stains of blood'" (46), thus calling attention to the tortuous dimension of the unbinding process that failed to liberate Qiu's body, yet paradoxically made her a *true* revolutionary. Her willingness to inflict pain on her body, echoed by her torture and death at the hands of the Manchu government, proves her commitment and devotion to the nationalist, and feminist causes she defended. Indeed, the bloody refashioning of her feet carried a profound political and personal message.

Yan explains the difference between the pain of footbinding and the pain of unbinding. In the case of footbinding, "an institution of authority imposed the earlier rupture, with the intended and materialized effect of domestication and domination" (43).<sup>39</sup> Contrastingly, unbinding became for revolutionary women "an act of agency-in-the-making amidst conditions that were not made by [themselves]" (43). As such, the inflicted suffering and pain of the unbinding process became a symbol of liberation for the women who took on that task of their own free will. By thus re-imagining herself beyond strict gender codes, and literally inscribing her political and social fight on her body, Qiu put in motion a feminist consciousness carried on by many educated women in the following decades, and upheld as well by Chinese American women in the late twentieth century in their ethnic and feminist assertions. Yet, the association

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<sup>39</sup> Yan does not consider, however, women's past embrace and re-fashioning of this *imposition* in their own self-assertion as women, as seen with seventeenth-century women writers.

of unbinding as symbol of self-making in female revolutionary discourses remains limited, if not ironic, as feminist revolutionaries took part in spurring—and even forcing—their compatriots in rural areas to unbind their feet despite their will. By thus upholding this liberation rhetoric at all costs, female revolutionaries contributed indeed to the erasure of “women’s experiences, emotional needs and physical negotiations,” as Lingzhen Wang explains (42) to promote nationalist ideals and hegemonies.

The development of a feminist consciousness in concurrence with and against masculine ideals can also be seen in Qiu’s writing. While Qiu published political and feminist essays in the Chinese local press, as well as in the journal *Zhongguo nübao* (*Chinese Women’s Journal*) she created in 1906, a year before her death, most of her poems and personal writings have been posthumously collected, compiled and published by her friend Xu Zihua in a collection entitled *Qiufeng qiuyu ji* (Wang, *Women’s Poetry* 41, 210n4; see as well Dooling and Torgeson 5-6). Footbinding recurs in her work as a feudal evil to be eradicated, while unbinding is presented as a rebellious act of self-assertion against patriarchal constraints; patriarchal constraints which she continues to value over femininity as she predicates female transformation on women’s masculinization in many of her poems.

Qiu recounts her rebellion against gender norms in her poem “Preoccupation (Written While in Japan)” written in the sorrow tradition of her female predecessors who expressed their longings for the absence of husbands or lovers (Yan 34):<sup>40</sup>

A lusterless sun and a wan moon have cast heaven and earth  
in obscurity—  
Sinking without help,  
more imperiled than anyone else,  
are the women of my race.  
Searching for a remedy,  
I pawned my jewelry, left behind my children,  
And sailed across the ocean  
to this foreign land.  
Unbinding my feet, I washed away  
a thousand years of poison.  
My heart fired with excitement, I awoke  
one hundred slumbering flower-spirits.  
But pity my shagreen handkerchief—

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<sup>40</sup> See Yan 34-46 for more information on “boudoir sorrow” poems (34) written by gentry women in ancient times, and on Qiu Jin’s use of the genre.

Half stained with tears  
and half with blood.

(trans. Li-Li Ch'en; Chang and Saussy P.126.18, 643)

In this autobiographical poem, Qiu associates her flight to Japan with the unbinding of her feet through water imagery. Her unbinding that *washes away* the evil of this custom mirrors her sailing across to Japan and the leaving behind of her traditional roles as wife and mother. Footbinding, marked metaphorically as a poison, is opposed to the vastness of the ocean purifying this thousand-year-old custom. Note as well Qiu's play with the poisonous effect of footbinding, which euphemistically puts women to sleep. The unbinding thus stands, in Yan's words, for the "reshaping of the socially deformed bones of Chinese femaleness" (42) in Qiu's poem. This rebellious unbinding, leading to the persona's excitement for a brighter future, figuratively awakes women ("flower-spirits," l.13) from their slumber. This metaphorical awakening to feminist consciousness contrasts with the dark and lifeless atmosphere depicted in the first lines of the poem used to describe women's condition in Chinese society. This "lusterless" (l.1), "sinking" (l.3), and "imperiled" (l.4) life frames the persona's unbinding and awakening, as she returns to women's sad and bloody life conditions in the last lines. This framing renders her call for action more vivid and urgent. Her subversive feminist message is furthered as well by the re-appropriation of her female ancestors' "boudoir sorrows" to express her revolutionary stance (Yan 37). While inscribing her work in a larger female poetic tradition, she re-writes this tradition subversively to re-make herself away from the confining space of the inner chambers that kept her predecessors and herself bound.

Similar motifs are used in one of her untitled poems, whose *man jiang hong* form ("red fills the river;" Li, "Engendering" 2) already announces its subversive nature. Written in this masculine heroic lyric style, this poem attests Qiu's self-assertion as a "female hero" and her larger endeavor to "construct a female heroic tradition" (Li 35). Not only does she appropriate this masculine lyric pattern, but she also rewrites the masculine heroic tradition altogether by recuperating a Chinese female heroic legacy in which she inserts her rebellion against women's subjugation. Grace S. Fong speaks of Qiu's embrace of this masculine lyric mode as a type of "cross-dressing" that she uses "to reject the conventional poetic 'feminine'" (143; qtd. in Li 35). This cross-dressing imagery complements Qiu's literal cross-dressing. By re-inventing her body and her poetic work subversively, Qiu dismantles constricting gender boundaries at the literary

and social levels, and creates new possibilities for women—possibilities that remain nevertheless framed in a masculinist discourse (Li 36, 37).

While the first stanza recalls the greatness of her female ancestors obscured by China's exclusive focus on men's heroism, the second stanza quoted below appears as a metaphorical call to arms addressed to her female peers to free China and women from oppression:

When, *when* can we avenge  
Our country's humiliation?  
My peers, let us  
Exert ourselves as of today.  
Peace and security for our race is our goal.  
The prosperity we seek should exceed our own  
    showy jewelry and clothes.  
Above all, the three-inch bow-slippers  
    have been all too disabling.  
They must go.

(trans. Ch'en; Chang and Saussy P.126.35, 654)

By urging women to privilege the “peace” and “security” (l.5) of their race and nation over their personal appearance, Qiu articulates the necessity to abolish footbinding, while approaching women's emancipation in nationalist terms. Not only does Qiu urge women to reject the jewelry, clothing and three-inches slippers that metonymically and metaphorically define a woman's identity in materialistic terms, but she also encourages women to embrace an ideal masculine identity that combines *wen* and *wu*, cultural/literary achievement and martial prowess/courage (Louie 10). Qiu particularly stresses, in this poem, women's necessity to *exert* their *wu* and *avenge* their nation. She thus presents unbinding as an heroic act that women can do to *liberate their country* from its “humiliation” (l.2), an heroic act that complements her female ancestors' valiant deeds listed in the first stanza. Footbinding—this disability—simply “must go” (l.10). This conclusive line makes clear the revolutionary nature of Qiu's poetry, her position as a leader in the fight against women's oppression, and her urge to awaken her compatriots to act against an imprisoning patriarchal society. Yet, the masculinist ideals dominating her poem simultaneously undermine its more subversive message as they continue to devalue femininity and uphold masculinity.

Qiu's zealous attack against footbinding is fully formulated in *Stones of the Jingwei Bird*, her autobiographical *tanci*, a form of oral narrative composed of recited prose and sung verse,

that she wrote in 1905 in Japan (Dooling and Torgeson 41).<sup>41</sup> Chapter five—entitled “American and European influences suddenly cure old diseases; Rousing the deaf and enlightening the blind, heroes are born”—vividly critiques footbinding. This chapter describes women’s attempt at escaping their constraining everyday life to go to Japan. Women agree to unbind their feet to gain more freedom and mobility. One woman is, however, worried about the inelegance of unbound feet which gave rise to the main protagonist’s monologue and invective against footbinding. The beginning of her soliloquy is worth quoting at length:

Bound feet have always been a *disgrace*. You *torture* your own body to make lotus-petal feet. With such *painful broken* bones and *withered muscles*, how can you walk anywhere freely? Because of these feet, we become *frail* and *weak* and even *catch tuberculosis*. How can we blame this on anything but our ignorance? We’re unable to fend for ourselves since we can’t even walk. We have to lean on our maids for support, and if we walk more than a few li our feet hurt like *festering sores*. From morning until night, we sit still like statues, and if some calamity strikes, we’re like prisoners who want to escape but can’t move. The pains we suffer are self-inflicted. (qtd. in and trans. by Dooling 75; my emphasis)

This passage reflects the anti-footbinding discourse of Qiu’s time. The evils of footbinding and the literal and metaphorical mutilation caused are approached through a medical lexicon and overview of the deformed bones and diseases caused by the practice. In contrast to seventeenth-century women’s proud descriptions of their feet as integral components of their feminine identity, Qiu denounces this self-inflicted pain that she sees as going hand in hand with women’s ignorance, blind reliance on men and acceptance of their status as slave and animal. The medical lexicon dominating this paragraph is also complemented by similes reinforcing the literal and symbolic disability of bound-footed women. Compared to statues and prisoners, bound-footed women are presented as paralyzed and inert, relying on men and maids to walk and move around. Qiu thus demystifies the beauty of the custom by revealing the excruciating pain caused by binding and its disabling effect, breaking free from the taboo surrounding the physicality of footbinding sustained by seventeenth-century female poets. Qiu ultimately hopes to awaken her female compatriots from their inertia—an awakening here symbolized by the repetitive use of rhetorical questions to sensitize her female listeners to their self-inflicted imprisonment. In so

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<sup>41</sup> This work was published in full for the first time in 1962 in a late-Qing literature anthology edited by Qian Xingcun (Dooling and Torgeson 42).

doing, Qiu sets the stage for a feminist consciousness among women beyond the nationalist agenda, despite its masculinist overtone.

Qiu Jin's feminist agenda was shared by some of her female contemporaries, including her friend Xu Zihua (1873–1935), an educator sustaining the nationalist movement and women's emancipation (Grace S. Fong; Chang and Saussy 657). Her quatrain produced in response to the classical poem "Fragrant Dressing Case" states her progressive view on footbinding:

That two hooked feet are bewitching is such nonsense:  
A beautiful golden lotus left behind at each step!  
I hate so much the last ruler of the Southern Tang:  
He originated an evil to plague a thousand years.

(trans. Fong; Chang and Saussy P.127.7, 661)

While Xu refers to the stock imagery used in the Chinese poetic tradition (male and female) to portray the elegance of bound feet ("hooked feet;" "golden lotus"), the persona's sarcastic tone renders Xu's criticism against footbinding more vivid. She counterpoises the metonymic association of bound feet with beautiful golden lotuses left by a woman's footsteps to crude words such as "nonsense" (l.1), "hate" (l.3), "evil" (l.4) and "plague" (l.4), demystifying the beauty, elegance and bewitching nature of bound feet. Written in the first person, this poem is personal in tone, making Xu's criticism against footbinding both a national and a personal affair. Furthermore, the anaphoric juxtaposition—as appearing in the English translation—of the first person pronoun and the third person "He," here denoting the mythical creator of footbinding Emperor Li Yu, foregrounds the opposition between men and women and their diverging stances on footbinding, as well as women's rebellion against imposed customs and a life of submission to the male order.

Poet and calligrapher Chang Mo Qun (1884–1965) similarly depicts the constrictive regime governing women's lives in the early twentieth century, as well as the disabling effect of footbinding. Chang recalls in her autobiography (1953) the beginning of her fight against this custom when she confronted her sister's excruciating pain when her feet were bound. While her sister, affected by her community's criticism and rejection, reiterates her elders' sexist beliefs and sayings, and resigns to suffer, Chang adamantly opposes the custom: "I must eradicate this despicable custom that does so much harm; I must sweep away this preposterous idea" ("Opposition" 126). Note here the power of autobiography as a genre to retrospectively give

voice to women's thoughts and beliefs that were at the time predominantly silenced or unheard. While Chang tries to convince her mother to unbind her sister's feet by pointing to the natural feet of goddesses on Buddhist illustrations, her attempts remain vain. Although her mother shares her dream of emancipation, she refuses to act for fears of failing, her society not being ready to receive and implement these new values.

Her poem "On Natural Feet" (1893)<sup>42</sup> written at the age of nine testifies to her progressive views and rebellion, as she critically responds to the pro-footbinding sayings permeating her community:

Sympathy for natural feet has moved  
hundreds of spirits,  
Women can be seen rising from the depths  
of the bitter sea of degradation;  
Nature's ways are best after all,  
The return to dignity begins with  
emancipating the body. ("Opposition" 127-8)

Similarly to Qiu Jin, Chang uses water imagery to approach the metaphorical drowning of women's spirits and bodies, while advocating women's awakening from their degrading position. This spiritual awakening is paralleled to the physical liberation of their feet. Her invocation to Nature echoes the discourse diffused by Anglo-American missionaries and Natural Feet Societies, which she joined at a young age. Following missionaries' steps, Chang defends Western progressive ideas to emancipate the women of her society. While she convinces the women of her family to unbind their feet and stop binding young girls' feet, other people from the community do not see her action and embrace of Western liberal thoughts as liberation, but as nefarious for society. Indeed, Chang's autobiographical notes on her opposition to footbinding stress the conflicting discourses of this transitory time that oscillated between feudal and modern ideals. Chang's fight against footbinding, narrated retrospectively half a century later, did not have the same impact on society as Qiu Jin's works and ideas had. Yet, it shows the personal fights taken on by women, who opposed the custom, and often unbound their feet or refused to have their feet bound, and fought for the abolition of this rite within the limits of their family

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<sup>42</sup> This poem is reprinted in her autobiography.

and/or community. These struggles, which have remained unwritten for the most part, accompanied the larger work of this first wave of revolutionary female scholars.

Although most Chinese revolutionary women in urban centers worked toward the unbinding of women's feet to modernize the Chinese nation and emancipate women, Xue Shaohui (1855–1911), editor of the *Chinese Girls' Progress Journal* and co-founder of the Chinese Girls' School did not share the same enthusiasm. Her view on footbinding differed from both Chinese reformers and her female compatriots (Ko, *Cinderella* 38). While she neither defended nor celebrated footbinding in her writing as she found it debilitating—"no matter how dainty and pitiful the 'twin hooks' and 'lotus petals' may look, the 'curved arch' barely inches long makes for clumsy and hesitant steps" (qtd. in Ko, *Cinderella* 40)—she questioned male and female reformers' extensive focus on unbinding women's feet in their campaign for modernization. As Ko argues, for Xue, footbinding was a "trivial, private matter" (39): "Bound or unbound, a woman's foot is simply irrelevant to her mission in life and her contributions to the nation" (39).

Moreover, contrary to Qiu Jin, Xu Zihua and Chang Mo Qun who advocated the unbinding of women's feet in their feminist re-making, Xue instead drew attention to the physical limits of unbinding, questioning the symbolic significance of liberation that her compatriots attributed to this process. Her differing views can be seen in her written response to a woman who—spurred by the anti-footbinding movement—sent a letter to Xue's journal regarding her suffering caused by footbinding (Ko, *Cinderella* 38). In this response dating to 1914, Xue questions the liberatory benefits of unbinding:

Now they suggest that those who have already bound should all let their feet out at once. But no magical pill can grow a new set of bones; a severed head cannot be reattached. If you insist on bending crooked into straight by force, you create something that is neither a horse nor an ass. How would that improve customs and reform society? (*Daiyunlou yiji*, qtd. in Ko 40)

Xue emphasizes the absurdity of the unbinding laws that forced women to unbind on the spot, and the irreversibility of footbinding altogether. Her two analogies—a removed head and a hybrid species that is neither horse nor ass—visually amplify the impossibility of returning the bound foot to its natural shape. As Ko underlines, Xue's response brings another dimension to the nationalist movement by providing "a subjective view from inside the woman's body" (39); a view that took into account the limits of the body (40) and therefore, the limits of the unbinding-



as-liberation rhetoric defended by her peers. Although Xue is an isolated figure among the well-known revolutionary women of her time, her different views point to a more ambivalent vision of footbinding and unbinding in the early decades of the twentieth century than what has been recorded in upper-class women's revolutionary writings.

This ambivalence can further be attested by the different responses from women toward footbinding in the cities and in the countryside in the early twentieth century. This discrepancy caused by geographical separation, as well as class and social distinction, can be seen in some feminist works of the May Fourth Era,<sup>43</sup> as revolutionary women came into closer contact with women in rural areas. Similarly to Qiu Jin and her peers, May Fourth women in the urban centers fought against the restriction of women's physical and social movement in their society still dominated by patriarchal and feudal beliefs. The footbound woman, who was the epitome of femininity in feudal China became the "quintessential symbol of the Confucian *feiren* (inhuman) system" that new culturalists sought to abolish (Wang, *Women* 12). The rise of physically-liberated and politically-involved female students during the May Fourth Movement replaced the footbound feminine model of the past with a strong, educated and physically-healthy woman.

Women writers during and after the May Fourth Movement disclosed an increasing concern about women's condition beyond the elite milieu of gentry women in urban areas. Yet, these revolutionary unbound women encountered resistance in the countryside, as rural women were for the most part unwilling to unbind their feet and let go of these feudal customs. Writer Xie Bingying (1906–2000) shares, in her letter written to her editor Mr. Fuyuan in the 1920s, her horror at the persistence of footbinding: "I regard footbinding as a great misfortune of our sex and consider it a terrible disgrace that even today, in the era of women's emancipation, there are those of our sex who are still willing to be like the slave of the eighteenth century" (*War Diary* qtd. in Dooling and Torgeson 261). Xie's statement highlights the tensions of this transitional time between old and new customs, shedding light on a society torn between a lingering past, and a chaotic present-in-the-making that some reluctantly accepted.

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<sup>43</sup> The May Fourth Era starts with the New Culture Movement of 1915 and ends with the May Fourth Movement of 1919. The New Culture Movement corresponds to the "re-evaluation of China's entire cultural heritage" following the political turmoil of the Republic of China (Fan 119). It mostly consisted in reforming and Westernizing China (120). The May Fourth Movement, conversely, was created by Chinese public reaction to the Treaty of Versailles that concluded WWI and which failed to grant China its full independence from Japan. After the war, Japan was left in control of Shandong, at the dismay of the Chinese. A wave of student protests took place, leading to a "national movement for cultural and political rebirth" (122). See Fan, *Footbinding* 119-47.

Promoting women's education, physical strength and mobility as well as the rejection of the feudal family system that kept women imprisoned and subjugated to their male counterparts, Xie was a fervent advocate of the new cultural and social principles of the May Fourth Era. She was one of the first female soldiers to serve in the Nationalist Army, where she enlisted to flee her arranged marriage.<sup>44</sup> Animated by a rebellious personality from a young age, she worked to challenge traditional cultural and feminine ideals. In her autobiography (1940), Xie recounts her opposition to traditional values and her defiance of her mother's authority by demanding to attend a boy's school, and by constantly fighting for her education thereafter. She eventually unbound her feet when she was admitted to a girl's school, marking her progressive step in her rebellion and fashioning of identity (Dooling and Torgeson 253-4).

Her *War Diaries* (1928) precedes her autobiography in presenting her experience as a soldier in the mid-1920s and her confrontation with traditional women with bound feet, drawing attention to the gap between old and new visions of womanhood co-existing in this time of political and social refashioning. She recalls how she had been ridiculed by footbound women in the countryside when she lectured on the advantage of unbinding their feet: "One well-to-do middle-aged woman who had three-inch 'golden lotuses' laughed at me: 'Your feet are enormous. Don't you get your shoes mixed up with your husband's?'" At this, all the soldiers, captains, and peasants who were standing around burst out laughing. They laughed so hard that even a brave young girl like myself began to blush" (qtd. in Dooling and Torgeson 260). The rural woman's wit and Xie's resulting shame despite her revolutionary thoughts testify to the more traditional perspective still prevalent in rural areas.

The rural woman's attack on Xie's feet shows as well that rural women were not ready to unbind their feet, although most women in the cities had stopped practicing this custom. Although rural women agreed that without bound feet they would have more mobility, be able to escape their husband's physical abuse if not better reciprocate ("if we unbound our feet we'd be able to beat them up"), other excuses not to unbind were told such as the fact that natural feet "would waste too much cloth" (qtd. in Dooling and Torgeson 260). By foregrounding rural women's resistance to new models of femininity and womanhood, Xie ultimately portrays an

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<sup>44</sup> For a more detailed biography see Dooling and Torgeson 253-6.

ambivalent society divided between old and new,<sup>45</sup> past and present, rural and urban. Her emphasis on these conflicts gives more depths to the female revolution started by Qiu Jin a few years before. Not only does she stress the difficult battle she was leading against her own kind to emancipate Chinese women, but she also gives voice—even if critically—to rural working-class women who have remained marginalized and silenced by their illiteracy and low social position for centuries. This constitutes yet another first step in breaking free from oppressive bonds that affected Chinese women across the board.

The corpus of educated Chinese women's revolutionary work thus underscores the new language of rebellion that women developed to talk about their bodies and social conditions; a new language that contributed to transforming footbinding into the quintessential symbol of China's social ills at a time of social, cultural and political turmoil. Contrasting with seventeenth-century gentry women's and courtesans' poetic celebration of footbinding's beauty and values, these early twentieth-century works emphasize how the female culture of the inner chambers in which footbinding developed was slowly redefined. It also highlights how revolutionary women conferred symbolic meaning to the unbinding of their feet, epitomizing their physical and intellectual self-remaking in a time of national reformation and increasing female consciousness. Chinese women's literal and symbolic unbinding thus paved the way for Chinese American women's metaphorical unbinding, as well ethnic and feminist self-assertion started in the 1970s.

Chinese revolutionary women's texts, though, present the standpoint of a small group of urban upper-class women who benefitted from an education and who were exposed, thanks to their privileged milieu, to the new ideas and literatures of their time. These few works are not enough to define women's experience and vision of footbinding across space and social divide. Although many women followed the fight against footbinding throughout the twentieth century, many others refused to unbind and comply with new dictates. As Wang Zheng argues, the nationalist movement for women's rights and physical liberation was not "a universal experience for all Chinese women in that period" as "illiteracy, poverty, and physical isolation from the sources of information made the majority of Chinese women unaware of those empowering ideas"

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<sup>45</sup> For instance, some of Xie's friends from the city refused to believe that bound feet were still valued by women and found in the countryside. Comrade Xu strongly reacts: "I absolutely refuse to believe that the two-inch feet exist. Even the ancient books speak only of the three-inch golden lotus,' and since people no longer believe in ancient ways how could this custom have 'improved'?" (qtd. in Dooling and Torgeson 261).

(*Women* 365). A woman's progressive stance and chance of emancipation depended, therefore, on her class, geography, personal stance and ideology.

What is left missing is precisely the perspective of working-class women who resisted anti-footbinding edicts and laws. They left no written records as their voices were ignored and marginalized from the printing press and from the nation's focus until the proclamation of Communism. Even then, their voices remained largely unheard. Their silence was extended in the aftermath of the anti-footbinding campaign when footbinding was redefined as a national shame (see Ko, *Cinderella* 10-14). Other sources are needed, therefore, to complement upper-class women's textual records, to better depict women's ambivalent vision of footbinding and unbinding across the social divide in the early twentieth century.

### ***Unbinding: A Glance at Oral Testimonies***

Complementing textual accounts with the more recent oral testimonies of bound-footed women stresses women's multilayered and conflicting personal histories and views on footbinding throughout the twentieth century, but also across social and geographical divides. The testimonies of working-class and often-illiterate bound-footed women clarify the often-contradictory discourses about footbinding, oscillating between pride and shame, confinement and social uplifting, pain and lack thereof, that these bound-footed women themselves held. They give a female perspective still predominantly lacking in contemporary footbinding literature that has excluded the cases of women who kept their feet bound despite official bans. This illustrates the persistence of footbinding in rural areas throughout the twentieth century, the impact of the countryside environment and lifestyle on this rite that originated at court, and the meaning footbinding had for working-class women in their quest for a better social life. These testimonies thus give a more nuanced and ambivalent perspective on footbinding at different political moments beyond the privileged milieu of upper-class urban families, and complicate the metaphorical association of footbinding with oppression and unbinding with liberation that took shape with Qiu Jin's and her feminist contemporaries.

Engaging with three main corpuses of interviews, this conclusive section looks at the physical, social, and political reasons that led women to unbind or resist unbinding enforcement laws. The first corpus consists of twelve interviews conducted by Howard Levy in 1960–61 in

Taiwan.<sup>46</sup> His informants had their feet bound between 1874 and 1915.<sup>47</sup> Seven women unbound their feet between 1904 and the 1930s. The other five did not unbind for aesthetic reasons or because they were unable to do so.

The second corpus consists of the interviews of 50 bound-footed women in Shandong province conducted between 2010 and 2014 by photographer Jo Farrell as part of her project *Living History: Bound Feet Women of China*. These women had their feet bound between the early 1920s and late 1940s, highlighting the prevalence of footbinding in the countryside despite the rise of Communism, and the demise of footbinding in urban centers.<sup>48</sup> 28 women out of 50 unbound their feet.<sup>49</sup> Twelve women unbound in the late 1940s and early 1950s,<sup>50</sup> while four unbound their feet between the late 1960s and 2010.<sup>51</sup> Ten women kept their feet bound despite social pressures.

These interviews will be complemented by a larger discussion of the economic factors that contributed to the demise of footbinding. Hill Gates's 1989 and 1992 studies conducted in Fujian and Sichuan, the co-authored project regarding the change in textile production in Shaanxi led by Gates, Wang Xurui, Melissa Brown, and Laurel Bossen, as well as Bossen's study of the Yunnan area point to the influence of changing economic habits in women's binding practices.

Political changes and law enforcement affected women's binding practices with the rise of Japan in the 1900s and Mao's Communist regime in the 1940s. After the Empress Dowager Cixi in 1902 and Sun Yat-sen in 1911 banned footbinding by decree, inspectors were sent to cities and villages to verify that women had unbound their feet. Women who were unwilling to comply were fined and publically humiliated (e.g. forced to wear a cangue, flogged or exiled; Berg 68), and frequently forced to unbind their feet on the spot.<sup>52</sup> Mrs. Feng (born in 1878)<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> 5 interviewees were born and raised on the Chinese mainland, 7 in Taiwan.

<sup>47</sup> 1 in 1874, 2 in the 1880s, 4 in the 1890s, 3 in the 1900s, and 2 in the 1910s.

<sup>48</sup> 11 had their feet bound in the 1920s, 22 in the 1930s, and 14 in the 1940s. 3 did not specify the date of their footbinding.

<sup>49</sup> Farrell gives the date of unbinding for 16 informants. For the other 12, it is not clear when they unbound or even if they unbound. I have included in this count women whose feet seem unbound on the photographs accompanying their brief presentation. For another 12 informants, it is not specified and unclear if they unbound at all.

<sup>50</sup> 1 in 1945, 3 in 1947, 1 in 1948, 1 in 1951, 1 in 1952, 2 in 1953 and 1 in 1954. 2 specified that they unbound due to the new government/society but did not give a date. The other 14 who unbound their feet did not specify when.

<sup>51</sup> 1967, 1980s, 1999, 2010 respectively.

<sup>52</sup> Women interviewed in Shaanxi province mentioned that government inspectors confiscated women's bindings, forced them to unbind their feet and fined them for the offense (Bossen et al. 366). Ko also recounts how in 1928, Deng Changyan, the head of the Office of Civil Affairs in Shaanxi, drafted a "three-stage program" to develop "parliamentary democracy" on the basis of "admonition," "enforcement" and "penalty" in imitation of Sun Yat-

vividly remembers this ban passed by the Qing empire and the effect it had on her decision to unbind: “Those who refused would have both legs cut off. I therefore let them out, but later there was further foot growth. If I had kept binding them, I could today wear three-inch embroidered shoes without difficulty” (Levy 275). Her nostalgia regarding her no-longer-bound feet evoke the values defended by educated women in the seventeenth century.

Other of Levy’s informants evoke the influence of the Japanese occupation on the demise of footbinding in Taiwan, as they describe the orders received and the threats professed by the Japanese. In 1915, after twenty years of occupation, the Japanese forbade footbinding by official decree in Taiwan, leading 700,000 women to unbind their feet the same year and many more as the years unfolded and sentiments toward footbinding shifted (Levy 279). Mrs. Shi’s testimony sums up the explanation given by Taiwanese informants:

The Japanese felt that both footbinding and pigtailed were unsanitary and that the foot’s freedom of movement was restricted. Therefore, soon after they occupied Taiwan, though I forget which year it was, they sent down a strict order that feet be let out and pigtailed cut off. The Japanese had a spirit for accomplishing anything they wanted. If someone didn’t let her feet out, they would force her feet in a liquid medicine. Therefore, though people felt it a pity to give up bound feet, they had to let them out. (Levy 276)

It is not clear what Mrs. Shi (born in 1894)<sup>54</sup> means by immersing women’s feet in a “liquid medicine.” Levy suggests that it could designate a “concoction for causing the bones to stretch out” (276). What her testimony emphasizes, however, is Japanese soldiers’ strategy of intimidation. Most women complied with Japanese orders for fear of being punished or tortured.

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sen’s edict (Ko, *Cinderella* 64). Footbinding was highly scrutinized under this new program. Tianzu hui (Natural Feet Societies) were first established to educate the population in the cities and villages, and boys at schools had to wear a banner indicating their refusal to marry bound-footed women (Ko 64). Under the enforcement stage, inspectors were sent to households to force women to unbind. Binding cloths were confiscated and brought to the ministry office. The women in their thirties or younger who refused to unbind were fined and saw their parents arrested (64). With the thousands of binding cloths that reached his office, Deng displayed women’s bodily cloths as spectacle. Similar inspection and law enforcement programs were observed in other provinces in the 1930s. Ko mentions how in Jiangxi province “a mountain of confiscated shoelaces was erected, with a tombstone, as public monument” (64). An informant born in 1927 in Yunnan interviewed by Bossen in 1996 equally recalls: “when we went to market, on that short section of road as you entered the city you could see that at the Great West Gate Bridge there were people who burned foot bindings. Those people were called the ‘Long Arm Team’” (*Chinese Women* 51).

<sup>53</sup> Mrs. Feng, from Hunan province, was 82 and residing in Taiwan when interviewed. Her feet were bound at the age of 3. She unbound them at 26 following the anti-footbinding edict passed in 1902 (Levy 275). All of Levy’s informants’ names have been transposed to pinyin.

<sup>54</sup> Mrs. Shi was 71 and still binding when interviewed. Her feet were bound when she was 4 or 5. Although she recounts how women were forced to unbind their feet, she does not specify why she kept her feet bound (276).

Yet, she also dwells on women's reluctance to unbind their feet, as footbinding was still considered the beauty norm in rural areas.<sup>55</sup>

Mrs. Wu Han (born in 1878)<sup>56</sup> evokes how Japanese soldiers beat her because she did not want to unbind her feet: "The Japanese strongly called on all women to let out their feet. ... I didn't want to let out my feet. The Japanese beat me so severely with a stick that finally I had no other recourse. ... But the Japanese beat me very painfully, so I had to ..." (Levy 277). Mrs. Wu Han was reluctant to unbind her feet, as "no one regarded such feet [unbound feet] as good-looking" (277). Despite the punishment received, she rebound her feet at a later stage when the Japanese soldiers stopped coming to her village. Nevertheless, she refused to go out fearing that the Japanese might discover her trespass and beat her again, pointing to the traumatizing effect of Japanese violence. This shows a contrasting narrative to the unbinding as symbol of women's re-making advanced by Yan Haiping.

Anti-footbinding decrees and humiliation practices did not stop all women from binding their feet, neither after the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1912, nor after the Communist proclamation of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Different responses were found in urban and rural areas. Urban women followed new ideals and fashions due to the circulation of progressive ideas and the development of schools for natural-footed women, spurring many women to unbind. Women in isolated and conservative rural villages were contrastingly more reluctant to unbind. As a result, the anti-footbinding movement developed more quickly in urban centers than in remote areas. Mrs. Tong (born in 1895)<sup>57</sup> recalls this dichotomy: "City people were the first to respond to this reform. Country people were comparatively bigoted, but they too gradually followed the example set in the cities" (Levy 275). Mrs. Tong underlines, however, the impact of mass movement on the decline of footbinding in urban *and* rural areas: since everyone was unbinding their feet, so did she, and so did many women.

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<sup>55</sup> Mrs. Ding, born in 1885 and 71 at the time of the interview recalls how women in her village were subjected to the humiliation of unbinding their feet publicly (Levy 276). She started binding her feet at the age of 5 and unbound at 30 after the Japanese prohibited footbinding.

<sup>56</sup> Mrs. Wu Han was interviewed in 1961 at the age of 83. Her feet were bound when she was 4 and was still binding when interviewed, her feet measuring about three and a half inches long (6n324). Three photographs of her naked feet are provided (256-7).

<sup>57</sup> Mrs. Tong, from Hubei, was 65 when interviewed. She bound her feet at 7 or 8 and unbound in her early twenties (23 or 24). Her unbound feet were measuring approximately 6 inches (Levy 6n324).

This transitory moment between old and new captured in Mrs. Tong's testimony is amplified by Mrs. Chen Qian (born in 1890)<sup>58</sup> who remembers with nostalgia how she unbound her feet in 1910 to comply with her husband's progressive ideas: "I was nineteen when I married and let out my feet the following year because my husband wanted me to. He said that it was easier to walk without bound feet. I was stout, and he saw how awkward it was for me to walk. He was from Taitung city and understood women ... I have now had 'big' feet for more than fifty years, and am really embarrassed by this" (277). Mrs. Chen Qian's testimony accentuates the tension of this transitory historical period. While she presents her husband as a progressive city man, she stresses her conservatism and defends her bound feet that were once praised for their small size and beauty. Her embarrassment at having had "big feet" since then stresses the values that she still attributed to bound feet in the late 1960s. Although urban and upper-class women condemned footbinding, many working-class women continued to see footbinding as an integral part of their identity as women, recalling the values attributed to this custom by seventeenth-century writers.

Mrs. Chen Shichou (born in 1892)<sup>59</sup> recollects her resistance to official bans and refusal to unbind her feet. She was not subjected to Japanese feet inspection, as her husband was working in a Japanese organization, and as her feet "had been bound too long and were too small" (Levy 278). However, she further remarks that she would not have unbound her feet anyway, "for [she] spent many years in getting [her] feet bound small" (278). Furthermore, "Feet let out were ugly!" she observes, and "also very hard to walk on ... Once let out, they could not grow like natural feet nor remain like small feet. And that would be repulsive" (Levy 278). By opposing the beauty of small feet to the deformity of unbound feet, she demystifies the liberatory function of the unbinding process, and highlights the importance of aestheticism in her choice of keeping her feet bound despite official decrees.

Although governmental bans led many women to unbind their feet in urban and rural areas despite individual resistance, the abolition of footbinding was not exclusively caused by the shifting political environment and anti-footbinding campaign, as Gates contends. The surveys

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<sup>58</sup> Mrs. Chen Qian was 71 when interviewed. Her feet were bound when she was 4. They were once about 4 inches long (Levy 6n325), but became bigger as she unbound them at 20 years old. She is one of the rare informants who contended that she never suffered from footbinding.

<sup>59</sup> Although born in Taiwan, Mrs. Chen Shichou was from Fujianese ancestry. She started binding her feet at 9 years old and refused to unbind for aesthetic and practical reasons. Although Levy was not able to measure her feet, he stipulates that they were no longer than 4 inches (6n324).



she conducted in Fujian and Sichuan between 1989 and 1992 show that many women in rural areas never saw anti-footbinding propaganda, let alone foot inspectors (“Footbinding and Homespinning” 182). In Fujian, only a handful of women participating in the survey had heard about the governmental ban of footbinding, but this knowledge seemed not to have conditioned them to unbind (“Footloose” 137).<sup>60</sup> Gates concludes that other economic factors might have encouraged women in the countryside to unbind, which also complicates the association of unbinding with feminist revolutionary liberation. In this sense, unbinding becomes a more practical endeavor. Indeed, this substantial change in footbinding practices coincides with different labor requirements for the female population in the 1930s onward. Gates contends that the decline of home textile production and the need of women in factories and fields to do heavier manual labor urged many to unbind and slowly led to the demise of footbinding (“Footloose” 144).

Similar data was collected in Shaanxi province in the early twenty-first century as presented in Bossen, Wang, Brown and Gates’s co-authored project on the effect of changing textile production on rural women’s footbinding practices. This collaborative work discloses how women’s textile production and handiwork were displaced by industrial production, causing footbinding to decline as women had to perform more strenuous field work or were required in industrial factories (350).<sup>61</sup> Bossen et al. argue that this radical decline of footbinding in the 1930s corresponds to the “profound transformation of the value and marketability of women’s handcraft work” “in the face of the massive influx of industrial goods hauled by trains and trucks into hinterland provinces” (373).

In Yunnan, women seemed well aware of anti-footbinding decrees, however. As Bossen explains: “in Lu Village, however, police enforcement clearly hastened the end of footbinding, even though ideological movements evidently made little impression upon the women who experienced it” (*Chinese Women* 44). Out of 15 informants, 13 explained that they stopped

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<sup>60</sup> Gates’s survey of footbinding in Sichuan indicates that a total of 15 percent out of 4987 women interviewed had permanently bound feet in the 1990s (see “Footbinding and Homespinning”). Her other survey conducted in Fujian shows that out of 427 informants, 80 women had their feet bound but only 4 were still binding when interviewed. Footbinding was more widely practiced among the informants’ mothers. Out of 402 mothers, 317 had their feet bound, among which 193 never unbound, and 124 let their feet out (see “Footloose”).

<sup>61</sup> In the Zhouzhi county, while all women born between 1917 and 1921 had their feet bound, only 30 percent born between 1937 and 1941 and less than 5 percent born in the late 1940s practiced footbinding (365). In LuoChan county, whereas women born between 1922 and 1931 had their feet bound, only 2 or 3 percent had their feet bound when born in the aftermath of WWII (1947–51) (Bossen et. al 372).

footbinding because “society opposed it” (56).<sup>62</sup> The vast majority concurred on the impact of a larger social force on their unbinding, although they did not specify the role played by anti-footbinding enforcements in their decisions to unbind (56). Four also mentioned that they unbound because of pain, and three indicated that their labor was required to help their family (56).

Bossen agrees with Gates, however, as she claims that official decrees were not enough to change the mentality of the people in rural areas. She similarly mentions the influence of changing economic factors in the 1930s: “Changes in the household economy, driven by the industrial and transport revolutions, as well as trade and more open markets, made the bound foot an impediment to economic success—which it had not been before” (*Chinese Women* 21). She calls attention to the replacement of the hand shuttle by the iron foot-powered loom as one example of technological factors which played a role in the abandonment of the practice in many remote areas, as handiwork was slowly replaced by an increase in foot-operated work (46).

Farrell’s *Living History* remains more vague on women’s unbinding practices under Communism in the mid-twentieth century, which principally stems from the photographic focus of her project. Condensed to a few sentences, each informant’s testimony is synthesized to its extreme, giving limited information about their personal lives. Out of her 50 informants, one (Zhang Yue Ying) unbound her feet after entering local school in 1945 because she was required to (3). Another informant (Yang Zi Ju) unbound her feet in 1951 after she married because it was inconvenient for walking (7). Conversely, five informants identify Communism or the change in society as the cause of their unbinding in the early years of the People’s Republic. Ma Zhen É (born in 1918) explains that she unbound her feet in 1948 at 30 years old “as women would be fined if they still had their feet bound—their cotton bindings would be hung out for everyone to see to humiliate and shame them” (26). Li Shi (born in 1920) also unbound her feet due to government pressure and changing mentality: “everyone in the village said that it was time to take the bindings off, or the government will punish you” (33).<sup>63</sup> Fu Xiu Shang (born in 1932) similarly recounts how she unbound her feet “because the old tradition was ‘broken,’ the new

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<sup>62</sup> Bossen’s data collected in Yunnan shows a similar decline in footbinding in the 1930s. Out of 54 informants, 75 percent of the ones born between 1916 and 1920 had their feet bound, while none of the ones born between 1936 and 1940 ever practiced footbinding (*Chinese Women* 50). Most of the informants had their feet temporarily bound, as most of them unbound them within a few years of their first binding.

<sup>63</sup> She did not specify when she unbound her feet.

society of China was set up so everyone removed the bindings” (44). Likewise, Wang Xiu Ying (born in 1937) unbound her feet in 1953 because “people’s minds had changed” and because she was required to work in the fields (13), thus highlighting the combined political and economic reasons behind her decision to unbind.<sup>64</sup>

In contrast, ten informants never unbound their feet despite governmental pressures. While eight did not specify why they kept their feet bound, two evoke the strategies implemented to fool officials and resist the law. Cao Mei Ying (born in 1922) recalls her mother’s resistance, as she forbade her to remove her bindings when officials came to their village in the 1940s. Cao unbound her feet in 1999 instead for reasons unknown (Farrell 49). Yang Jing É similarly resisted law enforcement “due to family pressure:” she kept “her feet disguised from the government by wearing large shoes stuffed with socks” (Farrell 10). Their resistance seems, however, to have been first and foremost their mothers’.

Another crucial aspect beyond political and economic factors drove women to unbind their feet: the excruciating pain caused by footbinding. Some testimonies, complementing autobiographical works published by women in the May Fourth era and beyond, disclose women’s rebellion from a young age against the pain inflicted on their bodies by their mothers. This is the case of school principal and physical education teacher Lu Lihua (1900–1997),<sup>65</sup> whose oral account is transcribed in Zhang Weng’s study *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment* (1999). Lu systematically unbound her feet, until her mother gave up rebinding them altogether: “I cut the wrapping cloth off at night. I usually obeyed my parents, but not with this footbinding. I was afraid of the pain and did not like bound feet. With bound feet, a girl could be distinguished as a girl. I wanted to be the same as boys—without distinction” (146). Lu refuses footbinding not just in fear of the pain, but also in the hope of dismantling confining gender boundaries. She vividly recounts her daily fight against her mother—“You wrap them up, but I

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<sup>64</sup> Bound- and unbound-footed women’s disability had to be accommodated by the Communist regime at a larger scale. Beverly Jackson refers to one strategy adopted by the Party in the distribution of the workforce: “One of their solutions was to assign different tasks to the differently able workers. In mobilizing women for spring planting and cultivation, for instance, ‘Large Feet’ were given the harder work of agricultural production, including land clearance. ‘Small Feet,’ which included young boys and old men, as well as women with bound feet, would be charged with simpler chores such as pulling weeds or collecting dung” (*Splendid Slippers* 157).

<sup>65</sup> Lu Lihua was in her 90s when interviewed (in 1993, 1994 and 1995). She came from Qingpu, a village in the Jiangsu area. Her feet were bound at the age of 6 but she rebelled shortly after.

will cut it off anyway!” (146)—and against the permeating belief that crippling a woman’s feet would give her a better future.

This account resonates with the testimony of a sixty-two-year-old Sichuanese woman interviewed by Gates. This anonymous informant emphasizes how she won her parents’ heart and unloosened her feet because of pain:

When I was four or five, Mother bound my feet so I wouldn’t have to do outdoor work, which was very heavy in our area—carrying stones for pathways, carrying firewood to market, cutting pig food in the mountains. I cried a lot, but Mother said I would have a better marriage, so she was going to do it even if I cried. But one day, I walked with Mother to the market [it was about 5km.—H.G.] and I cried all the way from the pain. When I came home, Father felt sorry for me. He said, ‘If we unbind you, you’ll have to cut weeds for the pig.’ I said I didn’t care, I would feed the pigs. I was really happy to have my feet let out of the bindings. (“Footbinding and Handspinning” 117)

Binding a daughter’s feet was partially meant to secure a good marriage, and to protect her from heavy manual labor or indentured servitude. However, as this testimony suggests, the pain was so unbearable that this six-year-old girl chose hard labor over beauty, social standing and a good marriage. For this girl, as for Lu Lihua, the successful unbinding was the result of her young age and the few months of binding that had not yet considerably deformed her feet. The testimony of this Sichuanese informant calls attention as well to the involvement of progressive fathers in the unbinding of their daughter’s feet.<sup>66</sup>

In contrast, before the reform era leading to the Revolution of 1911, girls were rarely in a position to resist the pain of footbinding. Some of Levy’s informants, mostly born between the 1870s and 90s often submitted for fear of their parents’ reprisal. Yang Mian (born in 1881)<sup>67</sup> not only stresses the pain felt, but also her fears to resist her mother’s order: “My foot felt very painful at the start. The heel of my foot became odoriferous and deteriorated. Cotton and wine were used to cure it. Because of the pain in the foot, my whole body became emaciated. My face

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<sup>66</sup> One of Bossen’s informants similarly underlines her father’s modernity: “One day, [my mother] decided to change me by binding my feet. I cried and said, ‘I hurt so much I’ll die! Today it’s no longer good to bind feet, but you still want to bind my feet.’ Then I just sat there and did not do any work. When my father came home I said, ‘Mother is binding my feet!’ My father said to her, ‘For this generation of young wives now, it is no good to bind feet ... it is not allowed.’ Then, she no longer bound them” (*Chinese Women* 55). This example also echoes the differing ideals defended by husbands and wives, as seen with the case of Mrs. Chen Qian.

<sup>67</sup> Yang Mian was 80 when interviewed. She bound her feet at 9, unbound at 36 because of the Japanese decree and rebound later (Levy 278). Her feet were over five inches at the time of the interview (278, 3n324). Photographs of her feet are also provided. She was reluctant at first to have her naked feet photographed because of the pain felt when her feet were unshod. She was also embarrassed to unbind her feet in front of the interviewer (3n324).

changed color and I couldn't sleep at night, frightening my mother. I did not dare stealthily remove the binding cloth because of the pain, for I would have been beaten" (Levy 246). Instead, Yang Mian numbed her feet by tapping them against the bed to divert herself from the pain (265). Only a few of Levy's interviewees tried to fool their mothers by unbinding at night. Wu Han, for example, recalls how she did not dare to cry in front of her stepmother, but would "stealthily remov[e] the binding" when alone. However, she was beaten as soon as the stepmother discovered it (Levy 250). Violence reaches another level for Farrell's informant Su Xi Rong who recalls how her grandmother would punish her—even in the 1940s—for trying to unbind her feet "by having a slice of flesh cut off her toes" (20). Yang's, Chen's and Su's respective resistance was ultimately suppressed as they were violently forced to submit.

While some resisted footbinding from a young age due to the excruciating pain, other women who survived the pain of footbinding were unable to unbind their feet at a later stage because of their numerous years of binding. This contrast revises the clear-cut division between footbinding and unbinding, and complicates the easy association of unbinding with liberation. Out of the six informants who were still binding their feet when interviewed by Levy, five pointed to their inability to walk without bandages. Mrs. Ding describes the tortuous unbinding process: "letting out the feet was more painful than having bound feet. It had to be done very slowly, for otherwise the foot felt so painful that one couldn't walk. When the foot was let out, the area between the toes and the heel of the foot bled easily" (Levy 276-7).<sup>68</sup> Undoing the bandages progressively was necessary to prevent the blood from rushing in the feet after years of intense compression. Keeping loose bandages even after the foot was let out was also a common practice to prevent bleeding and facilitate the walking process.

Unbinding, in addition to being a complicated and tortuous process, was at times impossible. Three of the six footbound women interviewed by Levy were unable to unbind altogether. Mrs. Yang Mian had to re-bind her feet in order to walk, despite her discontent at having to do so: "When the Japanese issued their decree, I was very pleased. I thought that it would be convenient to let them out and that I would no longer have to make shoes. My husband was head of the village and, as such, considered a model. Everyone therefore let out their feet

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<sup>68</sup> However, Mrs. Ding specified that for her, "walking was about the same ... before and after [she] let out [her] feet" (Levy 277).

[after I did]. But I found that I was unable to walk and therefore later had to rebind” (Levy 278). Mrs. Guo Wu Que (born in 1886)<sup>69</sup> conveys her similar unbinding ordeal and failure:

Forty years ago the Japanese ordered bound feet to be let out and strictly carried the order in effect [in Taiwan]. I was then in my thirties and was glad to let them out, because bound feet were very inconvenient. For example, I could not walk in the street in the rain. Besides, since my husband was an important local official, I had to form a model. But my feet were too small, and bled between the toes when being let out. I could not walk because of the pain. Local officials reported this to the police chief and the mayor. After examination, they permitted me not to let my feet out; that is why I still have bound feet today. (Levy 277)

The pain, the bleeding of the toes and the resulting disability make unbinding more crippling than footbinding itself.<sup>70</sup>

No matter whether informants chose to unbind or to keep their feet bound—voluntarily or involuntarily—what these testimonies have in common is the ordeal that unbinding represented for many of them after a certain age. These narratives stress the disabling aspects of unbound feet: the inability to walk without the support of bandages, the excruciating pain felt when trying to inverse the custom, or even the impossibility of unbinding or correcting one’s feet after years of binding. Revising the liberatory symbolism of the unbinding process, these conflicting textual and oral testimonies blur the lines between bound and unbound feet altogether. This blurring ultimately points to Chinese women’s multiple subjective experiences and visions of footbinding and unbinding; experiences that refuse generalization.

Indeed, these unbinding narratives complicate our contemporary understanding of this process, as well as its symbolism of liberation. Although unbinding marked revolutionary women’s first steps toward their own re-making and emancipation, a discrepancy can be noted regarding the literal unbinding process and its metaphorical significance. This discrepancy is crucial to the rethinking of the footbinding/unbinding dichotomy that Unbound Feet and Judy Yung have symbolically used to talk about Chinese American women’s experience and that Bonnie Khaw-Posthuma and Susie Lan Cassel have read at the heart of Chinese American

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<sup>69</sup> Mrs. Guo, from Fujian province, was 75 when interviewed and lived in Taiwan. She bound her feet at the age of 8 and never stopped binding. Her feet were the smallest of Levy’s informants, around three and a half inches in length (6n324). Photographs of her feet are also provided (268-9). She refused to expose her naked feet to the camera and therefore kept a cotton wadding on (3n324).

<sup>70</sup> Levy’s oldest informant, Mrs. Liang Shi (born in 1879) also tried to unbind around the age of 40, but was unable to walk and so rebound (278). She started binding her feet at 3 and was still binding when interviewed. Levy describes her feet as being over 5 inches long (6n325).

women's progressive development in the United States in Chinese American literature. A more critical approach to footbinding and unbinding is therefore needed to give sense to the ambivalent function of these tropes in the diasporic context—tropes that reflect the quite ambivalent subjective discourses of footbinding already held by Chinese women over the centuries, verging between praises and condemnations, female self-definition and patriarchal imposition, embrace and interpellation, emancipatory remaking and failed liberation.

## CHAPTER 4 - NEGOTIATING THE DOUBLE BINDS IN *THE WOMAN WARRIOR*, AND *OF FLESH AND SPIRIT*

Chinese women's ambivalent discourses of footbinding held over the centuries are echoed in the works of Chinese American women writers who turned to footbinding in the 1970s and 1980s to approach their conflicting cultural identities and write the Chinese American experience from a matrilineal perspective. Second-wave feminists' new attention to footbinding in the mid-1970s became inspirational for many Chinese American writers, aspiring, on the one hand to dismantling systems of gender oppression and discrimination at home and abroad, as well as to recuperating Chinese women and Chinese female immigrants' history obscured by Asian American cultural nationalists' masculinist stance. Indeed, in response to this dominant masculinist culture—notably defended by the editors of *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (1974) Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada and Shawn Wong—many Chinese American women writers, following Jade Snow Wong's lead with the publication of her avant-gardist autobiographical novel *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1945), took the pen to write Chinese American women's experiences across generations, giving rise to a proliferation of writing focusing on mother-daughter conflicts.

Not only subverting the footbinding and unbinding binary, but also often complicating Orientalist stereotypes of Chinese barbarism and American success, texts dealing with mother/grandmother-daughter relationships depict a custom of footbinding whose ambivalence and ambiguity connect with Chinese (American)<sup>1</sup> protagonists' often ambivalent negotiation of their cross-cultural identities. Footbinding—this rite that tied Chinese women together for generations—holds particular significance as a trope in Chinese (American) women's journey to self-assertion as women of Chinese descent in the United States, and in their recuperation of cultural heritage. In the exploration of their complex matrilineage through footbinding imagery, Chinese American authors have returned to the historical meaning and symbolism footbinding had had for its practitioners, using its destructive and connective power to accentuate and breach the generational and cultural gaps separating Chinese (American) protagonists from their female

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<sup>1</sup> I use “Chinese (American)” to refer to the first and subsequent generations of Chinese immigrant writers and protagonists in the United States.



ancestors. Indeed, wavering between mutilation and eroticism, repulsion and appeal, patriarchal imposition and female culture, and by extension between silence and voice, footbinding resonates with Chinese (American) heroines' double binds opposing American or Western values (such as individualism) to their Chinese heritage (presented as collectivity, family, etc.).

These depictions of footbinding do not escape the Orientalist framework of female exoticism and eroticism dominating footbinding representations in the West. Yet, this footbinding trope equally holds subversive power. Chinese (American) writers' portrayals of their heroines' search for identity at the transnational level inserts itself in an ambivalent disorienting Orientalism that simultaneously Orientalizes and de-Orientalizes Chinese female bodies, culture and relationships with their female ancestors. This ambivalent Orientalism is complemented by the equally ambivalent function of the transnational in these mother-daughter narratives. Silvia Schultersmandl defines *transnationalism* in her analysis of transnational matrilineage in Asian American literature as referring to "the distance and sense of disconnectedness the daughter protagonists feel as they investigate their matrilineage ... from within an American perspective" as well as to "the gaps and breaks in the line of cultural inheritance and the sense of disconnectedness from this heritage that the daughters feel" (*Transnational* 10). Building on her definition, I here refer to the *transnational* relationship between heroines and ancestors as representing Chinese (American) protagonists' sense of disconnectedness from their cultural legacy, but also their simultaneous and inevitable interconnectedness with their ancestral culture. Indeed, footbinding in Chinese American literature dealing with mother/daughter relationships often mirrors this simultaneous separation and connection. Conflicting images of footbinding—wavering from stereotypes of subjugation and backwardness to powerful depictions of female agency—document heroines' endeavors to make sense of their Chinese heritage, and to adapt it to their American context. Footbinding, within this Orientalist framework, thus speaks of heroines' conflicting negotiation of identity between self and other, individuality and collectivity, ethnic rejection and assimilation at the thresholds of both China and the United States.

Maxine Hong Kingston's pioneer fictional memoirs *The Woman Warrior* (1975), appearing as a collection of linked stories, and Wang Ping's poetry collection *Of Flesh and Spirit* (1999) offer cases in point of Chinese American literary texts that simultaneously deploy and subvert Orientalist depictions of footbinding, while imagining a new journey to self-realization

for Chinese (American) women through intergenerational and cultural bindings. Although Kingston's and Wang's heroines do not have bound feet, their bodies and voices figure as negatively bound to and by their Chinese legacy. Their tentative unbinding from their ancestors' lives gives way, however, to renewed connections with their Chinese lineage. The assimilationist rhetoric unbinding *a priori* puts forth is deconstructed as protagonists' self-fulfillment depends more on the resolution of their contradictory feelings toward their Chinese heritage than on their rejection of ethnic culture. By remembering their female forbearers' collective history, these protagonists ultimately reunite with their Chinese ancestors symbolically, and blur the conflicting binaries of past and present, East and West, individuality and collectivity, disconnection and interconnection, footbinding and unbinding that infuse their identity struggles. The ambivalent meaning both authors bestow to footbinding and unbinding thus proposes female connections across temporal, cultural and geographical borders, and highlights the importance of cultural heritage in shaping Chinese (American) women's cross-cultural identity in the United States.

By putting Maxine Hong Kingston's 1970s pioneering work in conversation with Wang Ping's late 1990s poetry collection, this chapter not only sheds light on the early development of footbinding as a subversive trope in Chinese American women writings, but also foregrounds its evolution, paying particular attention to the influence of the *Woman Warrior* on Wang's work. This conversation will also highlight the unparalleled transgressive nature of Kingston's work. Although Wang offers a subversive reading of footbinding in her poems, her transgression remains limited by the overwhelming misogyny framing the collection that continues to objectify and eroticize Chinese women's bodies at the detriment of women's self-realization and resistance, thus pointing to Wang's limitation in deconstructing systems of oppression despite her alternative modes of story-telling.

### **The Woman Warrior: *Between China Dolls and Dragon Ladies***

Allusions to footbinding permeate Maxine Hong Kingston's most acclaimed work *The Woman Warrior*,<sup>2</sup> especially Maxine's mother's talk-stories and far tales of China. It is through images

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<sup>2</sup> *The Woman Warrior* won the National Book Award in 1976 and the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award in 1978. Published by Vintage International, her fictional memoirs reached a broad audience at the national and international scales.

and tales of female pain that she is first introduced to her Chinese heritage. Footbinding is presented in the opening chapter “No Name Woman” not only as a debilitating custom of the past that kept Chinese women entrapped in an oppressive patriarchal society, but also as a literary device foregrounding the cultural and generational distance separating Maxine from her Chinese female ancestors. Footbinding is introduced in a comparison between the pain Maxine had to endure when her mother tied her hair and the excruciating pain her aunts might have felt when having their feet bound: “It especially hurt at the temples, but my mother said we were lucky we didn’t have to have our feet bound when we were seven. Sisters used to sit on their beds and cry together, she said, as their mothers or their slaves removed the bandages for a few minutes each night and let the blood gush back into their veins” (9). Yet, as the mother tells her daughter about her unnamed aunt to warn Maxine of the danger of sex now that she is menstruating, footbinding becomes another story of the past meant to *silence* her complaint at having to embrace mild cultural rituals. Acting as a larger metaphor for Chinese women’s condition in China, footbinding is counterpoised from the start to the protagonist’s contrasting freedom and voice. Indeed, the description of the excruciating pain caused by footbinding reifies cultural differences and sustains the equation of footbinding with Chinese oppression and unbinding with American freedom, distinguishing Maxine from her ancestors.

In addition to representing the constricting Chinese norms that Maxine escaped by being raised in America, footbinding stands metonymically for the aunt’s mutilation by her community, and serves to lay bare the disabling effect of Chinese culture on Maxine’s self-development as a Chinese American woman. Footbinding can be metaphorically linked to the aunt’s banished and decomposing body that Sean Mattio depicts as being the “first body of trauma” in Kingston’s narration (137). For Mattio, this body of trauma signifies “cultural anxiety, communal repression and the effects of dominant patriarchal narrative” that the “family must contain either through secrecy or denial, silence or repression” (137).<sup>3</sup> In the light of Mattio’s claim, the unnamed aunt’s body returning as a hungry ghost after she commits suicide—a “weeping ghost, wet hair hanging and skin bloated, wait[ing] silently by the water to pull down a substitute” (16)—can be seen as the embodiment of both the gendered *repressed* of Chinese misogyny and Maxine’s closeted yet haunting Chinese ancestry asking to come out.

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<sup>3</sup> Maxine’s aunt’s victimization is echoed in Brave Orchid’s talk-story about the crazy lady of her village who is unable to escape the villagers’ ostracization because of her bound feet. See Khaw-Posthuma, *Unbinding* 57-60.

Following her aunt's lead, Maxine ultimately transgresses her mother's command at keeping her aunt's story secret, lifts the taboo, and imagines the missing parts of the story. Opposing both physical mutilation and oppressive silence, Maxine's retelling epitomizes her endeavor at metaphorically *unbinding* her ancestors' life stories from silence and oblivion. Yet, her talk-stories have a double function. As Maxine says, "unless [my aunt's] life branches into mine, she gives me no ancestral help" (8). While the power of the imagination allows her to fill in the gaps left by her mother's silence and elliptical narratives, it also enables her to insert herself in this matrilineal legacy and explore her conflicting self-identity at the junction of her mother's conflicting silence and tales.<sup>4</sup>

Maxine's effort at recovering and liberating her female ancestors' *mutilated* corporealities can also be seen in the swordswomen's episode concluding her retelling of Fa Mulan. Maxine, in the role of Fa Mulan, after slashing the hated baron across the face and beheading the bandits who robbed her father's village, frees the bound-footed women who were imprisoned in a locked room:

When I broke down the door, I found women, cowering, whimpering women. I heard shrill insect noises and scurrying. They blinked weakly at me like pheasants that have been raised in the dark for soft meat. The servants who walked the ladies had abandoned them, and they could not escape on their little bound feet. Some crawled away from me, using their elbows to pull themselves along. These women would not be good for anything. I called the villagers to come identify any daughters they wanted to take home, but no one claimed any. I gave each woman a bagful of rice, which they sat on. They rolled the bags to the road. They wandered away like ghosts. (44)

Described as "cowering," "whimpering," shrilling and scurrying like insects, blinking like pheasants, and crawling away with the help of their elbows, the captive bound-footed women are metaphorically transformed into animals. Footbinding magnifies the scar left on their bodies by an oppressive patriarchal and feudal society. Abandoned by their servants and repudiated by their surviving families, they are further portrayed as useless and unwanted beings left to wander like *ghosts*. Echoing the ghost of the no name woman, these bound-footed women are dead to their community once the ties that kept their kin bound are severed. By killing the paternal authority figures of their village, Fa Mulan, breaks the encircling kinship that kept them protected.

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<sup>4</sup> Schultermandl argues that daughters in Asian American women writings "recreate memories and thus attempt self-creation via the narrative process of storytelling" (*Transnational* 25). For more on storytelling in relation to *The Woman Warrior*, see as well Schultermandl 69-70.

Maxine's imaginary vision of bound-footed women as vulnerable and powerless once deprived of patriarchal support, while resonating with Orientalist depictions of China as barbaric and misogynistic, points to Maxine's unease toward her family's Chinese culture that she sees as literally maiming her ancestors' bodies.

These female ghosts turn, however, into "witch amazons" (45) who, as a mercenary army, vengefully free girls and kill men and boys. These subjugated women's emancipatory transformation into swordswomen is not accompanied by the expected move from footbinding to unbinding, however. Conversely, bound feet do not prevent the swordswomen from accomplishing their goal and redressing the wrongs committed against them. As Mattio states referring to the role of ghosts in *The Woman Warrior*, "the gendered and racialized female body becomes involved in a change of narrative reproduction, from that which inscribed the body with the mark of trauma, to an experimental testimony that attempts to release the body from the collective anxiety projected onto it" (135, referring to Griffiths 354). Though Mattio is neither alluding to the swordswomen episode nor to footbinding, his words can be applied to the swordswomen's transformation from ghosts into amazons. Kingston's change in narrative focus from the swordswomen's traumatized bodies to their accomplishments resuscitates them from the Kingdom of the Dead, and *releases* them from the *collective anxiety* caused by an oppressive patriarchal system that has dehumanized them.

The swordswomen's emancipation thus re-revisions the narrator's hypothesis opening "White Tigers," which claims that women were perhaps "once so dangerous that they had to have their feet bound" (19), as well as the common association of footbinding with women's victimization. The swordswomen's episode, by suggesting that a woman can be dangerous *even* on bound feet, subverts the victim script of footbinding, as well as revises the overwhelming association of her female ancestors with extremely oppressed beings. By transforming these crippled beings into swordswomen, Maxine thus imagines a positive alternative to her aunt's ostracization and suicide, the power of the imagination infusing Maxine's stories and foregrounding what should have remained concealed in an act of subversion.<sup>5</sup> Kingston also blurs the stereotypes of female Chinese-ness constructed in the West, the China Doll with bound feet and the tormenting, femme fatale Dragon Lady. By creating Dragon Ladies with bound feet

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<sup>5</sup> This complicates Susie Lan Cassel's reading of this scene that she equates with a case of "literary extreme" of a "staunchly feminist rhetoric" turning the most "debilitated victims" into empowered heroines (53).

who kill men and boys in retribution Kingston proposes a more subversive figure of female heroism.

Although these empowering tales exoticize the Chinese legends evoked, their most extreme forms expose the deception of Maxine's mother's mythical stories of female heroism, and Maxine's equally hyperbolic take on them. Contrasting with the harsh reality Maxine confronts in Chinese America, such empowering female stories can only be the products of her imagination: "I myself never encountered such women and could not vouch for their reality" (45), Maxine declares, relegating the swordswomen to the fictional realm. This "act of destabilization," as Ma calls it (*Deathly* 67), or Kingston's constant deconstruction of the imagery created, emphasizes her subverting attempt at de-Orientalizing the Orientalized. Indeed, Kingston complicates Maxine's effort to liberate her female ancestors' lives and questions women's ability to escape patriarchy. The doubtful validity of the swordswomen's story points to the inadequacy of instituting matriarchy as a response to patriarchal oppression, and to the limitations of militarism as an answer to subjugation—a critique later addressed in "White Tigers" when Maxine dismisses the power of martial arts (52).

By underlining the illusion of her imagination, Kingston also highlights Maxine's inability to break free from her Chinese female lineage of oppression and misogyny. Her endeavor at erasing patriarchy and rewriting subjugation into acts of extreme heroism brings attention instead to her difficulty at making sense of the paradoxical representations of femininity that permeate her mother's talk-stories, from the subjugated and ostracized aunt to the mythical figures of women warriors. The clash brought forth by these conflicting representations of womanhood, with which Maxine cannot identify, similarly informs Maxine's conflicting voices, wavering between individuality and collectivity and her identity struggle more generally.<sup>6</sup>

Only her mother's life account approximates these mythical heroic female figures that infused her childhood. Her name Brave Orchid already identifies her as a woman warrior. Footbinding is again associated with a stereotypical Chinese feudal custom that kept women bound in Maxine's mother's life story. Brave Orchid's emancipation and wandering (unbinding) when she left her in-laws to pursue a medical degree is compared to her mother-in-law's

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<sup>6</sup> As Schulermandl states, "Maxine has both a personal voice with which she rebels against her mother and the mother-culture and a collective voice with which she reconstructs her matrilineal heritage" (*Transnational* 68).

immobility and resulting entrapment (binding):<sup>7</sup> “Free from families, my mother would live for two years without servitude. She would not have to run errands for my father’s tyrant mother with the bound feet or thread needles for the old ladies, but neither would there be slaves and nieces to wait on her” (62). The imprisonment resulting from footbinding is twofold. It prevents women from walking and moving, confining the mother-in-law to the house sphere, and enslaves young women who have to attend to the needs of older ones. Read in the context of Brave Orchid’s youth in the early decades of the twentieth century, the mother-in-law’s feet and lifestyle clash with Brave Orchid’s modernity at a time of social and political reforms in which national discourses were predicated on the physical and intellectual education of women. Kingston emphasizes this modernizing China by underlining the changes for women brought about by the 1911 Revolution that “put an end to prostitution by giving women what they wanted: a job and a room of their own” (62). Although Kingston’s feminist undertone and her allusion to Virginia Woolf forge the gap between old and new generations, they simultaneously depict China as a land of possibility and modernity, thus revising the negative representations of China and its debilitating effect on women presented in “No Name Woman.”

This description of China as a land of possibility provides an ironic counterbalance at the end of “Shaman” to Brave Orchid’s degradation when she moves from China to the United States. Brave Orchid’s metaphorical *unbinding* is questioned when she migrates to the United States, where her medical degree and years of practice as a doctor for the community are not enough for her to find a good job. Impeded by her racial identity, she is forced to work in her husband’s laundry business in the segregated space of Stockton Chinatown. The social and professional status she gained in China no longer matters: she is put in the same category as the other Chinese immigrants of her community. Acting as a counterbalance to Brave Orchid’s metaphorical unbinding in China, footbinding figuratively stands for Chinese female immigrants’ binding by racist discrimination at the social and economic levels. This complicates the metaphorical move from footbinding to unbinding accompanying Susie Lan Cassel’s and Bonnie Khaw-Posthuma’s reading of Chinese (American) protagonists’ successful development on

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<sup>7</sup> Khaw-Posthuma similarly argues: “In direct opposition to her ‘tyrant’ mother-in-law with bound feet who embodies the woman of old, patriarchal China, Maxine’s mother epitomizes the ‘natural-footed’ modern Chinese woman who breaks the traditional Chinese taboo against education for girls” (*Unbinding* 98).

American soil. Revising this progressive dichotomy, it is the United States that Kingston describes as debilitating, not China.

Brave Orchid remains, nonetheless, a heroic character in Maxine's eyes, conversely to the other female immigrants portrayed in *The Woman Warrior*. Indeed, Brave Orchid has the feminine *and* masculine capacities required to become a female warrior: Her big muscles and her ability to "carry a hundred pounds of Texas rice up- and downstairs," to work from dawn to midnight at the laundry, "shifting a baby from an ironing table to a shelf between packages, to the display window" (Kingston 104) testify to her combined roles as mother and factory worker.<sup>8</sup> Like Mulan who saves her village by going to battle instead of her aged father and who embraces her roles as mother, wife and daughter-in-law by returning home and kneeling in filiality in front of her in-laws and husband, Brave Orchid knows how to fight to survive and take care of her offspring in a hostile land.

Yet, Brave Orchid suffers from her toil. Her trauma of working herself out to see their laundry business torn down is read between the lines of her confession to adult Maxine at the end of "Shaman:" "This is terrible ghost country, where a human being works her life away" (104). The feudal values that prevented her mother-in-law from wandering around and which killed the aunt are displaced to represent the economic bindings that severely regulated Chinese immigrants' lives and kept them in place:

"I can't sleep in this country because it doesn't shut down for the night. Factories, canneries, restaurants – always somebody somewhere working through the night. ... Time was different in China. One year lasted as long as my total time here; one evening so long, you could visit your women friends, drink tea, and play cards at each house, and it would still be twilight ... I would still be young if we lived in China." (Kingston 105–6)

As footbinding might have been started because women were once so dangerous that they needed to have their feet bound (19), the enforced labor and economic bondage of Chinese immigrants ensured their contribution to the American economy, while subverting the Yellow Peril they represented for the United States. In this respect, the mother's story echoes the tale of Fa Mulan which ends on the ambivalent character of Mulan wavering between tradition and modernity, subversion and subservience, masculinity and femininity, as well as female heroism

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<sup>8</sup> For more on Brave Orchid female, yet masculine, heroism, see Madsen, *Woman Warrior* 56.



and filiality. Brave Orchid remains an ambiguous character who, despite her heroism, cannot escape the binds of the American hostile society she has migrated to.<sup>9</sup>

Unable to identify with these conflicting and equivocal depictions of Chinese femininity, Maxine interrogates the desirability of both Chinese femininity and warrior identity that Mulan, the swordswomen and her mother represent. Although these models of heroism offer positive counterpoints to the slaves of patriarchy imprinting her mother's stories, what these models leave aside is the American part of Maxine's identity that refuses identification with the depictions of Chinese warrior femininity that these tales convey. These tales fail to offer solutions to the traumatic effect of her Chinese culture on her self-development as an American girl of Chinese descent in mainstream society.

Rejecting these heroic Chinese figures with whom she cannot identify, Maxine paradoxically aligns herself with the oppressed bound-footed women of her mother's tales—the “failed women,” as Kingston calls them, who “didn't know how to fight,” and who she saw as dominating (Chinese) American society in the 1970s and 80s (Hoy 48).<sup>10</sup> Kingston revises once again footbinding's empowering potential infusing the swordswomen's story preceding the narration of Maxine's inner struggle. By re-appropriating the custom of footbinding and using it as the representative of her own physical and psychological confinement, Maxine stresses the discrepancy between Chinese heroines' emancipatory stories and the quandary posed by her Chinese culture: “Even now China wraps double binds around my feet” (48). By punningly equating the idiomatic double binds to the custom of footbinding, Kingston spells out the psychological predicament Maxine is held in as she is unable to understand her conflicting Chinese culture, its heroic legend of female empowerment and its misogyny.<sup>11</sup>

Additionally to these Chinese cultural ambivalences, what appears traumatic for Maxine is the cultural clash between her Chinese background and her American upbringing. King-Kok

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<sup>9</sup> Roberta Rubenstein underlines Brave Orchid's ambivalence: “in America, the mother Kingston has known from infancy is a ritual-bound traditionalist, unable to transfer her professional training from one culture, language, and social context to another. Thus she is, for her daughter, ambivalently both a woman of exceptional power within the female world of her culture and a powerless female in the larger bicultural situation” (174). See as well Khaw-Posthuma's *Unbinding* 100-1.

<sup>10</sup> In her interview with Jody Hoy, Kingston explains how difficult it was to find an actress who could play the role of Brave Orchid, whereas she had a profusion of actresses to play the *failed women*. She concludes: “this shows that in 1986 the feminine, bound-footed, dainty type is with us. But where is the peasant woman with big feet who is fierce and strong and of the earth, and yet beautiful?” (48).

<sup>11</sup> For more regarding Maxine's double binds, see Shirley Chew's “Double Binds” 138.

Cheung reads this cultural clash as leading to Maxine's *polarization* of her two cultures at the beginning of the *Woman Warrior*, "dismiss[ing] anything untoward as Chinese" and "sanctifying" American culture (92). Yet, by appropriating footbinding to approach Maxine's double binds in the United States, Kingston also simultaneously deconstructs this dichotomization of American and Chinese cultures, making transnational connections between Maxine and her imagined ancestors, and between China and the United States, through this revisited cultural marker of female oppression. These transnational connections thus reinforce the ambivalence of the imagery used by Kingston to represent Maxine's conflicting, yet fluctuating, identity, while subversively highlighting Kingston's refusal of cultural fixity.

Maxine's conflicting cultural identity culminates in the last story "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe" when she bullies a Chinese girl at school for her inability to speak. Denying the identity of the bound-footed woman she had embraced in "White Tigers," Maxine takes on the identity of a bully instead. The bullying scene occurs at a moment in the text when Maxine is searching for her voice and identity as a Chinese American woman and seeks to break free from the cultural ties that impede her self-development. This bullying scene is preceded by Maxine's reflection on her mother's ambivalent act of tongue cutting that metaphorically epitomizes Maxine's conflicting sense of self. Her mutilated tongue is invested with ambivalent meanings as it simultaneously represents her linguistic incapacitation and empowerment: "I cut [your tongue] so that you would not be tongue-tied," the mother explains (164). "Your tongue would be able to move in any language. You'll be able to speak languages that are completely different from one another. You'll be able to pronounce anything. Your frenum looked too tight to do those things, so I cut it" (165). The cutting of Maxine's tongue paradoxically and symbolically appears as an act of *unbinding* or liberation, complicating the restrictive association of mutilation with oppression permeating the trope of footbinding. Indeed, the cutting and loosening of the tongue seek to foster both Maxine's multilingualism and figurative integration in Chinese and American societies.

Haunted by this mutilation, Maxine experiences mixed feelings about her mother's act: "Sometimes I felt very proud that my mother committed such a powerful act upon me. At other times I was terrified—the first thing my mother did when she saw me was to cut my tongue" (164). Maxine's ambivalent feelings toward her mother's paradoxical unbinding translate into

her oxymoronic “broken voice” (165). Instead of speaking freely in English and Chinese, Maxine undergoes silence at school, and linguistic incapacitation in mainstream society:

When I went to kindergarten and had to speak English for the first time, I became silent. A dumbness—a shame—still cracks my voice in two, even when I want to say ‘hello’ casually, or ask an easy question in front of the check-out counter, or ask directions of a bus driver. I stand frozen, or I hold up the line with the complete, grammatical sentence that comes squeaking out at impossible length. (165)

The progression from silence to broken voice is accompanied by a shift from past to present tense, indicating Maxine’s persisting feeling of linguistic inadequacy beyond her traumatizing experience at school. Moreover, her oxymoronic broken voice resulting from shame is broken in *two*, thus symbolizing the double binds she encounters at the thresholds of her ancestors’ China and her present United States.

Maxine’s linguistic double bind is amplified when Maxine confronts Chinese and American feminine speaking personalities at school. While Chinese girls “screamed and yelled during recess when there were no rules” (167), and found comfort in the collectivity of the chants and recitals at Chinese school, they faced the faltering of their individual voices in American school:

We American Chinese girls had to whisper to make ourselves American-feminine. Apparently we whispered even more softly than the Americans. Once a year the teachers referred my sister and me to speech therapy, but our voice would straighten out, unpredictably normal, for the therapists ... Most of us eventually found some voice, however faltering. We invented an American-feminine speaking personality, except for that one girl who could not speak up even in Chinese school. (172)

Kingston counterpoises the American feminine personality and speech that Chinese American girls imitatively adopt and the forced speech therapy they have to attend. As Jeehyun Lim points out in “Cutting the Tongue,” the intervention of the medical establishment indicates the racialization and normalization of language and the pressure of assimilation on Chinese American subjects (51, 54, 56-7).<sup>12</sup> Their speech impairment measured against the American norm takes multiple shapes wavering between soft—almost inaudible—whispers and silence. In an attempt at becoming “American feminine,” Maxine thus masks her own insufficiency or impairment by bullying her Chinese classmate at school for her muteness.

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<sup>12</sup> For more on speech impairment and American normative regulation, see Nelly Mok’s “Beyond the Feminine” 63.

Indeed, it is because the mute girl appears as the distasteful mirror of Maxine herself, whose voice is crippled by both her mother's tongue cutting and her own bilingualism, that she wants the girl to speak. In her endeavor at separating herself from this hated *Other*, Maxine confines the mute girl to the position of Oriental and stereotypical "silent passive China Doll" (Mok 62), while she herself embraces the position of abuser. The mute girl is described by her "China doll hair cut" (173) and her malleable body and skin: "She was baby soft. I thought that I could put my thumb on her nose and push it bonelessly in, indent her face. I could poke dimples into her cheeks. I could work her face around like dough" (176). Maxine transforms the silent girl into a literal Chinese doll made of clay whose face she can work and rework at will. By verbally and physically bullying her, Maxine hopes to escape the weak and fragile doll-like figure that the girl, and by extension herself, embodies.

Maxine's distinction from the mute girl is emphasized by their different gait and feet, as well as by their respective hyperbolic representations as China Doll and Dragon Lady. The girl's padding, delicate and soft footsteps are opposed to Maxine's steps that are loud and strong due to the taps she had nailed into her shoes (175). Moreover, in her fantasy, the girl has bound feet—further Orientalizing her body—while she herself wears iron shoes, thus assuming the warrior identity of her female ancestors:

"Look at you, snot streaming down your nose, and you won't say a word to stop it. You're such a nothing." I moved behind her and pulled her hair growing out of her weak neck. I let go. I stood silent for a long time. Then I screamed, "Talk!" I would scare the words out of her. If she had had little *bound feet, the toes twisted under the balls, I would have jumped up and landed on them – crunch! – stomped on them with my iron shoes*. She cried hard, sobbing aloud. "Cry, 'Mama,' I said. "Come on. Cry 'Mama.' Say, 'Stop it.'" (178, my emphasis)

Seeing the ineffectiveness of her verbal and physical abuse, Maxine resorts once again to the power of her imagination to force words out of the weak and vulnerable girl she despises. As Mulan wore her father's armor into battle to free her community from abuses and robberies, Maxine imaginatively marches in iron boots to defeat this stereotypical Chinese weak and passive doll-like figure.

Maxine's imagined iron shoes symbolize her role as torturer, while the girl's bound feet put her in the position of tortured. These figurative shoes, combined to Maxine's honking, pinching, and pulling of the girl's hair and skin, act as torture devices to *unmake* the girl's world,

and push her to *confess* her ability to speak.<sup>13</sup> Their indestructible metal component and their ability to destroy/crush render this bullying scene more vivid. By conflating the silent girl with flesh, body and pain, Kingston further represents the *destruction* of the girl's voice. According to Elaine Scarry, torture makes the prisoner's body "emphatically present," and turns his/her voice into incessant screams and cries reminiscent of a stage "prior to language" (43). By disclosing the "destruction of language" inherent in the act of torture, Scarry demystifies its entire purpose: the betrayal and the confession can never be achieved (54). Maxine's attempt at making the girl talk through physical assault is thus doomed from the start, forcing her into silence instead.

Failing to make the girl talk, Maxine's bullying scene blurs the distinction previously made between torturer and tortured, deconstructing once again the warring metaphor pervading *The Woman Warrior*, as well as confusing the Orientalist stereotypes of China Doll and Dragon Lady that the mute girl and Maxine respectively embody. The seemingly powerful iron shoes Maxine wears in her fantasy are as debilitating and mutilating as the mute girl's imagined bound feet. In *Aching for Beauty*, Wang Ping explains how iron shoes, ironically entitled "the red embroidered shoes," were invented by eunuch Wei Zhongxian and served as a torture device at the court: "These iron shoes were heated until they turned red. The torturer then forced them onto the victim's feet. Whoever wore the shoes would be severely crippled for the rest of their lives, just as women who bound their feet became crippled" (136). Wang draws attention to the link between this torture device and eunuchs' own castration. As the eunuch was tortured/castrated (self-castrated at times) to serve in the palace and hold a position of power, the eunuch-torturer emasculated his victim by crippling his feet—re-enacting his own castration symbolically and vengefully. The retaliation dynamics at the heart of this torturing device can be read between the lines of Kingston's bullying scene. The metaphorical crippling of the girl's feet haunts Maxine with a vengeance. Tortured by her own bullying act, Maxine's body and voice are incapacitated at the end.

Furthermore, although Maxine claims to have found at school a somewhat American-feminine voice qualified by a whispering, no matter how faltering it might be, the bullying scene proves otherwise. The linguistic performance she describes before narrating the incident at school testifies to self-discipline and control. Instead of controlling her emotions and voice when

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<sup>13</sup> I here use the terminology and definition of torture given by Elaine Scarry in "Structure of Torture" of her *Body in Pain*.

interacting with the mute girl, Maxine falls prey to her anger and (self-)hatred. Her shouts transform into hysterical sobs and cries—“bouncing wildly off the tile, sometimes together sometimes alternating” (181) with those of the Chinese girl—blurring the distinction she has tried to forge between herself and the hated girl. The iron shoes she imagines to have, or the “big strong yellow teeth” (178) she wants to grow to differentiate her body from the girl’s weak appearance dissolves, as her strong and bossy voice falters into begging sobs: “Look, I’ll give you something if you talk. I’ll give you my pencil box. I’ll buy you some candy. O.K.? What do you want? Tell me. Just say it, and I’ll give it to you. Just say ‘yes,’ or ‘O.K.,’ or ‘Baby Ruth’” (181). Moreover, no longer pulling the girl’s hair to make her talk, Maxine hangs onto her hair to prevent herself from falling, her knees shaking underneath her, her body dizzy “from the air [she] was gulping” (181).

The crippling of Maxine’s voice is ultimately echoed by the maiming of her body: her bullying is followed by a long mysterious illness which invalidates her body, and ironically plunges her in silence. Following her recovery, Maxine has to learn how to walk and talk anew. No longer defined by her American-femininity, her voice then sounds like an ugly “quacking” (192); a voice that needs to be *fixed* now that she is in age to get married. Far from having enabled her voice and speech, the mother’s tongue cutting reemerges as a disabling act that mutilated her tongue and made her unmarriageable; a potential nod here to the practice of footbinding that precisely meant to assure women’s marriageability in imperial China. However, in contrast to footbinding that transformed a woman into a marriageable subject through the mutilation of her feet, Maxine’s loose tongue and resulting “pressed-duck voice” (192), although a hindrance to her future in her mother’s eyes, becomes Maxine’s way out of the institution of marriage.

In her endeavor to separate herself once again from these normative models of femininity and womanhood defended by her Chinese community, Maxine sides with disabled or pathologized figures—despite her disdain for them—which recalls her previous appropriation of footbinding imagery to express her double binds: “I thought every house had to have its crazy woman or crazy girl, every village its idiot. Who would be It at our house? Probably me. ... I was messy, my hair tangled and dusty. My dirty hands broke things. Also I had had the mysterious illness. And there were adventurous people inside my head to whom I talked. With them I was frivolous and violent, orphaned” (189). Although she recognizes her own insanity

and abnormality, she nevertheless distances herself from the disabled figures of her Chinese community, who she dehumanizes linguistically (“It”).<sup>14</sup> Likewise, she willingly adopts the behavior of an idiot to counter her mother’s attempt at marrying her off, but rejects this rebellious attitude when she sees her growing similitude with the “hunchback” boy always hanging around her parents’ laundry business: “I didn’t limp anymore; my parents would only figure that this *zombie* and I were a match. I studied hard, got straight A’s, but nobody seemed to see that I was smart and had nothing in common with this *monster*, this *birth defect*” (195, my emphasis). The lexicon of monstrosity marks this unusual boy as disabled, even inhuman. Maxine’s rejection of the abnormal and her transformation into the perfect girl remains nonetheless unseen by her parents, and does not lead to the boy’s disappearance. The dehumanization of the disabled figure further questions bound-footed women’s transformation into amazons seen in “White Tigers” as disability reifies once again Chinese immigrants’ impairment in the United States, and their marginalization within their own community.

Maxine’s effort at differentiating herself from the disabled figures permeating her Chinese American community leads to her climactic declaration of independence from her parents and Chinese culture, a declaration which also contrasts with her previous “pressed-duck voice” (192):

*I’m going to college. And I’m not going to Chinese school anymore. I’m going to run for office at American school, and I’m going to join clubs. . . . And I can’t stand Chinese school anyway; the kids are rowdy and mean, fighting all night. And I don’t want to listen to any more of your stories; they have no logic. They scramble me up.* (202, my emphasis)

The repetition of the pronoun “I,” accentuated by the polysyndeton, exemplifies her rebellion. Her ultimate refusal to listen to her parents’ stories marks her distance from her mother culture that she cannot understand, let alone fathom.

It is this bursting-out and the confession of her disdain for her Chinese culture that paradoxically forces her to reconsider her rejection of her Chinese heritage: “The very next day

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<sup>14</sup> The last bound-footed figure in *The Woman Warrior* presented in “Shaman” is the crazy lady of Brave Orchid’s village in China who got stoned to death by her community because of her insanity (92-6). By inserting herself in this line of crazy ladies, while simultaneously distancing herself from this disabling lineage, Maxine once again connects with and separates herself from these bound-footed, disabled and ostracized figures in her conflicting search for self-identity. For more on the disabled figures of *The Woman Warrior*, see King-Kok Cheung’s *Articulate Silences* 79.

after I talked out the retarded man, the huncher, he disappeared. I never saw him again or heard what became of him. Perhaps I made him up, and what I once had was not Chinese-sight at all but child-sight that would have disappeared eventually without such struggle” (205). Pondering on the vanishing of the hunchback in the aftermath of her rebellion, Maxine questions his reality and the power of her imagination, recalling her dismissal of the swordswomen’s existence in “White Tigers,” and reflects on her childish rejection of her Chinese legacy. Kingston’s doubled-voice narrative (Cheung 77) thus emphasizes the alienating effect of cultural clash on the Chinese American subject torn between two cultures, and the equally damaging effect of cultural rejection.

*The Woman Warrior* concludes on Maxine’s reconciliation with her Chinese culture, as Kingston proposes a destabilizing conclusion that brings China and the United States together in a subversive twist of hybrid creation. Footbinding comes to play yet again an important role in the representation of Maxine’s perspective on her double heritage. While the opening chapter gave a negative view on the custom of footbinding by foregrounding the excruciating pain it causes, the last tale does not equate footbinding with subjugation and disability but highlights instead the strong ties that bind Maxine to her female legacy and ancestral culture. Told through the combined narrative voice of mother and daughter, this tale narrates the story of Maxine’s grandmother who loved to go to the theater and used to force her family to come along. The family, quite reluctant, was afraid that bandits would raid their house. However, the bandits did not attack the houses but the theater. The grandmother, unable to run away on bound feet, hid in a ditch with Brave Orchid, observing powerlessly her younger daughter being dragged by bandits before being miraculously released. Khaw-Posthuma argues that the young daughter, with her natural feet, “more easily escaped the danger” (“Unbound” 269). However, the grandmother’s bound feet in Kingston’s tale are not as disabling as Khaw-Posthuma has made them to be. After all, the grandmother’s mutilated feet ironically saved Brave Orchid from being kidnapped, conversely to her younger daughter who got captured while running away. It is not her natural feet that saved her in the end, but her ugly face, the story tells.

Furthermore, the grandmother’s tale does not reflect what Khaw-Posthuma has called the “tragic plight of Chinese women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, whose feet and identities were physically and metaphorically bound by their patriarchal culture; they could not wander outside their given sphere, the hearth or home” (“Unbound” 269). The grandmother



attended every theatrical performance given in the village despite her family's reluctance. By forcing every member of the household to go with her—servants included—the grandmother does not seem to be psychologically or metaphorically *bound*. Contrastingly, the men of the family are left to inhabit the undistinguished mass that follows the grandmother's orders. Maxine's maternal grandmother, therefore, offers a counterpoint to the paternal grandmother that Brave Orchid describes in "Shaman" as imprisoned by both her bound feet and restrictive gender norms, as well as to the silent and imagined bound-footed girl Maxine bullies at school. By turning the maternal grandmother into a heroic figure, Maxine also re-habilitates her matrilineage dismissed by her patriarchal society.

Coupled with the rendering of Ts'ai Yen's tale, the grandmother's story gives another perspective on China and its culture that Maxine had previously rejected. As her grandmother subversively forces her family to attend theatrical performances, stepping outside of the domestic sphere, Ts'ai Yen invents a Chinese song that matches with her oppressors' barbarian music. The tale of Ts'ai Yen also indirectly revisits Maxine's vision of the mute girl she bullied at school through music imagery. As Ts'ai Yen first rejected the barbaric music produced by her oppressors that felt like "an icicle in the desert," "its sharpness and its cold ma[king] her ache" (208), Maxine is disturbed by the "wheezes" produced by the hated Chinese girl with her plastic flute at music time (192). However, as Ts'ai Yen learns to accept her oppressors' disturbing music, and produces a hybrid song matching with the barbarian flutes, Maxine re-visions her *discordant* Chinese culture. With the musicality of her words she conceives a new hybrid tale that no longer separates her from the debilitating Chinese culture that the mute girl and her female ancestors represent. It is by joining her mother's song and re-connecting with her Chinese culture through writing that Maxine embraces her cultural heritage and combines it with her reality in Chinese America. Maxine's bonding with her mother and culture that concludes the memoirs ultimately creates, as Schultermandl states, "a narrative of selfhood that spans several generations of women, that conjoins historical with personal renditions of the past, and that illustrates how the narrative recovery of the past is an essential part of Maxine's present sense of self" (*Transnational* 77–8).

Accordingly, footbinding, other than representing a feudal China of the past and Chinese female immigrants' mental and linguistic incapacitation in America, becomes a crucial marker of Maxine's struggle between an oppressive Chinese culture and a disabling America. Kingston

thus revises the binary opposition of footbinding and unbinding to document Maxine's journey toward self-acceptance, from the unbinding to the binding of her cross-cultural heritage. Kept in tension and contradiction as the memoirs move back and forth from one term to the other, this ambivalent footbinding and unbinding images ultimately refuse easy resolution. They point to Maxine's simultaneous feeling of disconnectedness from and interconnectedness with her ancestors' lives, as well as to Kingston's ambivalent Orientalizing and de-Orientalizing strategies of ethnic self-assertion she deploys to write the Chinese American female experience, while captivating a larger audience beyond the Asian American community.

### **Of Flesh and Spirit: *Toward Transnational Bindings***

While Kingston deploys the trope of footbinding in *The Woman Warrior* to express the predicament of a second-generation Chinese American girl, who, caught between two conflicting cultures, defies the obstacles posed by her Chinese legacy in the definition of her cross-cultural identity, Wang Ping explores generational, cultural and gender conflicts beyond the first-generation/second-generation divide typical of Chinese American literature dealing with mother/grandmother-daughter relationships. Published two decades after *The Woman Warrior*, Wang's poetry collection *Of Flesh and Spirit* (1999)<sup>15</sup> returns to the feminist trope of footbinding to address the oppressive patriarchal system that regulated Chinese women's lives in imperial and Communist China and continued to impact Chinese women immigrants in the post-1965 United States.

Approached from a predominantly feminist point of view, footbinding dramatizes Chinese women's oppression and mutilation under a strict patriarchal regime, and strengthens Wang's persona's desire to break free from this misogynist culture. By retracing her female ancestors' fading steps obscured by a dominating patriarchal family clan, Wang's persona gives voice to her ancestors' constricted lives, and seeks to free their bodies and souls from the literal and metaphorical bindings they were held in, as well as from silence and oblivion. Yet, in her attempt at revealing her ancestors' life stories and at liberating them from physical and psychological strictures, Wang's persona is drawn to reflect on her own oppressed mind, body

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<sup>15</sup> Conversely to Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, *Of Flesh and Spirit* has received little critical attention despite the broad readership targeted by Coffee House Press.

and voice that immigration to the United States has failed to liberate. Caught between collectivity and individuality, other and self, the poetic voice learns to reconcile these apparently opposite entities. Unable to dissociate herself from her female ancestors, she ultimately redefines binding into a familial and cultural bond necessary in the formation of her own cultural identity. Similarly to Kingston, Wang thus deconstructs the binarism of footbinding and unbinding to represent Chinese women's conflicting identities in a transnational context. By adding her name to her female genealogy and intertwining her personal stories to her ancestors' lives, she ultimately draws gender connections across temporal, spatial and cultural borders.

The collection of poems as a genre is particularly suited to describe Wang's persona's cultural conflicts between individuality and collectivity, past and present, separation and connection. Individual poems predominantly narrated from a first-person point of view present the poetic voice's inner conflict and desire to distance herself from an oppressive Chinese culture and her submissive female forbearers. In contrast, the collection as a whole presents a succession of poems that inform and infuse each other, blurring the line between their individual and collective function. The collection of poems mirrors, therefore, the persona's simultaneous disconnection from and inevitable interconnection with her ancestors, legacy and past, as she struggles to find her self at the threshold of both China and the United States.

The linked poems of Wang's *Of Flesh and Spirit* generically echo the linked stories<sup>16</sup> of Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. Although often perceived as a novel, *The Woman Warrior* presents five stories that can be read independently, but which remain interconnected when read as a whole. The hybridity of this genre creates tensions between "variety and unity, separateness and interconnectedness, fragmentation and continuity, openness and closure," as Rolf Lundén asserts (12). This ambivalent and destabilizing genre (Lundén 12) mirrors Maxine's fight for self-assertion away and in conjunction with her Chinese cultural heritage and family (see Davis 59). It also resonates strongly with Kingston's generic blurring of oral and written traditions, as well as American and ethnic cultural backgrounds.<sup>17</sup> Kingston's and Wang's respective linked

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<sup>16</sup> I am using the more neutral term of "linked stories" to refer to what Forrest L. Ingram called "short story cycle" in 1971, Robert M. Luscher "short story sequence" in 1989, Maggie Dunn and Ann L. Morris "composite novel" in 1995, and Rolf Lundén "short story composite" in 1999, among others.

<sup>17</sup> For more on orality and the ethnic significance of the genre, see the introduction and conclusion of James Nagel's *Contemporary American Short-Story Cycle*; Michelle Pacht's chapter "Creating Community Ethnicity and American Identity" in her *Subversive Storyteller*, especially 113-4; Rocío Davis, "Visions" 59, and *Ethnicity and the American Short Story*. Ed. Julie Brown. Garland Publishing, 1997.

stories and poems thus offer subversive potential as the destabilizing nature of these linked narratives enables them to represent their protagonists' inner and communal conflicts, while transgressing fixity and boundaries of all kinds to present fluctuating characters, stories, spaces and temporalities that ambivalently connect and separate the here and there, the now and then.

Yet, conversely to Kingston, Wang's poetry collection is less subversive in tone. By predominantly depriving Chinese culture of empowering potential, Wang traps her representations of China in its misogynistic past.<sup>18</sup> Although Wang invests footbinding with connective power the more the poetry collection unfolds, the bonds that the persona develops with her female ancestors remain framed within their shared pain and oppression, thus consolidating footbinding's metaphoric and synecdochic representation of what Ma has called "women's abiding pain in the here and now" ("Asian Immigrants" 192). Moreover, by exhibiting Chinese misogynistic sayings and practices, Wang fetishizes, exoticizes and even eroticizes Chinese culture and women's bodies to their extreme, thus embracing and perpetuating stereotypes of Asian barbarity diffused in the West despite her feminist denunciation of Chinese patriarchy. Indeed, the sarcastic tone that permeates her poems, her demystification of the American Dream, her deconstruction of the footbinding-unbinding dichotomy, and her reconnection with her female ancestors are not enough to subvert the Orientalist overtone that runs through her poetry collection.

Footbinding appears at the beginning of *Of Flesh and Spirit* as a marker of women's physical oppression—a beginning that recalls Kingston's dismissal of footbinding in "No Name Woman." Yet, Wang goes a step further in her Orientalizing exhibition, as she exposes the mutilated flesh and bones of her female ancestors' feet. The denunciation of the persona's forbearers' subjugation in a highly patriarchal society comes hand in hand with the revelation of footbinding's concealed mutilation in the poem "Of Flesh and Spirit:" "For a thousand years, women's bound feet were the most / beautiful and erotic objects for Chinese. Tits and asses were / nothing compared to a pair of three-inch 'golden lotuses.' / They must have been crazy or had problems with their noses. / My grandma's feet, wrapped day and night in layers of ban- / dages, smelled like rotten fish" (14). Sarcastically dismantling the eroticism conferred to these delicate

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<sup>18</sup> Kingston's and Wang's distinct Orientalist strategies might be linked to their different status. While Kingston is a second-generation Chinese American, Wang is what Ma would call a "Chinese expatriate" who fled Communism and found refuge in the United States ("Asian Immigrants" 191).

and elegant bound feet turned into metaphorical flowers, Wang discloses instead bound feet's disgusting smell, and draws attention to the unsettling ambivalence of bound feet whose rotten smell paradoxically attracts. Furthermore, as Chinese and Western, as well as past and present fetishes are opposed, so are the generic "they" and the poetic voice, who distances herself from her grandmother's generation, furthering the Orientalizing exhibition of a Chinese cultural past that has kept her ancestors bound.

Counterpoising her personal story to the maiming custom of footbinding, as well as to the Chinese offensive curses and sexist sayings that dictated her female ancestors' lives, Wang departs from her forebearers to define herself outside of a restrictive and sexist Chinese culture. The erotic and normative bandages that wrapped her ancestors' feet are opposed to the persona's *unbound* personality and language exemplified by her unconventional sexual life and the denunciatory and vulgar tone of the poem that confuses the flesh and spirit of the title. Whereas ancient China promoted female chastity and women's submissive role as wives, Wang provokingly discloses her loss of virginity before marriage and her love affairs in the opening lines of the poem, thus re-orienting her sexuality away from patriarchal bonds—"I was a virgin till twenty-three, then always had more than / one lover at the same time – all secret" (14)—and concludes on the failure of her first marriage: "Well, my first lover was a married coward. My first marriage lasted / a week. My husband slept with me once, and I never saw / him again" (15). The exhibition of her forebearers' feet is replaced here with the self-exhibition of her sexuality deviating from the imposed norms of Chinese patriarchy—notably its reproductive imperative. The subversive nature of her endeavor is, however, thwarted by the eroticization of her own transgression.

"Such vulgarity! Such horror!" Wang declares in her analysis of "Of Flesh and Spirit:" "My mother tongue would never allow them to surface to my consciousness, let alone let them out in writing as a poem. It is simply unimaginable, unthinkable, and unspeakable—and therefore, untranslatable" ("Writing in Two Tongues" 13). Yet, her words appear in English *glossing over*, or *dubbing*, as Ma would have it (see his "De/Alientation"), these Chinese sayings here described as *untranslatable*. By denouncing in a crude English language the misogyny and sexism of the Chinese language and culture, Wang not only violates China's "thousand years of poetic tradition" that she defines as "cultured, flowery, cluttered with historical allusions, images, and metaphors" ("Writing in Two Tongues" 12), but also transgresses the Chinese codes of

linguistic and behavioral propriety regulating a woman's life. This crude English language can be read in terms of Butler's haunting return of the unthinkable (*Bodies That Matter* 8) threatening to expose the illusory power of the normative order that created it. However, Wang's subversion remains once again framed in Orientalism. The opposition of English as enabling and Chinese as censoring, and disabling continues to demonize China in favor of the English world.

However, despite her rebellious identity mirrored by the denunciatory tone of the poem, the persona remains constrained by the Chinese customs, gender norms and sayings that kept her female ancestors subjugated. Confusing voice and body, flesh and spirit, the persona verbally denounces the hypersexualization and objectification of women's bodies at the hands of men, past and present, while simultaneously inserting herself in the genealogy of the oppressed and mutilated women of her family. Whereas Wang seeks to *unbind* her female ancestors linguistically and metaphorically from oppression and oblivion in an English language, "simple, bold and straightforward" that offers her "no fear or inhibition" ("Writing in Two Tongues" 12), she simultaneously grapples with her own difficulty at writing the self at the intersection of two cultures and two tongues.

The boldness of the English language serves once again to denounce the crudeness of Chinese sayings, and their negative impact on women in "Female Marriage," where Wang embeds the fragmented story of her paternal grandmother's life (Nainai) within a larger reflection on women's inferior positions in China, and their objectifications in Chinese proverbs. Yet, Wang complicates or destabilizes the English monolingualism seen in "Of Flesh of Spirit." Given in Chinese, Pinyin and English translations, these Chinese sexist proverbs not only transgress linguistic borders, but also spatial, temporal and cultural boundaries as they relate to the persona's grandmothers' lives, but especially to the lives of *women* across the board. Her combination of Chinese, English and Pinyin in "Female Marriage"—in contrast to her previous dominating English translation—also complicates her Orientalist *glossing over* of Chinese barbarism. Intertwining languages becomes as much a tool of subversion, as an identity marker. Akin to Gloria Anzaldúa's bilingualism presented in her infamous *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), Wang's experimentation with both style and grammar enables her to claim an ambivalent and fluctuating language for herself through which she can approach her ancestors' oppressive history and her own subjugation in the *borderlands* of China and the United States. Wang thus

develops a transgressive and hybrid language matching with the persona's ambivalent personality beyond Orientalist parameters.<sup>19</sup>

Footbinding acts again, in "Female Marriage," as a symbol of gender mutilation that resonates strongly with the metaphorical mutilation of a woman's identity and personality under patriarchal control. The short description of the persona's grandmother's footbinding is reduced to her deformed feet and altered gait: "For seventy-five years, my Nainai walked on her heels / because all her toes were broken and bent under the soles to / make a pair of 'golden lotuses'" (27). By contrasting footbinding's physical implication and the translated word used to describe it poetically in Chinese, Wang evokes footbinding's dualistic and binary nature opposing mutilation and beauty, body and language. This duality, however, accentuates mutilation, especially as the allusion to Nainai's mutilated feet is followed by the metaphorical mutilation of her identity and personality under patriarchy: "No one knows her name, / not even herself. When she was a girl, she was called a girl, / maybe Number 1 or Number 2. When she got married, her / neighbors called her 'wife of so-and-so,' and her husband / called her *wei* – equivalent to 'hello.' After she had her first / son, she got the name 'mother of so-and-so'" (27).<sup>20</sup> As her bound feet hindered her movement, her deprivation of personal identity ensured her embrace of her roles as daughter (daughter-in-law), wife, and mother dictated by the code of conduct—the *Three Obediences*—a woman had to follow; a code of conduct exemplified in the proverbs permeating Wang's poem: "*Fu chang fu sui*—when man sings, wife follows" (26); "A married daughter is split water. If she / marries a chicken, she becomes a chicken, if she marries a / dog, she becomes a dog" (28).

Footbinding further figures in "Female Marriage" as a woman's entrance into marriage, or, in other words, as a type of financial security: the smaller the feet, the better husband a woman could find. Nainai's bound feet help her to secure a good marriage match "even before her period started" (28). Yet, marriage, although providing a woman with a new home and better lifestyle, remains, in Wang's words, a woman's cause of unhappiness: "With a pair of 'golden lotuses,' she enters the code of 'pure / love,' a code of tears and suffering" (28). Critiquing the institution of marriage, Wang ironically redefines love's essence, not as attraction and desire, but as tears and suffering—two qualities that bound feet symbolically embody. Moreover, opposed

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<sup>19</sup> For more on Wang's subversion of linguistic borders, see her poem "Syntax" that opens *Of Flesh and Spirit* (11).

<sup>20</sup> This recalls as well the unnamed aunt of Kingston's opening chapter in the *Woman Warrior*.

to the independent “too powerful, well-armed” business women “Chinese men often warn / each other” about (28), Chinese brides become models of submission. Recalling Kingston’s claim that women were once so dangerous that they had to have their feet bound (*Woman Warrior* 19), Wang’s comparison between “powerful” business women and submissive wives turn footbinding into a patriarchal device of physical and psychological control. Even after her husband’s death at the age of twenty-five, Nainai remains imprisoned in her roles as mother, and daughter-in-law, as “her husband’s early death had given her / a bad name, and no decent man would go near her” (28).

More than a woman’s entrance into marriage, the bound foot stands in “Female Marriage” as a metaphor for the silenced and forgotten history of Chinese women’s oppression that Wang recovers and metaphorically *unbinds*. Reclaiming her matrilineage long obscured and forgotten, Wang, similarly to Kingston, writes for all the Chinese *no-name* women of her family and beyond who have existed but whose existence has been erased from family trees. Although a few women’s names have been recorded in Chinese history—“By becoming martyrs, we managed to leave some names for / ourselves in the vast army of the anonymous: concubines, / courtesans, a few empresses, a few poets and soldiers, the / other half of the sky, and the girls of iron” (“Female Marriage” 28–9)—these remained “martyrs,” symbolically killed for their beliefs or accomplishments, or propagandistic titles promoting gender equality in Communist China. Slogans such as “women hold up half the sky,” or glorifying titles such as “Iron girls” during Mao Zedong’s Cultural Revolution, although drawing attention to the necessity of women’s labor for the country’s economy, remained problematic as they encouraged women’s masculinization under the false pretense of gender equality.<sup>21</sup> It is not these martyrs that Wang addresses in her poems, but the “vast army of the anonymous”—the indistinguishable mass of female lives—to which her female ancestors belong. Echoing Kingston’s women warriors, Wang’s “vast army of the anonymous” depicts women as soldiers, contrasting with the ideal

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<sup>21</sup> Titles such as “Iron Girls” valorized “strong, robust women, capable of performing jobs more commonly done by men,” as Emily Honig explains (97). However, the Cultural Revolution did not address gender issues but focused on class. While the “sameness of men and women was asserted,” as Honig states, feminism was rejected as “bourgeois,” and women associations were “disbanded” (98). Many women were valorized because they fought as proletarian soldiers.



Chinese woman that the Chinese language writes as inferior, evil.<sup>22</sup> Their everyday battle has, however, been obscured and forgotten.

Similarly to Kingston, Wang's persona, taking the role as metaphorical soldier herself, rescues her female ancestors from anonymity and oblivion with her pen, and denounces the confining system that has kept women bound for centuries, to ultimately better understand her position as a woman of Chinese descent in the United States:<sup>23</sup> "I think of what happened to my grandmothers, what's hap- / pening to my mother and my sister, all those years of not / knowing where or who they are. I'm not taking that road. / But the only way for help is to think back through my grand- / mothers and my mother" ("Female Marriage" 30). Distancing herself from the alienating existence led by her ancestors, Wang chooses a different road: she actively lifts the taboo and crudely tells the forgotten or unknown stories of her female ancestors' lives, recalling once again Maxine's endeavor in *The Woman Warrior*.

Wang's effort to metaphorically unbind her ancestors' bound feet and lives culminates in her poem "Resurrection," where the persona imagines a new life free of bandages for her paternal grandmother, Nainai. Footbinding functions yet again as a symbol of oppression. The grandmother's fragmented body—represented by her bound feet and "bleak eyes" (21)—acts as synecdoche and metaphor for her physical and psychological subjugation. However, the literal unbinding of the grandmother's feet that the first stanza puts forth—"You leaned on the red / brick wall, unwinding the *endless* bandages on your feet" (21, my emphasis)—remains deceptive. Caught in an endless unbinding, the grandmother cannot free herself from oppression, and is condemned to reside in an interstitial space between life and death, materiality and immateriality, confinement and perpetual wandering, oppression and freedom.<sup>24</sup> The image of the endless bandages is further counterpoised in the second stanza to her deformed feet, synecdochically

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<sup>22</sup> By providing a list of derogatory Chinese words that contain the ideogram *woman* 女, Wang points to the negative perception of women inherent in the Chinese language and culture. The ideogram 女 itself represented a woman kneeling in the ancient Chinese language. The examples that Wang gives show how this ideogram has been negatively deployed beyond a woman's position or role in Chinese society: "Jian 奸: evil, traitor and adultery;" "Yao 妖: all the things that are alien, abnormal, monster, evil;" "Lan 婪: greedy;" "Xian 嫌: suspicion" (30).

<sup>23</sup> Maxine also adopts the position of metaphorical soldier when highlighting her resemblance to the swordswomen in "White Tigers:" "The swordswomen and I are not so dissimilar. May my people understand the resemblance soon so that I can return to them. What we have in common are the words at our backs. The idiom for revenge are 'report a crime' and 'report to five families.' The reporting is the vengeance—not the beheading, not the gutting but the words. And I have so many words—'chink' words and 'gook' words too—that they do not fit on my skin" (53).

<sup>24</sup> The grandmother appears as a ghostly soul haunting the persona throughout the poem.

represented by the “huge heels and toeless soles” (21), on which are carved her eighty years of suffering. The liberatory function of the unbinding process is thus obliterated, as the complete unwinding of her feet does not liberate her from oppression, but reveals instead the mutilation of her feet that these bandages have kept concealed.

The grandmother’s failed physical liberation is contrasted, however, to the metaphorical freedom the persona imagines through the transformation of her grandmother’s bandages into symbols of freedom: “Do not wave your bandages at me. My feet have grown as / hard as white poplars in our native town. I’ll make a pair of / wings with them, to carry your soul into spring, into the for- / est and grass, into a world without memory. Be a bird, a bee, / or even a fly. Just to live again, with joy” (21). Opposing her big feet to her grandmother’s mutilated feet, as well as refusing the bandages that her grandmother waves at her, the persona dismisses the footbinding transmitted from one generation to the next. She presents herself instead as her grandmother’s liberator, turning physical oppression into freedom through words. Similes and metaphors give her grandmother wings to fly and discover the world from above, opposing her grandmother’s imprisonment in life. The empowering potential of these metaphors is thus predicated on the unbinding of the grandmother’s feet.

Yet, the binary of footbinding and unbinding is confused as the persona’s feeling of distance from her cultural legacy dissolves into a strong sense of interconnectedness with her female ancestor here expressed through tree metaphors. As Nainai depends on her granddaughter’s big and sturdy feet to be figuratively carried into springs, the persona’s feet are ingrained in her native soil as the “white poplars” of her native town, and tied to her grandmother’s past: “The night I carried you on the ship for Qingdao, I dreamed / of turning into surging waves to retrieve your fading steps, I / didn’t realize until then that my childhood had been a *vine* / hanging over the precipice of your life” (21, my emphasis). The imagery of the white poplar and the vine connecting the persona to her native village and to her grandmother alludes to the family tree, and figuratively to the persona’s identity rooted in her family’s past. Counterpoising these tree metaphors to the sea her grandmother’s soul crosses and the surging waves the persona would like to become to retrieve Nainai’s fading steps, Wang opposes fluidity to roots, motion to stasis; key concepts in the discussion of transnational identity politics. The persona’s imaginary unbinding of her grandmother from oppression portrayed by her poetic transformation of bandages into wings thus complicates the persona’s distancing from her

matrilineal legacy, and creates new cultural and intergenerational bindings across temporal, spatial, and cultural borders.<sup>25</sup>

The distinction between binding and unbinding, and the gap separating Wang from her female ancestors similarly collapse in “What Are You Still Angry About.” Although footbinding alludes yet again to Chinese women’s literal and metaphorical oppression in a patriarchal society, it paradoxically fails to keep them subjugated. This ambivalent perspective once again accompanies Wang’s endeavor to retrace the forgotten stories of her female ancestors along maternal lines (32). The stock association of footbinding with oppression is deconstructed as the stories of women’s oppression and binding are often intertwined with the somewhat heroic story of their strength, resistance and rebellion against the constricting system they lived in—recalling Kingston’s destabilizing juxtaposition of disempowering and empowering images. In so doing, Wang proposes alternative modes of story telling, while reclaiming new ancestral connections, and inserting her own transgression within a larger legacy of female rebellion.

The story of her great-great-grandmother Hehua points to this ambivalence. The binding of her “body and soul” (36) is accomplished through the pain of footbinding once she enters her husband’s family at a young age. Although Hehua’s feet had been bound when she was three and were renown throughout the village for their exquisite smallness, they were rebound by her mother-in-law who claimed they were “too big and badly shaped” (36). The mother-in-law literally claims Hehua’s body and soul, through the re-binding of her feet. By crippling her anew, the mother-in-law forces Hehua’s submission, preparing her for her role as daughter-in-law. The hierarchy established between mother- and daughter-in-law is here represented by their respective position as footbinder and footbound:

When she pulled Hehua’s toes straight by force then bent them further toward the arches, Hehua was not only forbidden to cry in pain, but had to smile and practice how to say “mother” in the most respectful, grateful, and affectionate tone. “You’re lucky to

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<sup>25</sup> Wang explores footbinding’s connecting power at further length in her short story “Lotus” (*American Visa*, 1994) where she recounts her own experience of a self-inflicted type of footbinding despite Communist eradication of beauty and feudal ideals. The short story makes connection between the persona and her grandmother across the generational divide through these feet modifications. See as well Wang’s introduction to her study *Aching for Beauty* where she equally recounts her footbinding experience as a child, and the female connections footbinding enabled.

have such a kind-hearted mother-in-law like me,” she told Hehua. “When I came to the Wu family at your age, my mother-in-law broke every toe to reshape my feet, then ordered me to kneel in the yard to practice how to say mama from morning till night.” (36)

The psychological trauma the mother-in-law inflicts on her daughter-in-law resonates with the tight bandages that she pitilessly wraps around Hehua’s feet. As her feet are reshaped to reach the ideal size of three inches in length, so is her behavior to become the ideal submissive daughter-in-law.

Yet, the oppressive binding that Hehua suffers in the mother-in-law’s hands fails to mold her into the perfect daughter-in-law and wife: “After she had a son, she began talking back to her mother- / in-law. Gradually, she hit back when her husband tried to / beat her up. She was young and strong, and ready to risk her / life in the fight, so she always won” (37). Instead of being submissive and docile, she becomes a “tigress” (37). She is not easily *tamed* when sold by her husband to cover his gambling debts. Wang hyperbolically narrates Hehua’s fight, turning her resistance into a heroic legend, recalling Kingston’s hyperbolic tale of the bound-footed swordswomen: “It was said that Hehua, mother of my great grandma, scratched / four faces, broke three fingers, dug out two eyes, and bit off one / nose before she was tied up and carried into the mountain like a / captured wild sow. She was never seen or heard from again” (37). She is unable, however, to escape her fate, as she is bound like “a wild sow.” The open-ended story, nonetheless, leaves Hehua’s destiny to the power of the reader’s imagination, as it similarly questions Hehua’s resistance, and underlines the persona’s exaggerated mediation of her great-great-grandmother’s story. Wang’s narrative technique resonates with Kingston’s in “White Tigers” where she ultimately dismissed the swordswomen’s reality and revealed Maxine’s hyperbolic response to her unnamed aunt’s tragic story. Likewise, Wang’s ancestors’ footbinding is counterpoised to the persona’s imaginary unbinding of her family’s concealed history of female oppression; a metaphorical unbinding that finds no resolution at the end.

The division separating footbinding’s oppressive nature and unbinding’s liberatory function is further revised in Wang’s retelling of her maternal grandmother’s life story (Waipo). Wang does not describe Waipo’s footbinding, but the painful and oppressive nature of the unbinding of her feet as well as her continuing physical and psychological bindings. Waipo has to unbind her feet when she sold herself as an indentured laborer to save her eighth baby sister

from death, as her parents, expecting the birth of a son, had not enough money to raise yet another new-born girl. The unbinding process is described as being as painful as footbinding: “It was even more painful to straighten those broken / bones, bent under the soles than to bind them in the first / place. My Waipo had to soak her feet in urine for two hours / every night – a folk prescription to soften the bones – before / she tried to pull them back into their normal positions” (“What Are You Still Angry About” 34). The unwrapping of her feet came at a high price: her own enslavement in a textile factory. She is finally *free* after three years of indentured servitude and straightening of her feet; a freedom that is ironically followed by marriage and motherhood if we consider Wang’s pervasive criticism to both roles throughout her poetry collection. Yet, Wang concludes Waipo’s story with admiration, emphasizing her hyperbolic courage, resistance and strength: “My Waipo is the most intelligent / and energetic woman I’ve ever seen. ... If she had been born in a right age, / she could have been a great politician or a diplomat, at least / an excellent spy” (34–5). Despite her binding to traditional roles as wife and mother she remains an authoritative and learned figure in Wang’s reconstructed story.

Wang similarly complicates the persona’s mission of unbinding her ancestors’ lives in “What Are You Still Angry About,” as she draws attention to her own bindings across cultural, generational and spatial borders. Wang not only adds her, and her sisters’, names to the female genealogy she writes along maternal line, but also confronts her own constricted voice. Although her two sisters and herself did not have their feet bound by their mother, their lives appear bound by gender and cultural strictures in the aftermath of China’s Cultural Revolution. The narrations of Wang Yan’s, Wang Haixia’s and Wang Ping’s stories contrast with their female ancestors’ in terms of narrative techniques but remain similar in topics as they mostly trace their experiences as lovers and wives—thus continuing the barbarization, exoticization and eroticization of Chinese culture and gender division. The standard sentences Wang uses to tell her forbearers’ lives are replaced by elliptical lines which mark the ongoing suffering and oppression that the three sisters encounter, ultimately portraying their lack of completion and fragmented identities.

This sense of fragmentation is presented gradually from one sister’s story to the next, culminating with Wang Ping’s own life summary.<sup>26</sup> Wang’s story gives insight into the sexist

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<sup>26</sup> The three sisters’ stories are also told in prose in Wang’s *American Visa*.

ideology pervading her childhood,<sup>27</sup> the pressure of societal expectation she endured in China, the failure of her love relationships and marriage,<sup>28</sup> as well as her feeling of incompleteness despite her university education, her new life in the United States, and her career as a poet, writer and teacher. Shorter in length, but more numerous, Wang's elliptical phrases—consisting of fifteen lines in total—reflect her inner conflict and fragmentation. The middle section of her story emphasizes her inner struggle for self-recognition, fulfillment and acceptance pre-dating her migration to the United States: "... problems with authority ... problems with men ... can't / obey ... can't say no ... torn inside ... start lying in order to survive" (39). The double repetitions of "problems" and "can't" foreground her rebellion and conflict against expected roles as citizen and woman, as well as her instability and conflicting identity. Graphically positioned in the middle of the paragraph, the phrase "torn inside" becomes the key of her story, a key term that is left hanging in the conclusive lines: "found a job at board of education ... started writing / poetry and stories ... granted a green card ... still searching for / something else ..." (39). Despite the stability she finds in the United States, she remains unsatisfied and incomplete, searching for her self-identity. She also demystifies the American Dream that can be read between the lines. The financial and professional success she finds in the United States is not enough to mend the traumatic moments of her life.

Wang's sense of incompleteness is furthered in the frame narrative of "What Are You Still Angry About" when she confronts the limitation of her voice in expressing her own metaphorical binding. Although she recognizes her luck at having received a university education, as well as escaped footbinding as a child or its Western equivalent, the corset<sup>29</sup>—two stereotypes of female mutilation across cultures—she presents herself as "an ungrateful beast" who "always feel[s] like screaming inside with [her] broken voice" (32). Although denunciatory, her voice remains broken and bound by societal strictures, which echoes Maxine's similarly *broken voice*. Hindered by the metaphorical double binds that China continues to wrap around her feet, to borrow Kingston's metaphor, the persona resists a Chinese patriarchal culture that has deprived

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<sup>27</sup> Wang points to the rejection she faces as a child, being the first daughter born to a family still hoping for sons, "already a sin" in Chinese cultural beliefs (39).

<sup>28</sup> The modern institution of marriage Wang faces is represented as damaging as her ancestors' arranged marriages. The freedom and rights granted to women paradoxically seem as constraining as her ancestors' confinement in their inner quarters at the mercy of both mother-in-law and husband.

<sup>29</sup> "I no longer need to break my toes to make lotus feet / or squish my liver and kidneys to slim my waist" (Wang, *Of Flesh* 32).

women of voice and identity and that continues to negatively impact on her self-assertion as a woman of Chinese descent in the United States. Far from being strong, her voice is oxymoronically broken; her screams voiceless. Writing appears as an alternative space to create new selves beyond cultural and patriarchal imposition; a place where her ancestors can be rebels and survivors, and where the persona exists at crossroads between reality and imagination, as well as between familism, collectivity and individualism.

Yet, although her voice produces feeble sounds in the introductory frame preceding her genealogy along maternal line, her voice refuses to be contained at the end of the poem despite its voicelessness and resulting uttering failure. Wang's urge to find what she is still angry about functions as a compulsive, yet hysterical, need to speak up; a need that surpasses the limitation of her voice and questions the role of silence as a form of rebellion. By hysteria, I refer here to its psychoanalytic usage, not to the Ancient Greek equation with women's "wandering womb" (Gilman 26) that permeated views up to the end of the nineteenth century. Freud defines hysteria as the unconscious resurfacing of repressed traumatic memories—thus divesting this concept from its female referentiality and locating it in the human psyche instead (Eng loc3421). These repressed traumas rarely materialized through speech, but often "transformed into corporeal symptoms," as David Eng explains, thus turning the body into "the discursive field upon which unconscious traumas find their displaced expression" (loc3425). Indeed, for Wang's persona, speaking up becomes as much an oral as a physical endeavor:

I must scream even though I have no voice.  
Since my birth, silence has been my single weapon.  
Now it no longer suffices.  
The need to speak  
leaves me restless like a hunger.  
My words may not say what I mean,  
but they're my only means.  
I must scream through my voiceless throat,  
Even if I have to burp and fart,  
And suffer from chronic diarrhea.  
I don't care  
I am tearing myself and this world apart,  
to find out why I'm still angry. (40–1)

Her need to speak up is not only compared to a hunger ravaging the body, but also described as an uncontrollable convulsion seeking a way out, if not in words, through *farts*, *burps*, or *diarrhea*.

The physical manifestation of this hysterical urge foregrounds the abstractness of her voice, whose words are not yet properly formulated, but more akin to uncontrollable sounds of the body—physical, primitive, grotesque and unmelodious. As the digesting or sick body expels excesses, Wang’s body rejects the excessive codes of silence that have allowed women’s suffering and oppression to persist over time and space. The unbinding of her own voice and identity at the end thus remains at the ambivalent junction of hysterical rejection and self-assertion. This ambivalent unbinding ultimately links her to her female ancestors as she writes herself as both oppressed woman and warrior. The bodily discharge imagery she uses here, although used as an unsettling form of social protest and self-empowerment, reifies, however, the grotesque *self-exhibitionism* that permeates her work.<sup>30</sup>

Accordingly, Wang’s poetry is rife with contradictions as footbinding and unbinding come together the more the poems unfold to represent the persona’s simultaneous disconnection from and connection with her ancestors through both pain and rebellion. Like Kingston, Wang revisits the dichotomy of footbinding and unbinding to explore the persona’s ambivalent double binds, torn between her cultural and individual identity, as well as her desire to break free from her disabling misogynistic culture, while simultaneously recovering her female ancestors’ obscured life stories. In so doing, Wang and Kingston represent Chinese (American) women’s conflicting identity negotiations, rehabilitate their female ancestors in the family history and blur the lines between self and other, individuality and collectivity, unbinding and binding to draw attention instead to the flexibility and permeability of these binaries. Schultermandl, who sees the mother-daughter relationship as a “quintessential location of feminist identity politics” (*Transnational* 12) argues in her reading of Jessica Benjamin’s intersubjective theory that “in light of the daughter’s identity negotiation between self and other, this absence of binarity enables a woman to imagine herself in a fashion that does not demand a hierarchical division between her self and her (m)other but that ‘breaks down the oppositions between powerful and helpless, active and passive’” (*Transnational* 66, qting Benjamin 48). Wang’s and Kingston’s protagonists indeed express their cultural identity not as a hybrid entity, but as conflicting and contradictory, highlighting the “continuous dialogue between self and other” (Schultermandl and Toplu 16) that infuses it.

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<sup>30</sup> Ma talks about the grotesque empowerment of bodily discharges in his analysis of Ha Jin’s Maoist poetry (“De/Alienation” 81).



However, contrary to Kingston who constantly destabilizes and deconstructs her metaphorical footbinding and unbinding imagery, thus portraying bound-footed women as victims of Chinese misogyny *and* heroic female warriors, Wang remains more drastic in her representations of footbinding which persists throughout her collection as an emphatic symbol of female oppression and maiming under patriarchy. Although “What Are you Still Angry About” imaginatively empowers Wang’s female ancestors beyond their physical mutilation, their footbinding remains framed within the same discourse of pain, suffering and disability that permeates the collection. Likewise, although *Of Flesh and Spirit* points to the ambivalent positioning of the persona’s ancestors and herself at the crossroads between oppression and rebellion, Chinese culture remains predominantly disempowering for both the persona and her ancestors. Indeed, by *glossing over* Chinese misogynistic sayings, customs and traditions, as well as demonizing Chinese patriarchy, Wang continues to depict a barbaric China which objectifies, pathologizes and eroticizes Chinese women’s bodies long after the abolition of footbinding.

## CHAPTER 5 – EXPLORING FOOTBINDING HISTORY IN FILMS AND PERFORMANCES: A MALE FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

*“Telling one’s story on one’s own terms is an act of self-empowerment and validation, as an individual and as a member of a group. It says, ‘I am here and my experience, our experience in this culture, matters.’”*

(Dan Kwong, “Counterpunch” F3)

Four years after the publication of Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, artist and performer Winston Tong brought footbinding to the theatrical realm with his solo performance “Bound Feet” (1979), a two-part show that presents him binding his feet on stage before enacting an erotic scene between two dolls, a man and a bound-footed woman. Produced in the context of the emergence of an Asian American coalition in the 1970s, “Bound Feet” retraces a Chinese historical and cultural past obscured by a century of Chinese discrimination, exclusion and marginalization in the United States. Yet, more than historical, Tong’s performance is artistic in scope. The literal footbinding performed on stage is endowed with metaphorical and symbolic significance as it stands for the mental bindings that keep a person socially, culturally and gender bound (Tong, *Wylde Ryce*). Tong explores these mental bindings through footbinding’s ambivalence as he juxtaposes and dismantles unsettling oppositions such as mutilation and erotic pleasure, masculinity and femininity, life and death, performer and spectator. Similarly, he presents a variety of bodies real and unreal, androgynous and gendered, in pleasure and in pain, physically present and imagined; bodies that provide his performance with metaphorical and universal significance beyond the historicity of footbinding. Despite its universal message, Tong’s performance remains very personal in tone, however, as it not only exhibits Tong himself, but also reveals pieces of his “dreams” as he calls them (*Wylde Ryce*)—traumatizing and haunting dreams which he delves into and with which he seeks to come to terms through performance. Yet, this performance evades any sense of unbinding or liberation, as it stages Tong’s ongoing fight against gender and cultural impositions.

Although this piece does not explicitly define an “Asian American consciousness” (Lee 293), as Asian American solo performance artists would in the 1980s, Tong’s “Bound Feet” not only contributed to representing the conflicting cross-cultural self characteristic of this period,

but also participated in developing an Asian American *feminist* consciousness across the gender divide—a *transnational feminist* consciousness attentive to the imbricated processes of racialization and gendering that have kept women and men bound across geopolitical and cultural borders, in China as in the United States, past and present. Similarly to Maxine Hong Kingston and other Asian American feminists, Tong responds in his performance to cultural nationalists' idealization of heteronormative masculinity and patriarchal system, which imitates more than subverts the dominant gender values of mainstream society (see Eng loc1894-1967). By staging disturbing footbinding scenes combining mutilation and eroticism, Tong denounces these past and present normative mechanisms that have kept Chinese women in ancient China, and non-normative bodies in contexts of diaspora, in extreme oppression.

Moreover, appearing the same year as the literary circle Unbound Feet's performances, Tong's "Bound Feet" can also be read in relation, or in reaction to Unbound Feet's staged readings, as his solo performance—through footbinding—draws attention to the mechanisms of oppression pathologizing non-normative bodies across the gender line, thus offering a twist to this literary circle's claim of an unbound or liberated body and identity. I therefore propose to read Winston Tong's "Bound Feet" as part of a larger emerging Asian American feminist coalition across the gender divide taking shape in the late 1970s and 1980s;<sup>1</sup> a coalition that not only contributed to writing the Asian American cultural and feminine self more subversively, but also explored the ghosts of the past in the hope of changing the present.

To give sense of this larger feminist coalition across the gender line, I will complement my reading of Winston Tong's performance with another Chinese American man's artistic production with feminist undertone: Arthur Dong's narrative film *Lotus* (1987). This film explores footbinding in the historical and cultural context of 1914 China—a time of important political, cultural and social changes. It follows the hard choice of a Chinese widow woman—a woman whose husband left for the United States—who sends her daughter away to escape footbinding in the name of love, thus disobeying her husband and mother-in-law. Dong approaches footbinding from a transnational feminist lens. His work not only illuminates the damaging effect of highly patriarchal systems on women's bodies and minds across borders, but

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<sup>1</sup> 1979 was a symbolic year for queer coalitions as the first Asian American LGBT community was formed in Boston that year. BAGMAL, the "Boston Asian Gay Men and Lesbians," now known as QAPA "Queer Asian Pacific-Islander Alliance," was the first "co-gender lesbian and gay Asian group" in the United States. See QAPA's official website: [qapa.wordpress.com/about-qapa/](http://qapa.wordpress.com/about-qapa/).

also portrays women's often-observed resistance and resilience to oppression. Dong thus deconstructs the Third-World victim script sustained by Western feminists in the 1970s and 1980s and calls attention to the counter-narratives that formed locally against hegemonic forces.

Yet, Dong's more distant historical and feminist stance—compared to Tong's expressive performance—also signals the pressure of the 1980s characterized by an increasing institutionalization of Asian American productions (Tajima 14, 24). Tong's performance "Bound Feet" escaped this institutionalization as "Bound Feet" was first performed locally at La MaMa in San Francisco,<sup>2</sup> an "experimental" and "non-mainline" theater that welcomed "underrepresented, underfunded, and often misunderstood" artists since the early 1960s, although it was subsequently televised and diffused at a larger scale.<sup>3</sup> Although less subversive and experimental than Tong's solo performance, as well as catering to the tastes of a larger American audience interested in China's exotic cultural past, Dong's film contributes to the retracing and writing of Chinese American history that his predecessors started in the 1970s. Set in a transnational context of Chinese migration, *Lotus* presents an overlooked aspect of migration as it explores the results of men's migration on the widow women left behind; their physical and psychological bindings as well as their contribution to the modernization of China and to Chinese women's emancipation from constricting social, cultural and gender bonds. In so doing, Dong rewrites the Chinese barbaric past predominantly diffused in the West, as well as deconstructs stereotypes of bound-footed women as passive victims by showing Chinese women's endeavor in the early twentieth century to put an end to disabling practices.

Despite Tong's and Dong's social, cultural and gender critiques addressed through their feminist representations of footbinding, as well as personal endeavor to write the individual and cross-cultural self, their representations remain endowed with a tinge of Orientalism, their representations visually displaying the female body in pleasure and pain. Although amplifying Tong's and Dong's feminist critique to footbinding's literal and metaphorical maiming nature, the emphatic focus on women's mutilated feet continue what Traise Yamamoto has called "the mechanism of visual fetishization" (53) inherent to Orientalism, a fetishization of course accentuated by the visual nature of the theatrical performance and film.

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<sup>2</sup> I am not aware of any other performing venue in which Tong's "Bound Feet" was performed. A televised version was subsequently made and diffused by Twin Cities PBS as part of its *Wyld Ryce: Weekly Art Magazine*. It is on this televised version that I base my analysis.

<sup>3</sup> See the mission and history section of La MaMa's website.

Tong's and Dong's works remain nevertheless innovative, if not transgressive for their times. Both artists' works spur the audience to reflect on their voyeuristic presence and participation in the objectification and mutilation of Chinese women's bodies, amplifying their critique to oppressive and disabling systems at the transnational level. Similarly, they use their representation/performance to ponder artistically on their own ambivalent and unsettling positionality as external and internal to the represented, thus echoing their somewhat uncertain position at cultural and/or gender crossroads. It is perhaps in the simultaneously personal and universal scope of their representations that Dong's and Tong's attempt at complicating Orientalist representations is the most successful, as both seek catharsis for themselves and their audience through art, while questioning disabling borders.

Accordingly, by putting these two visual works in conversation I will shed light on Chinese American men's contribution to Asian American feminism, as well as on the imbricated notions of race and gender that both artists tackle in their effort to dismantle normative patriarchal ideals infusing imperial China, the Chinese American community and American mainstream society. This chapter therefore focuses on the subversive ambivalence at the core of both representations—an ambivalence that visually reproduces yet complicates, if not subverts, these Orientalist processes of subjectivation. It also examines the genres of solo performance and narrative film, as well as their ability and limitation in ultimately subverting Orientalist constructions.

### ***Winston Tong's "Bound Feet:" Performing Physical and Mental Bindings***

As Esther Kim Lee explains in her article "Between the Personal and the Universal: Asian American Solo Performances from the 1970s to the 1990s," Winston Tong's performances were not considered Asian American *per se* because of the "apolitical" nature of his work and because he did not actively participate, conversely to his Asian American peers, in the creation of an Asian American consciousness (290, 293). Tong was less interested in the social and political movements defended by the emerging Asian American community in the 1970s than by the postmodernist performance art that took shape in the late 1960s and early 1970s (290). Not only did he use the stage to exhibit his body and self and explore his individual identity, but he also used the performance realm to experiment, destabilize and push the boundaries of the acceptable/conventional. Because of their experimental, and nonconformist nature, Tong's solo

performances thus remained marginalized from the emerging Asian American Theater of the 1970s despite their subversive potential.

Yet, his performances have much in common, nevertheless, with the works of other Asian American writers, artists and playwrights who sought in the late 1960s and 1970s to recuperate their historical and cultural past obscured by decades of exclusion laws, social discrimination and forced assimilation, as well as to re-interpret their cultural legacy in their self-assertion as individuals and artists. Indeed, although his references to his Chinese American identity remain subtle in his work, as Lee claims (“Between Personal” 292), his performances revisit and destabilize his Chinese cultural background as they present an artistic collage of cultural forms that better represent his cross-cultural identity, while advancing a subversive political message. As Eileen Blumenthal contends, Tong’s “extreme economy of means is akin to types of traditional Chinese theatre; his use of puppets, dolls and silhouettes recalls elements of Japanese Bunraku and Javanese shadow puppets; and his startling pervasive eroticism has roots in nineteenth century French Symbolism” (87). By combining Asian and Western artistic practices as well as theatrical forms in his performance “Bound Feet,” Tong refuses the fixity of genre and situates his performance in a postmodern transnational artistic context that destabilizes the separation of East and West. This artistic collage also serves to represent the protagonist’s ambivalent and conflicted self literally and figuratively mutilated by cultural and gender impositions, as well as by mixed feelings of pleasure and pain, desire and shame. Tong also complicates the line separating the Chinese setting and subject of his performance from the American background of its production and spectatorship, situating his performance at unsettling crossroads, while equally attempting to deconstructing culture altogether.

“Bound Feet” starts with Tong introducing the historical context of the performance: “In China you know the Empress is Chinese and so are *all her* subjects. This all happened many years ago. But for that reason, the story must be told. It would be a pity if it were forgotten. What pain is born in the name of love” (*Wyld Ryce*, my emphasis). Tong foregrounds the *Chinese-ness* of the representation about to follow set in this vague context of imperial China here metonymically embodied by the Chinese Empress. In so doing, Tong also situates footbinding in a feminine world, revisiting 1970s feminists’ use of footbinding as model for the mutilation of women’s bodies under patriarchal regimes worldwide. By presenting Chinese footbinding

beyond this new dominating discourse of patriarchal mutilation, Tong draws attention to the women's world in which this practice developed.

In the interview that accompanies "Bound Feet" in the *Wyld Ryce* broadcast, Tong explains the custom of footbinding beyond patriarchy:

This footbinding process started in myth. Its beginning is shrouded in mystery. *Somebody* decided to wrap up the feet up and tight. *Probably a dancer*. So this habit, this custom *got duplicated and copied*. It started with the upper classes and soon took roots in the middle classes and even sit down with the lower classes for a period of a thousand years up until the early part of this century. This binding is all purpose-bounded, socially, aesthetically, even religiously. It did everything. Women were immobilized in every way, and thought much more desirable in such a state. (my emphasis)

The common myth of origins that attributes the beginning of footbinding to Emperor Li Yu of the Tang dynasty is made more neutral.<sup>4</sup> No longer an emperor, but a "somebody"—who Tong hypothetically identifies as a "dancer"—started the custom, thus revising men's domination over footbinding, while equally integrating women's involvement in this cultural rite. The neutrality of his explanation is also emphasized by his use of the passive form to express the propagation of this tradition from one social class to the other ("got duplicated and copied"), as well as to present women's resulting immobilization. Although Tong does not blame Chinese men for the propagation of footbinding as the agent of this passive sentence remains undefined, women continue, however, to be objectified as they "were immobilized" and "thought much more desirable in such a state." This objectification is crucial in Tong's performance as it underlines the maiming nature of footbinding, literally and figuratively; a mutilation and objectification that seem to exceed an overwhelming patriarchal regime from the start.

The transgressive nature of Tong's performance is not only hinted at by the Chinese Empress' substitution for the Emperor, but also as Tong takes on the role of a woman on stage. Yet, his body appears somewhat androgynous beyond his feet. The black tunic he wears on black pants, as well as the black scarf tightly wrapping his head and covering his hair—although giving the impression of a bun—are quite gender neutral. Similarly, the make-up he wears, more than

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<sup>4</sup> For more on this myth of origins, see chapter 3 of this work.

identifying him as female, recalls the make-up of Chinese opera artists.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, by cross-dressing on stage, Tong invokes a dual footbinding history that blurs gender lines—the well-known history of women’s footbinding, as well as a forgotten and obscured history of male footbinding that took place in the theatrical realm. Female roles in the Chinese theater—“the virtuous woman, the female warrior, the coquette and the old woman” (Jackson, *Splendid Slippers* 97)<sup>6</sup>—were performed by male actors known as *dan* (female role category, see Riley 320), as women were prohibited on stage and in the theater altogether from the Ming to the late Qing dynasty (1911) (Wu and Stevenson 47, Min, “Male Dan” 80).<sup>7</sup>

Boys entered the opera world around the age of seven and followed an intensive training to learn how to perform female roles (Jackson, *Splendid Slippers* 97, Min, “Male Dan” 83). While some of them entered the opera because they were from a family of actors, most boys came from poor families who sold them to opera troupes at a young age (Wu and Stevenson 46). As Beverly Jackson describes, these boys had “to master all the attributes of being a woman—the feminine voice, the gestures of the hands and head, and most difficult of all, the mincing lotus gait. They were taught to walk with the toe of the front foot only a few inches ahead of the back foot and with the feet always close together” (97; see also Min, “Male Dan” 83). While some actors used props to give the illusion of bound feet by using a wooden support that they would slide inside the lotus shoe and wrap around their leg to hold the foot straight up into the shoe,<sup>8</sup> some boys practiced footbinding to more faithfully reproduce on stage the female role conferred (96, 97).<sup>9</sup> Indeed, their success as actors depended on their “feminized appearance and

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<sup>5</sup> The white make-up Tong puts on can also be read as a subversive act when contextualized in the broader context of yellowface performances in the United States.

<sup>6</sup> Roles called *qing yi*, *wu dan*, *hua dan* and *lao dan* respectively. See *China: Five Thousand Years of History and Civilization* 800-1.

<sup>7</sup> For more regarding the history of female impersonation in China, see Min, “Male Dan” 79-80.

<sup>8</sup> This technique called *cai qiao* was developed in the eighteenth century by Wei Changsheng (1744–1802) and adopted by male *dan* actors playing roles of the *huadan*—“a young, lovely, or coquettish female role type” (Min, “Male Dan” 81).

<sup>9</sup> It is not clear if the boys were subjected to footbinding before Wei developed the *cai qiao*. Jackson does not point to particular sources to retrieve this information. What this reference shows, however, is that footbinding was not exclusively practiced by women. In most male footbinding cases, it was done nevertheless to visually change the gender of the boy. At the opera, the young actors had to learn how to become female in a play of illusions. Male prostitutes found in brothels were also often binding their feet and were frequently associated with the theatrical realm, as many *dan* developed relationships with male spectators (Jackson, *Splendid Slippers* 37, 112-3). Jackson lists other cases of cross-dressing involving the binding of men’s feet. She explains that some mothers bound their boys’ feet to “fool the evil spirits into thinking that their sons were girls and therefore of no value” (37). Mothers thus loosely bound their boys’ feet and dressed them in girls’ clothing as “spiritual protection” (37). She also points to a more recent example of male footbinding that was performed by aristocratic men in the 1920s as they would



air” which were meant not only to convince the audience, but also to spur the male public to invite them to dinner parties after performances (Wu and Stevenson 46-7). Precisely because of *dan* actors’ feminine appearance and gestures, the role of actor and prostitute often conflated as many of them equally took on the role of courtesan. Indeed, Beijing’s “prosperous sex trade” was connected to *dan* actors who provided “artistic, erotic, and sometimes sexual entertainment to [their] male clientele,” as John Zou explains (87). Relationships between actors and upper-class male spectators had been in vogue since the late Ming until the fall of the Qing dynasty (1911), but became taboo with the development of Republican China (Wu and Stevenson, 45, 47).<sup>10</sup> Although performed on the male body, footbinding remained a potent marker of female identity as it marked the body as distinctively female. The cross-dressing of Tong on stage as well as the erotic scene that follows the initial footbinding performance echo this conjoined history of male feminization and prostitution.

Tong opposes indeed gender and cultural impositions throughout his performance, as well as the hegemonic patriarchal ideals infusing Chinese—and American—society, past and present:

“I don’t think that I come into these things thinking, ‘I am a man; this is the way I appreciate this thing.’ These aren’t sexist works. When I’m completely divested of all these stupid, asshole things that people think about themselves, I’m androgynous. I’m just this free spirit that sort of floats around and picks at the hems of certain things and says ‘Wow, this is coming undone! What’s going on here?’ When I am called back by the audience reactions, and I see that women feel certain things and men feel certain other things, and I see those distinctions again, I think, ‘Well, I must keep working the way I am working to break those things down, because they’re not so important.’” (qtd. in Blumenthal 91-2).

Taking distance from gender division, Tong explores instead what it means to be androgynous, this free floating spirit that brings him closer to understanding who he is beyond deceptive heteronormative impositions. This is reinforced in the second part of the performance as Tong becomes both male and female through the doll play he enacts (Blumenthal 88). Yet, Tong’s invaluable comment also underlines this difficult negotiation and representation of his

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loosely bind their feet to “squeeze them into the exceedingly narrow shoes that were all the rage at the time” (37). This loose footbinding probably did not require them to bend their toes under the soles as necessary to enter the so-called lotus shoes.

<sup>10</sup> *Dan* acting has been a sensitive topic since the development of Republican China due to the sexual nature of their roles (Min, “Male Dan” 78).

ambivalent/conflicting self—as the come back to reality at the end of the performance re-establishes normative and hegemonic norms despite his attempt at dismantling them through art.

The binding scene that follows delves into the gendering of this androgynous body through the practice of footbinding. Sitting on a chair, Tong slowly washes and dries his right foot before applying a white powder. He proceeds in binding the toes under the sole except for the big one, before binding the extremity of the foot and the heel closer together. The detailed binding process that Tong performs continues the Orientalist staging of Chinese women's mutilated bodies as the performance reveals aspects of footbinding done in the intimacy of Chinese women's inner chambers. Yet beyond this Orientalism, Tong involves the audience voyeuristically in this footbinding, raising their awareness regarding their participation in the objectification of the character's body and deconstructing the separate spheres of private and public that kept women confined to their inner quarters. Indeed, about to complete the binding process, Tong suddenly appears aware of the audience's presence. Raising his head he looks at the audience for a few seconds before hiding his body behind a screen. Disturbed by the audience, Tong performs the rest of the binding in intimacy. The binding completed, Tong removes the screen to reveal his two feet wrapped in white bandages before putting on a pair of minuscule red slippers. The first part of the performance concludes on him sadly gazing at the audience.<sup>11</sup> Combining intimate binding and public exhibition through this footbinding scene, Tong ultimately queers the intimate space of women's quarters as spectators voyeuristically penetrate it with their gazes, objectifying, if not eroticizing this young woman binding her feet.

To this binding scene is juxtaposed a dialog in Cantonese between a mother and a daughter, which reinforces the female realm that the performance recreates. Blumenthal describes this dialog as “light-hearted” at first as mother and daughter talk and laugh (88). Yet this dialog deteriorates with the binding process, as the daughter's screams and crying intensify, while the mother tries to reassure and comfort her. As Tong states, “the mother is explaining for the first time to the daughter what it is to be a woman in society. So the mother says, you've got to have very small feet before anyone would look at you. And if you want to be married and if you want to please your mother, and have a wonderful life you know, do this little thing for me” (*Wyl'd Ryce*). Yet, no translation is given to the audience, thus amplifying the mutilation

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<sup>11</sup> Blumenthal explains that the first part of “Bound Feet” concludes on Tong taking a few steps across the stage. This part might have been cut from the Twin Cities PBS televised version on which I base my analysis.

performed and the excruciating pain resulting from it. While the audience might not understand the context that this dialog provides regarding footbinding, they will catch the girl's suffering. The intensification of the dialog accompanies Tong's binding of his toes under the sole. By juxtaposing the binding performance to this dialog, Tong not only contextualizes footbinding within a larger historical background of mother-daughter's ambivalent bonding through pain and suffering, but also points to the dehumanizing effect of this practice. Footbinding thus comes to act in "Bound Feet" as a "metaphor of the conjunction of love and suffering" (Blumenthal 88) that binds women together. The mutilation performed by a mother on her daughter to improve her future while preparing her for womanhood visually speaks of love, pain and suffering—a conjunction that goes beyond the custom of footbinding and touches upon the complexity of the human heart. This dialog thus foregrounds both the torture and personal sacrifice of a daughter becoming a woman, which reinforces Tong's critique of the gendering of the human body that he approaches here through its extreme forms of crippling beautification and female bonding.

Tong also endows his footbinding performance with figurative significance as footbinding is symbolically displaced from the physical to the mental. Tong explains:

I just use footbinding as a metaphor for some problems that I suspected I was not alone in having nowadays; just a metaphor for the kind of mental-binding which goes on, especially mental binding, I think for the things we accept as given from the day we were born. Some of these things may be as obstructive as footbinding. Part of the reasons for doing this is to allow myself in performance to come up against these things time and time again to see if I could figure out a solution for such things. That this practice happened so long ago but is still so shocking and eye-opening today is certainly reason enough to re-examine the matter. (*Wyld Ryce*)

Deformed bound feet's ever-shocking visuality makes footbinding a potent metaphor for obstructive bindings beyond the literal mutilation of women's feet. For Tong, footbinding is as much about the physical mutilation as the internalization of hindering beliefs and practices that have figuratively kept women and men bound for centuries. Tong thus uses this old tradition to approach something much more "contemporary and universal," as Nancy Fusion explains (*Wyld Ryce*), that tells about human ambivalence (see Lee, "Between Personal" 293).

Yet, this universal message is also predominantly personal in tone, as Tong uses his performance to explore his own mentally-bound identity "culturally, sexually, and as an artist" (Fusion, *Wyld Ryce*). In his interview with Blumenthal, Tong explains that he produced "Bound Feet" when he "was going through horrible madness—and wanting to know why why why why"

(88). Although he does not comment on this madness he was going through at the time, he stresses his doubt and desire to know. By choosing to represent and examine this madness through footbinding's ambivalence of love and suffering, beautification and mutilation, womanhood and eroticism, Tong not only investigates obstructive gender categories and ties, but also his conflicting positionality toward his Chinese heritage. Indeed, this performance constitutes his first look back at Chinese history as for many years he "stepped back" and avoided "finding out too much about China"—a China that his parents did not talk about (Tong, *Wylde Ryce*). Footbinding "that must not be forgotten," despite its disabling and maiming nature, as Tong states in the introduction to the performance, thus metaphorically represents his conflicting perception of and attitude toward his Chinese culture and legacy, which, although disabling in a diasporic context, must be remembered. In so doing, Tong rebinds with his Chinese legacy that he previously left behind—recalling Kingston's and Wang's rebinding with their matrilineal legacy—yet rebinds through pain.

The dialog that accompanies the footbinding process furthers the personal significance of this scene. As Tong explains, the dialog is performed by his mother and sister, which makes him "instantly lapse into an authentic state of self-annihilation," as he comments, when "hearing them going through that pain" (*Wylde Ryce*). General in scope, yet personal in focus, this dialog involves Tong in his own performance, leading him to respond emotionally to the figurative crippling of his sister's body—a crippling he himself undertakes on stage to ultimately reflect on both the gendering of a child's body, and on his own personal cultural and gendered identity that appears confused. This sense of self-annihilation is dramatized by the exhibition of his physical mutilation. By involving his own family in the performance—although more distantly—Tong also makes of this footbinding scene a familial issue. As mother and daughter confront together the cruelty of this custom masked under discourses of love, Tong figuratively contemplates the familial and communal necessity to come to terms with their own ghosts and disabling ties.

Tong continues to explore the conflicting love and suffering at the roots of footbinding, bringing this mother-daughter bonding to new grounds. Indeed, Tong pursues his performance with the staging of an erotic scene that captures the imbrication of pleasure and pain in a woman's life. In the second part of the show, Tong brings to life the erotic encounter between a man and a woman in ancient China through the sensual, soft and gentle gestures of two dolls—but also through their more aggressive and passionate movements and actions, thus charging the

scene with tender and passionate eroticism. In his interview with Blumenthal, Tong stresses the power of dolls, which he describes as having a life of their own conversely to puppets which “have to be brought to life” (Blumenthal 91). Dolls enable him to create a variety of conditions and imagery, as well as a wide “spectrum of sensibilities,” in Blumenthal’s words, that would be impossible for one actor on stage to perform (91). In so doing, Tong also comes to inhabit both male and female positions, once again destabilizing gender boundaries and exploring the conjoined histories of male and female footbinding.

These dolls’ bodies are marked as distinctively female and male. While the male doll’s gender identity is biologically represented by his penis, the female doll—whose body does not show any sign of breasts or genitals (Blumenthal 88) but remains androgynous—is made female by her red lotus slippers. These slippers are made hypervisible as their red color contrasts with the whiteness of the dolls’ bodies, and the blackness of their hair; a blackness accentuated by Tong’s black attire and the black carpet on which the scene is performed. The vivid red also resonates with the tiny red slippers that Tong shod beforehand and still wears, thus linking Tong to the female doll. This parallel is furthered by their similar hairstyle: the scarf wrapped around Tong’s head gives the semblance of a bun that visually matches with the female doll’s. This visual pairing connects the character Tong embodies in the background with the doll, making of this erotic scene he performs a personal and intimate matter.

This second part starts as Tong sits on the floor and pulls out a black cover, which he slowly unwraps to reveal two dolls. Tong slowly manipulates the female doll first, as she walks toward the male doll, kneel in front of him, slightly bend forward in a salute before lying down next to him. As a short interlude, Tong puts on a white silk skirt, before pursuing the scene, this time with the male doll. The male doll kneels by the woman and salutes her too, before slightly touching her leg from the top to the knee. As he gazes at her feet, he suddenly takes his hand off to touch his crotch, his body and head convulsing back and forth, as if suddenly taken by an intense feeling of pleasure. Interrupting the scene once again, Tong leaves the male doll, his hand on his crotch, to put on a white silk coat, thus completing his own adornment.

Continuing this sexual encounter, Tong intimately places the male doll behind the woman, moving his head and hand closer to her feet. The scene proceeds with him caressing one of her feet before kissing it more fiercely and passionately. The female doll’s body slightly reclines at the contact of the male doll’s hands and lips. At this moment, Tong abruptly interrupts the scene,

suddenly wrapping the dolls in the black cover, and bending his head and body forward in what seems like a mixture of internal pain and shame. Taking a deep breath, Tong slowly raises his body and eyes to sadly stare at the audience. The violent covering of the doll is echoed as Tong slowly unties the scarf forming his hair bun to mask his face with this black veil, all the while looking at the audience until his face is covered. While this veiling represents the character's covering of his face in shame, it is endowed with further subversive significance when read in a larger historical context. In addition to being symbol of shame, the veiling also symbolizes the character's reclaiming of intimacy outside of the audience's voyeuristic gaze, thus disrupting the audience's expectation and sense of closure. This veiling is followed by the loosening of the protagonist's body as his head falls forward, and his hands—first resting in his lap—slide down, touching the floor. No longer the manipulator, Tong recalls the inarticulate dolls now wrapped in the black cover. This visual association between Tong's character and the dolls created by the veiling and inarticulation of his body at the end further points to the problematic presence of the audience, whose gaze seems to transform Tong into a type of doll himself. The performance however concludes on his getting up and walking away with difficulty, his body bent forward as he limps off the stage on his little red feet.

The physical distance that separates him from the dolls is also revised as Tong interrupts this erotic scene three times to put on his white gown and shirt before ultimately ending this erotic play and leaving the stage. This simultaneously accentuates his separation and connection with the erotic scene performed. His presence and mediation of the scene become emphatically visible: it is, indeed, as much about the dolls as it is about this mysterious figure Tong embodies in the background. As Fusion explains at the end of the *Wyld Ryce* broadcast, “the white skirt and tunic the character puts on make Westerners think of a bridal gown, but in Chinese tradition white is the color of death and mourning. Still another layer of complexity Winston Tong leaves us questioning” (*Wyld Ryce*). The sadness of Tong's face, connecting with this whiteness, symbolic of death, gives a different connotation to the erotic encounter performed with the dolls and leaves us wondering if the character is figuratively mourning for a past long gone or a future to come? Eroticism appears in a negative light as a dark force that brings pleasure but also discomfort, shame, inner pain and suffering. In so doing, Tong revisits the eroticization of women's bound feet to draw attention instead to women's ambivalent reactions and positioning toward eroticism.

The juxtaposition of arousal and mourning, life and death suggested by this doll play asks the audience to meditate on what this *becoming* performed by Tong signifies. This becoming seems to enact the character's progression into womanhood with the binding and clothing of her body, on the one hand, and with the sexualization of her body figuratively represented by the fetishization of the female doll's bound feet in this performed erotic encounter. Yet, this becoming remains conflicting as it is based on a series of contrasts. The display of footbinding as well as the revelation of this sexual scene between these two naked dolls is opposed to the clothing of the character who covers his body from his feet to his face the more the performance unfolds. Yet, the performance does not offer any resolution regarding the unsettling presence, role and ambivalent physicality of Tong's character. Contemplating this erotic scene with a mix of intimate longing and shame, while becoming a type of doll whose body appears inarticulate at the end, Tong's character remains both external and internal to the scene, observer and observed, manipulating and manipulated.

The ambivalent presence of this character echoes Tong's own conflicting identity. The dolls—possessing a life of their own—more than presenting an erotic encounter between a bound-footed woman and a man come to give life to Tong's inner fantasies: “once contact is made, my hand to them,” Tong explains, “it's like I live through them” (qtd. in Blumenthal 91). The dolls thus allow Tong to perform and reflect on “various facets of himself,” as Lee maintains, that he alone could not perform (“Between Personal” 292) and therefore address conflicting aspects of his identity. Thus acting as “extension” of his body (Lee 302), the dolls continue to tell Tong's conflicting personal story at gender crossroads no longer through the mutilation of his feet, but this time through footbinding's equally disturbing eroticism, as well as through Tong's double embodiment of male and female bodies.

Resolution—although not shown on stage—is found at the personal level through performance. Tong sees his artwork as a dream—“The whole thing is a dream. The smaller incidents are dreams within the dream” (*Wyld Ryce*)—a haunting and traumatizing dream, however, that he needs to perform to find a sense of personal resolution. Although he grapples with the violation of exhibiting his inner conflicts and fantasies—for which the dream metaphorically stands—performing becomes therapeutic as well:

You should have seen me when I started out. It was terrible. I'm in the middle of a dream, and I have to wake up to do a performance, and the performance has to be the dream! And I would think,

‘Why the fuck do I have to get in front of people and show them what I’m dreaming? You know, I actually used to be really shy about doing that bit with the two dolls in “Bound Feet.” I said, “God, how disgusting for me to do this!” Those were the most horrible times, when I had to perform with that monolog running in my head. But after working and working and working, I got over it, stopped condemning myself, and started to make use of this horror I would occasionally feel. It became head-clearing.’ (qtd. in Blumenthal 92)

The performance comes with an array of emotional responses—shyness, disgust, horror, condemnation—that render the performer more fragile and vulnerable at the personal level, but which also give him the means to explore his inner conflicts through art. By putting himself in the position of voyeur and executor of these unsettling mutilation and erotic scenes, Tong pushes himself to confront the ghosts of both cultural heritage and gendering.

Through these self-reflexive and self-questioning practices, Tong not only reflects on his own positionality toward the represented, but also invites his audience to ponder on their own uncomfortable position as voyeur to this intimate and erotic act. Tong’s call for collective self-reflexivity highlights his attempt at dismantling the heteronormative and hegemonic structures in which we take part. Indeed, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty claims, “self-reflexive practices” are central to the decolonization of self, identity and politics (*Feminism* 8). Yet, Tong subversively approaches these *decolonizing* self-reflexive practices through the erotic, thus involving the audience intellectually but also physically, if not sexually, in the representation. Tong sees indeed the sensual eroticism of a performance as the “root of everything” (qtd. in Blumenthal 90), as an important connector between performer and spectator. While he describes the ecstatic aspect of performance through the image of a figurative orgasm that the performer experiences on stage (90), Tong also talks about the audience’s inner response to the erotic content watched, which increases the general “orgone level of the room” and “makes people more accessible” and receptive to the performance and message conveyed as they “connect viscerally” (90). Tong thus invests footbinding with a subversive message of *erotic bonding* across cultures, as the spectators bear witness to, if not take part, in this ambiguous character’s conflicting sexual fantasies or anxieties and feeling of shame toward his gender, sexual and erotic identities. By thus provoking the audience and stimulating conflicting emotional responses in his spectators at the collective and individual levels, Tong makes them consider the disturbing elements in their lives and cultures—a reflection necessary to find any sense of healing and deconstruct oppressive heteronormative ideals.



The universal message of “Bound Feet” is accentuated by Tong’s music choice in the second part of this performance; Erik Satie’s *Gymnopédie* (Blumenthal 88). This calm ambient piano tune—following the violence of the daughter’s screams and crying—gives an atmosphere of intimacy and sensuality to the erotic scene performed, while also endowing it with a touch of sadness that mirrors the character’s mood on stage. Moreover, Satie’s *Gymnopédie* infers sexual, if not a somewhat subversive homoerotic connotation, to the scene. Derived from the Greek, the term *gymnopaedia* originally referred to the yearly and ritualistic dances performed by young naked Spartan men in Ancient Greece (*Merriam-Webster*). Although this music reinforces the erotic universalism of Tong’s performance, which contrasts with the emphatic Chinese background of the binding scene, it also contributes to destabilizing gender boundaries, this time more implicitly, recalling the free floating spirit and androgynous body previously invoked.

Although “Bound Feet” continues to Orientalize Chinese history through a focus on footbinding’s mutilation and eroticism, as well as contributes to the self-Orientalization and self-exhibitionism of Chinese American subjects at times of important cultural and ethnic refashioning, this performance also inserts itself in a discourse of resistance and subversion, as it explores and opposes constricting boundaries. Tong thus uses footbinding to stage a variety of physical and mental bindings that impact our identities and leave us in a conflicting and uncomfortable state between self-mutilation and resistance. This conflicting positionality is represented through the ambiguous position of Tong’s character at gender crossroads and his contradictory reactions, as he seems to endorse both footbinding and its eroticism, while simultaneously feeling ashamed, afraid, if not horrified when confronting its ultimate functions and meanings. The juxtaposition of contrasts and oppositions finds no resolution at the end and destabilizes the audience, asking them to ponder on the meaning of the representation but also on the larger cultural practices that we internalize and reproduce in self-mutilation—if not self-annihilation—across borders. The subversive potential of Tong’s performance lies in this ambivalent Orientalism that reveals a conflicting self-identification and assertion hindered by obstructive ties, individually and collectively. Through this experimental theatrical representation that refuses generic fixity but presents a collage of artistic practices and traditions, Tong ultimately destabilizes the geopolitical boundaries of East and West, as well as deconstructs the heteronormative separation of male and female bodies and identities across cultures.

### ***Footbinding and Transnational Feminism in Arthur Dong's Lotus***

Arthur Dong's narrative film *Lotus* not only complements Tong's performance in exploring an obscured chapter of Chinese history, but also Kingston in *The Woman Warrior* in her endeavor to retrace and rewrite her ancestors' life stories in the context of both migration and the marginalization of Chinese (American) women's history in the United States. Dong's thirty-minute fictionalized story (1987) is part of his *Toisan Trilogy* that documents early Chinese migration to the United States—an avant-gardist production for its time. While the 1980s saw the publication and production of numerous stories and histories of Chinese immigration, few approached it from a transnational perspective exploring the consequences of migration across the geographical, cultural, social and gender divides.<sup>12</sup> By analyzing the consequences of migration on transnational families in the early decades of the twentieth century from three different perspectives, Dong presents a complex history of Chinese migration that points to the intersectionality of gender, culture, race and hegemonic heteronormative ideologies in creating identities and subjectivities, while accounting for the local disparities and injustices created along the gender and racial lines in specific Chinese and American contexts and between the two nation-states. Dong thus refuses universalizing discourses of globalization, but pays particular attention to the internal borders/boundaries Chinese men and women have confronted in different local contexts and situations, thus accounting for Chinese men and women's plights and fights for survival in China as in the United States without, however, relying on Western discourses of *Third-World* liberation. In so doing, Dong's *Toisan Trilogy* proposes a transnational feminist approach to Chinese migration and history that ultimately deconstructs stereotypes of Chinese passivity and victimization diffused in the West, and equally contributes to decentering or de-territorializing<sup>13</sup> feminist practices to acknowledge—in this particular case—Chinese women's own feminist praxis at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Kingston's *China Men*, discussed in chapter 6 of this work, offers another case in point, as Kingston also looks at the roles and positions of the widow women left behind in her transnational approach to Chinese migration.

<sup>13</sup> De-territorialization alludes here to Arjun Appadurai's concept defined in his *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (1996). Appadurai's de-territorialization refers to the mobilization of people, goods and capital in our globalizing era, as well as to the layers of displacement engendered (37-39). In the context of Dong's film, I also use de-territorialization to hint at the territorialization of power and hegemonic structures that need to be dis-placed—and not re-placed in an hegemonic reversal—to dismantle unequal relationships of power across the globe that continue to dichotomize and subordinate East to West, Third to First World, South to North, etc. De-

The first *Toisan Trilogy* documentary, *Sewing Woman* (1982), deals with Chinese immigration to the United States, as well as immigrants' survival on American soil through the story of a woman's journey from Toisan to San Francisco based on oral histories and Dong's mother's personal story. The second documentary *Living Music for Gold Mountains* (1981) examines immigrants' life in San Francisco and follows the life of a laundry worker who finds spiritual comfort in music. The film depicts his passion for Chinese folk music, his commitment to passing it on to the next generation, and his personal connection to his homeland through music. The fictional piece *Lotus* (1987)—produced in collaboration with Rebecca Soladay—concludes this trilogy by providing a glimpse at the lives of the women left behind in China, the *widow women*, as Dong calls them, whose husbands left for the United States. Contrary to *Sewing Woman* and *Living Music for Gold Mountains*, which are based on oral histories and immigrants' lives, *Lotus* is a narrative film—a fictional construction of widow women's lives. This choice of genre, explained by the unavailability of Chinese widow women's stories in the 1980s United States, is more enabling in terms of its representational possibilities. Not bound to represent someone's life as faithfully as possible as it would in a documentary, narrative films have thus more subversive potential.

Set in 1914, three years after the Chinese Revolution, *Lotus* stages the persistence of traditions in a transitional time of social, political and cultural changes and examines its devastating effect on women's lives and family relationships. Dong approaches indeed the growing ideological conflicts between tradition and modernity across gender and generational divides, by dramatizing the perseverance of footbinding in an upper-class family of rural Toisan despite Sun Yat-sen's official ban passed in 1911. *Lotus* recounts the story of Lotus, a widow wife and mother who faces the difficult choice of binding her daughter's feet (Joy) to comply with her husband's and mother-in-law's wishes, or saving her daughter from the pain of footbinding to free her from the disabling life she has herself led. In so doing, Dong denounces the misogynistic practice of footbinding that inhumanly mutilates women since a young age in the name of beauty, good marriage and social mobility, as well as the dominating patriarchal regime that oversees it. However, by representing the conflicts faced by a mother in this

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territorialization implies therefore a de-rooting of power from Western soils, and an acknowledgment of Eastern/Third World/South's own hegemonic practices and resistances beyond the domination of the West.

<sup>14</sup> For more on transnational feminism's decolonizing mission from the 1980s to the early 2000s see for instance Chandra Talpade Mohanty's *Feminism without Borders*.

transitional time as well as her ultimate defiance to her husband and mother-in-law, Dong also points to the counter-narratives of female resistance that took shape within oppressive systems. In so doing, Dong breaks free from second-wave Western feminists' universalization of women's suffering and oppression (Fernandes 12-13) to foreground Chinese women's own plight and resistance to hegemonic practices locally and transnationally.

The film opens on a traditional nursery rhyme from Southern China that sums up a girl's life deprived of childhood, the white words dramatically scrolling up the black screen in silence:

At one year old, she cries and cries  
At two years old, she's full of smiles  
At three years old, she chops the wood  
At four years old, she weaves hemp fiber  
At five years old, her feet are bound  
At six years old, she embroiders flowers  
At seven years old, the matchmaker comes  
At eight years old, she gets engaged  
At nine years old, her hair is braided  
At 10 years old, she gets married  
At 11 years old, she has a baby. (*Toisan Trilogy*)

This nursery rhyme situates footbinding within a larger dehumanizing system that cripples girls physically and deprives them of individual identity beyond their future roles within their husbands' families. A girl's childhood is no childhood at all, but years in which she is prepared to become a woman, i.e., a wife and a mother according to the dictate of the *Three Obediences*.

The opening image of Joy slightly revises the nursery rhyme, however, as it presents her—maybe 6 or 7 years old—playing joyfully in the courtyard. The camera first focuses on her natural feet in motion, before zooming on her mother's bound feet shod in tiny embroidered slippers. While Joy runs and jumps, her mother, Lotus dances, slightly moving her feet forward alternatingly, the tip of the toes pointing to the ground. This contrast already presents a statement against the custom of footbinding as it captures a woman's restrictive movement on bound feet. A cheerful music accompanies these juxtaposed feet shots while the camera slowly zooms out to show the larger background and the mother and daughter joyfully dancing in the courtyard. Although this opening presents a happier childhood for Joy than suggested by the nursery rhyme, the juxtapositions of these misogynistic sayings and this cheerful scene, mother and daughter,

bound feet and natural feet foreshadow the conflicts presented in the film, while dramatizing the girl's scripted future.

The nursery rhyme that opens the film is echoed by the traditional beliefs and sayings regarding a girl's life and future reiterated by the mother-in-law, as she repetitively stresses the importance of footbinding in securing a good marriage match for a daughter. Joy is, indeed, already engaged to the son of a wealthy family who expects her to have tightly bound feet—in the same way as the mother-in-law expected and chose Lotus as daughter-in-law because of her bound feet. Lotus seems also influenced by these beliefs, sayings and practices. The film follows her filial piety and subservience to her mother-in-law, fulfilling the promise she had made to her husband to take care of his parents. She nevertheless contrasts with her mother-in-law as she questions these misogynistic practices and beliefs as well as undermines her mother-in-law's authority the more the film unfolds.

Although *Lotus* presents a world in which women appear as preservers and enforcers of traditions as in Tong's performance, it remains framed in a pervading patriarchal regime that regulates women's lives, despite men's marginality and physical absence. The son/husband/father figure is not physically present as he lives in California, but appears through material objects—photographs, letters, gifts—reminding the women of his authority and their respective duties. Indeed, his absence does not deter his authority. It is this patriarchal figure that spurs mother- and daughter-in-law to bind Joy's feet—although Lotus had postponed this task as long as she could. In a letter where he announces his home coming, he asks his wife about their daughter's feet, hoping that the binding went well and that Joy's feet are as small as Lotus's. Lotus is deeply affected by her husband's comment as his imminent arrival reminds her of the necessity to bind Joy's feet to fulfill his wishes and comply with traditions despite the new laws banning footbinding in China. Lotus's doubts are therefore silenced: she gives in to tradition and allows her mother-in-law to bind Joy's feet, despite her initial resistance.

Dong's critique to the pervading patriarchy that literally cripples women is made more dramatic by the transnational frame in which the story is set. The son/husband/father does not seem affected by the Western ideals encountered in California, but appears ingrained in Chinese tradition as he sustains footbinding. This depicts a Chinese diasporic community more conservative than the Chinese rural village in which the family lives. The absented male figure's adherence to footbinding dramatizes the preservation of outdated cultural traditions in diaspora,

despite the inevitable evolution of these cultural rites and beliefs in the homeland. This however contrasts with the progressive ideals generally sustained by the Chinese diasporic community (see chapter 2 of this work).

Also, read in relation to Chinese immigrants' plight in the United States in the early twentieth century, this man's attachment to footbinding magnifies the growing social gap separating him from his family in China. By holding onto this custom of footbinding—a custom believed to grant upward mobility to girls in marriage—despite a changing China, the husband/father inscribes the family's upper-class status on his daughter's feet, thus compensating for his own degrading and emasculating experience of economic exploitation as laundry worker in the United States. The father's social uplifting and feminization of his daughter's body through the cultural imposition of footbinding can indeed be read in this transnational context of economic exploitation and male symbolic castration as his ultimate effort to re-gain his severed masculinity and power through the exploitation, control and subordination of women's bodies and lives despite the changing values of femininity and masculinity in China. Moreover, the daughter's marriage has already been arranged with a gentile family equally linked to the United States. While binding Joy's feet, the grandmother emphasizes not only the good marriage and richness she will have if her feet are tightly bound, but also the gifts that she will receive from America. The daughter appears as another widow wife to be whose traditional and upper-class feet will continue to ironically mark the husband's success despite the plight, hardship and social degradation encountered in the United States, as well as regardless of China's changing ideals.

Concurrent with Third-World feminist practices developing in the 1980s (see Mohanty 5), Dong approaches the crippling effect of patriarchal and traditional bindings on Chinese widow women's lives, while foregrounding women's individual fights and small steps toward emancipation and independence at a time of important changes in China. This not only amplifies the growing social and cultural gap between Lotus and her migrant husband, but also the intergenerational gaps between daughter- and mother-in-law. While the mother-in-law enforces both traditions and her son's wishes, Lotus appears torn between old and new ideals, here exemplified by her doubt concerning the binding of her daughter's feet. Lotus's inner doubts are accentuated by the presence of her friend Coral, an Opera actress in a moving troupe who escaped footbinding as a child because of her family's low status. Coral's unbound feet, more than marking her low social status in 1914, represent her modern character despite the low

connotation of her job. Indeed, Coral encourages and helps Lotus to oppose tradition and save her daughter from the pain of footbinding and a submissive life as wife and daughter-in-law.

Although Coral's disapprobation regarding footbinding does not prevent Lotus from binding her daughter's feet, she influences Lotus in her progressive battle against tradition and female subjugation. Lotus asks Coral for help after unbinding her daughter's feet, the rebinding being imminent. While Coral had previously stressed the law banning footbinding, she now casts this custom as more disabling and undesirable for a woman than men's sexual advances. Lotus asks Coral at the sight of her being constantly courtshipped by men: "I don't bind her feet, what then? Would you like her to grow in all this madness, men always chasing her?" Although Lotus's comment openly debases Coral's life and status, Coral authoritatively answers: "Yes I would prefer that," foregrounding the undesirability of footbinding regardless of a woman's social status. This dialog is once again instrumental in spurring Lotus to rethink her daughter's future beyond the limits of social values and propriety. The presence of Coral and her important role in the liberation of Joy's body marks as well the development of female solidarities among Chinese women across the social and class divide.

Coral also leads Lotus to reflect on her own life condition and physical disability, and encourages her to question the *real* future her daughter would have if she binds her feet beyond the embellished sayings used to comfort girls. Dong accompanies Lotus's progressive thought about the disabling effect of footbinding with many shots on her bound feet to show the limited mobility bound-footed women have, as well as the mutilation at the origins of this practice—the visuality of the bound foot amplifying and dramatizing women's pain and difficulty in walking. The camera provides numerous close-ups on Lotus's tiny feet, awkward steps, and dandling walk highlighting her physical plight. Unable to walk back from the town after seeing Coral, Lotus desperately grabs a bamboo stick that she uses as a cane to make her way home. This dramatically conveys her disability—a disability that is made even more apparent and real when she takes off her shoes at home. The camera, zooming on Lotus's foot as she takes off one of her slippers, reveals the bloody bandages wrapping her feet. The focus on Lotus's bloody bandages amplifies Dong's denunciation of the inhumanity of footbinding, and women's suffering.

This zooming is preceded and followed by close-ups on Lotus's face disclosing her inner conflict. She moves her eyes and head around in search of answers, while she lightly frowns her eyebrows in pain. The dim light in the room casts a shadow on her face amplifying the drama of the scene; a drama accentuated as well by the sad music in the background. Alternating close-ups



*Lotus*, directed by Arthur Dong, starring Lucia Hwong in the role of Lotus. Photo by Laurie Craig. ©1989 DeepFocus Productions, Inc. [www.DeepFocusproductions.com](http://www.DeepFocusproductions.com)

on Lotus's facial expression and bloody feet are followed by a last shot on Lotus' face, as she raises her head and eyes to stare straight ahead, severely and determinedly.<sup>15</sup> This constitutes a turning point in the plot, Lotus appearing resolved to end this suffering, not for herself but for her daughter. The film concludes on Lotus helping Joy escape to Canton with Coral where she could go to school. Lotus thus chooses modernity over tradition and saves her daughter from the pain

and impairment of footbinding, as well as from the life of submission she would have as a daughter-in-law in a conservative and traditional Chinese middle/upper-class family, at the cost, however, of this distressing separation.

Dong's feminist stance and the denunciation of bound-footed women's pain and impairment are reinforced by his visual representation of the mutilation at the origins of footbinding, culminating with the binding of Joy's feet. This scene is preceded by a *mock*-footbinding act performed by Coral. Coral uses her hand to show Joy how the binding is done while commenting on how the toes are bent one by one under the sole except for the big one, and on how the walking on these re-shaped feet causes the toes to break. As Coral raises her voice to dramatically emphasize how toes are crushed, Joy hides her face against her mother's body in fear. Coral's explanation reveals what Lotus left unsaid to protect her daughter, thus presenting a

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<sup>15</sup> Similar close-ups on Lotus's face can be found throughout the film in moments of intense emotions. The camera captures her growing sadness, suffering and distress as she reads her husband's letter and his happiness at imagining his daughter's bound feet. Her sadness culminates when she tends to her bed-ridden daughter following her footbinding. Lotus's eyes stop on a pair of scissors that lies on the nightstand. Her slightly frowning eyes slowly move from the scissors to her bedridden daughter and back to the scissors at which she then stares. The unbinding of her daughter's feet is not shown, but is revealed as the mother-in-law discovers the unwrapped bandages on the daughter's nightstand the following morning.



counter-version to the mother-in-law's and Lotus's understatements. This mock footbinding scene, while traumatizing Joy, also foreshadows the torture Joy is about to endure.

Joy's footbinding scene shortly follows. It is presented from a triangulation between mother-in-law, Lotus and Joy. While the mother-in-law takes the role of actor as she binds Joy's feet, Joy becomes object in her grandmother's hands, and Lotus spectator helplessly looking at her daughter being tortured. The scene juxtaposes the mother-in-law's calm voice reiterating sayings regarding the good future footbinding will grant her to the violence of the binding process. The more the binding unfolds, the faster the camera shifts back and forth between the three women, zooming on their contrasting facial expressions; the grandmother smiling, the

mother compassionate and anxious, the daughter increasingly scared. The camera also progressively alternates shots of the women's faces and Joy's feet. Indeed, the camera zooms on Joy's toes being bent under the sole before refocusing quickly on the mother's compassionate, inquisitive and almost warning look. A last rapid close-up on Joy's foot follows as the grandmother violently pulls the bandages around Joy's toes, pushing them deeper into the sole. The camera ultimately returns to Lotus's face



Footbinding Scene. *Lotus*, directed by Arthur Dong, starring Lisa Lu in the role of the mother-in-law and April Hong in the role of Joy. Photo by Laurie Craig ©1989 DeepFocus Productions, Inc. [www.DeepFocusproductions.com](http://www.DeepFocusproductions.com)

showing horror and suffering this time, as her daughter screams in pain. The alternating shots on the three women's contrasting faces, juxtaposed to close shots of the footbinding process contribute to the fragmentation of these three women's bodies—a passage ritual to become a woman, it seems—while amplifying the suspense and drama of the scene.

The camera's constant return on Lotus's decomposing face at the sight of her daughter's fears and pain also shifts the focus away from Joy's feet. Although Joy's footbinding is made central to the film plot and Dong's critique, the main focus remains on the mother, as the title *Lotus* indicates.<sup>16</sup> Lotus's pain surpasses that of her daughter as the film not only follows her

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<sup>16</sup> A reference as well to bound feet that were called "lotuses" in China.

physical disability on bound feet, but equally conveys her psychological trauma as she is pulled between tradition and modernity, her own life and her daughter's future. The film closes on Lotus hobbling away after saying goodbye to her daughter, her back turned to the camera. Her slow and unsure steps epitomize as much her physical pain as her psychological suffering, as she sadly returns to her dutiful life at her mother-in-law's side. The lack of resolution regarding the mother's and daughter's respective fate gives hope that Joy will find a better future, while simultaneously dramatizing the mother's own sacrifice for her daughter as her disobedience to her husband and mother-in-law leaves no hope for her.

Dong's feminist and anti-footbinding stance culminates in this dual message. His sad representation of a mother's sacrifice whose life remains bound by patriarchal and feudal beliefs, counterpoised to the young daughter's promise of liberation, not only portrays the conflicting ideologies of a China in political and cultural transition, but especially Chinese widow women's difficult steps taken to change traditions and independently remake their lives beyond patriarchal commands. Dong thus proposes a conflicting depiction of Chinese women as he denounces their mutilation and subjugation under oppressive regimes, and revises the stereotypes of Chinese footbound women as passive victims of their plight. Dong endows *Lotus* with a universal message of love and human sacrifice to which spectators can relate across geographical and cultural boundaries. Indeed, Dong's film presents an ambivalent story of motherly love wavering between crippling and empowerment,<sup>17</sup> as it follows a mother's individual battle, transgression and self-sacrifice to save her daughter in the name of love.

However, Dong's feminist approach to Chinese widow women's plight and fight for survival remains grounded in sensationalism. Predominantly addressed to an American audience neither familiar with the intricacies of footbinding, nor with misogynistic beliefs and sayings dominating ancient China, *Lotus* relies on its visual medium to show the horror of footbinding, the disabling society that bred it, as well as the difficult lives of these women literally and metaphorically *bound* by disabling ties. It is precisely this maiming footbinding that the film trailer advertises. By presenting Joy's binding scene framed in its misogynistic sayings internalized and reiterated by the mother-in-law, the trailer stresses mutilation, accentuating

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<sup>17</sup> This story recalls the Cinderella story which received renewed attention in the 1970s and 80s by feminist writers to denounce and subvert patriarchal practices internalized and reiterated by women. See Angela Carter's rewriting of the Grimm's "Ashenputtel" in her tale "Ashputtle or the Mother's Ghost" posthumously published in *American Ghosts and Old World Wonders* (1993).

Dong's denunciative stance against the torture of young girls. Yet, by capitalizing on footbinding's maiming nature, Dong also entices the curiosity and interest of his American audience. This filmic lens thus remains somewhat Orientalist as it obsessively returns onto bound feet's exotic, yet disturbing and painful appearance. Indeed, the numerous close-ups on women's bound feet contribute to their fetishization, their bodies being repetitively zoomed out from the camera's lens. Dong's insistent focus on bound feet's deformed bones and mutilated flesh continues in 1987 to depict a barbaric Chinese past that never seems to get old.<sup>18</sup>

The somewhat Orientalist sensationalism of *Lotus* needs to be contextualized in the 1980s background in which *Lotus* was produced. As Renee Tajima explains in her article "Moving the Image: Asian American Independent Filmmaking 1970-1990," the 1980s were characterized by the institutionalization of Asian American documentary and film productions compared to the 1960s and 70s when productions remained predominantly communal-based in terms of funding and viewing (14, 21). As independent film producers, of whom Dong was part, slowly adapted their productions to "the structures of mainstream mass media production" (22), the topic of their documentaries/films was adapted to reach a broader audience through television: "although socially conscious," Tajima states, "Asian American documentaries reflect the constraints of television, conventions and tastes, positioned largely in the realm of history, cultural documentaries and personal forms" (24).<sup>19</sup> Dong's choice of approaching Chinese immigration by giving a glimpse at widow women's plight through a more general historical approach to the custom of footbinding at a transitional time of political, cultural and social changes exposes the pressure of this institutionalization despite his social critique to women's exploitation.

The pressure of institutionalization can also be seen with Dong's language choice. Produced in English, *Lotus* reveals the "aesthetic problem," as Tajima calls it (27), that Asian American filmmakers confront regarding the language chosen to "articulate to a general audience, an experience lived and spoken in another language" (27), which often points to the mediation of these cross-cultural productions. The discrepancy between the 1914 Chinese background—

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<sup>18</sup> The inclusion of footbinding photographs at the end of the *Toisan Trilogy* 2010 DVD, although emphasizing the film's historical stance, furthers its fetishistic approach to footbinding. The DVD features indeed photo galleries of lotus shoes, as well as women with bound feet—naked and shod.

<sup>19</sup> The original broadcast of *Lotus* beyond film festivals remains unspecified.

filmed in Hong Kong—and the English spoken by the characters in *Lotus* appears somewhat disconcerting, indeed, in the context of this historical approach to footbinding; a language choice explained by the language spoken by the Chinese American producers and actors, as well as by the audience targeted.

Yet, although Dong chose to approach widow women's plight in a transnational context of migration through footbinding, thus using a hot topic of the time to sensitize his television audience to a chapter of migration often ignored, his strong feminist stance can also be read against the backdrop of Asian American cultural nationalists' masculinist assertion in the 1970s and 80s. Dong, similarly to Kingston and Tong, responds to Asian American cultural nationalists' patriarchal proclamation, of which Frank Chin's attack on Asian American women writers' *white prostitution* is representative (See "Come Ye All"). Indeed, *Lotus*—and Dong's work more generally—seeks to dismantle the narrow gender categories that continue to divide rather than bring together the Asian American community in this time of ethnic cultural and political assertion. By calling attention to Chinese women's past of subjugation and physical mutilation, as well as denouncing the misogynistic beliefs and sayings permeating Chinese culture, Dong sensitizes the Asian American community to their own problematic embrace of maiming beliefs, practices and traditions, as well as resulting division.

Moreover, despite its sensationalization of mutilation, *Lotus* remains avant-gardist for its time. Narratives about footbinding, as well as about the transitional cultural and political time of the Chinese post-Revolution abounded in the 1980s. However, filmic reconstructions were rare, if not nonexistent. Dong thus developed visual techniques to convey the pain of footbinding beyond words. Furthermore, by having an all Chinese American cast,<sup>20</sup> Dong's work opposes the century of Asian American exclusion from the theatrical and filmic realm, as well as the offensive practice of yellowface that cast white actors in the role of Asians. In so doing, Dong joins his predecessors who, since the 1960s, had worked to dismantling the stereotypical Oriental roles played by Asian and Asian American actors in the West by developing Asian American theatrical companies and creating positive roles for Asian American actors beyond the stereotypical villains or sexualized yet passive Oriental women. Yet the de-Orientalization of

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<sup>20</sup> Lisa Lu, a famous Chinese-born American television and cinema actress plays the role of the mother-in-law. Her own daughter, Lucia Hwong—an American musician and composer—plays the role of "Lotus," and composed the music for the film. Coral is played by Patty Toy, a TV series actress. April Hong who played Joy has similarly become a TV series actress/ voice actress. See the IMb website for more information on these women's careers.

Asian American roles remains partial in *Lotus* as Dong has chosen to approach Chinese feminism through footbinding—a hot topic in the West since the 1970s.

Similarly, the plight of widow women in China was of little interest to Chinese American scholars in the 1970s and 80s. Giving them voices in his narrative film and including their stories alongside Chinese immigrants' stories, Dong's *Lotus*—and his *Toisan Trilogy* more generally speaking—offers an important transnational contribution to Chinese immigration and feminist studies in the late 1980s. By presenting Chinese women's patriarchal oppression, as well as their resilience and feminist praxis beyond Western intervention at the beginning of the twentieth century, Dong sheds light on the complicated lives of Chinese widow women who grappled with the absence of their husbands, while taking advantage of their absences to redefine their gender roles for themselves and their children, despite persisting cultural and gender ideals. Moreover, by focusing on Chinese women's plight *and* resistance, Dong deconstructs the stereotypes of Chinese women as passive victims in needs of Western salvation diffused in the United States and dominating global feminist discourses. Instead, Dong calls for inclusive and intersectional feminist practices that would account for women's needs in specific contexts and across the color line, while drawing connection across national borders. By approaching footbinding from this transnational context of migration, and from a predominantly Chinese feminist perspective, while reaching out to his diasporic community and mainstream America, Dong ultimately de-territorializes feminist critique from the United States and opens up the possibility of nuanced feminist alliances across national, geographical, cultural and gender borders to dismantle local and global hegemonic structures.<sup>21</sup>

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Tong's and Dong's works have contributed to the creation of what Linda Trinh Võ and Marian Sciachitano have called a “new politics of representation” that not only combines “positions of resistance and spaces of self-definitions,” but also questions constructed and imbricated categories such as race and gender (10). Both Dong and Tong approach footbinding from a

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<sup>21</sup> These alliances across borders echo the “imagined communities of women” defined by Chandra Talpade Mohanty in 1991, communities with “divergent histories and social locations woven together by the political threads of opposition to forms of domination that are not only pervasive but also systemic” (4). For more on transnational feminist alliances see *Between Women and Nation*, edited by Caren Kaplan, Norma Alcón and Mino Moallem.

feminist lens, denouncing the mutilation of women's bodies in the name of love, cultural belonging and social mobility. Their resistance to maiming cultural rituals, in addition to conveying a broader political message, is accompanied by their own re-interpretation and metaphorical use of footbinding to approach their cross-cultural identity and history. Indeed, both "Bound Feet" and *Lotus* echo the Asian American community's endeavor to retrace their cultural legacy and history, and to write the Asian American experience into American history. Yet, contrary to Asian American cultural nationalists who defended a masculinist stance in the 1970s and 80s, Tong and Dong sided up with their female contemporaries, showing resistance in their work to gender discrimination and misogynistic beliefs. As a result, they not only integrated Chinese women into Asian American focus, but also destabilized gender roles and boundaries, in the hope of dismantling the "hegemonization of masculinities," to borrow Norma Alarcón, Caren Kaplan and Mino Moallem's term (8), at work in mainstream society and within the Asian American community.

However, their feminist stance did not completely subvert the Orientalization of Chinese women's bodies. The visual display of women's bound feet accentuates the fragmentation and fetishization of their bodies, grounds China in a barbaric past, and contributes to fetishizing Dong's and Tong's ethnic identity for a larger audience (See Ma, *Deathly*). Although these representations and imagery are not enough to subvert their Orientalist underpinnings, the strong social and gender critiques they convey nevertheless constitute a crucial step toward disrupting obstructive ties across cultural, social, historical and gender borders. In other words, *Lotus* and "Bound Feet" provide dis-orienting Orientalist representations staging the hegemonic forces that keep men and women *bound* across cultures, while equally subversively re-appropriating them to ultimately destabilize, if not deconstruct, them from within.



## CHAPTER 6 – UNSETTLING UNBINDING’S LIBERATORY POWER: MAXINE HONG KINGSTON’S AND GENNY LIM’S IMMIGRATION NARRATIVES

*“Corporeally damaged bodies are ... a language in themselves, one that is communicable and shareable.”*

(Ng 652)

The late 1970s and early 1980s saw as well the publications of fictional works dealing with the obscured history of Chinese American immigration, exclusion laws, and disenfranchisement. These narratives continue the political and denunciative overtone of Winston Tong’s solo performance “Bound Feet” and Arthur Dong’s narrative film “Lotus,” as they similarly write Chinese immigrants’ racial and gendered mutilated bodies into American history. Indeed, while Chinese Americans’ and Chinese immigrants’ living conditions improved with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Immigration Act of 1965, their history of discrimination, segregation, exclusion and violence haunts Chinese American literature. Chinese American writers often articulate this traumatic past through imagery of bodily, mental, and linguistic mutilation, as well as portray a community of immigrants disabled by their race, national origins and history of exclusion. The disabled, deformed or mutilated body in Chinese American fiction dealing with immigration thus come to embody the disabling system of normative regulations to which Chinese immigrants were confronted upon arrival in the United States. The physical deformity of the Chinese subject thus offers a counter-narrative to American success stories and American liberation rhetoric as it reifies the dehumanizing consequences of racialization and gendering on the Chinese immigrant body—male and female. This counter-narrative is accentuated as the unruly corporeality of the mutilated or disabled Chinese immigrant refuses erasure, but haunts the narrative and constantly threatens to undermine the system that has produced it. Narratives of bodily mutilation thus serve an ambivalent purpose: while they magnify disabling processes of subordination and remind the reader of the undemocratic and unjust principles on which the U.S. nation is based, they also give room for subversion to *extraordinary* bodies, to use Rose-Mary Garland Thompson’s term, to destabilize hegemonic discourses.

Maxine Hong Kingston’s linked stories *China Men* (1980), and Genny Lim’s play *Paper Angels* (first staged in 1980 and published in 1991) explore the ambivalence of the literal and



figurative mutilated body of Chinese immigrants through the trope of footbinding; a mutilation which is equally racialized and gendered in both works. Although Kingston's and Lim's footbinding references contribute to freezing Chinese culture in its distant and barbaric past, as well as feminizing and eroticizing Chinese immigrants' bodies across the gender divide, this Orientalization comes with a twist. No longer used to portray Chinese culture as such, these footbinding references—when displaced to the United States—satirize and magnify American barbarism. Indeed, Kingston and Lim deconstruct the American Dream as their fictions complicate, if not erase, any sense of unbinding/liberation. Both authors dismantle the Orientalist move from footbinding to unbinding, and from oppression and liberation often associated with immigrants' journey from China to the United States, but deconstruct the success story and assimilationist rhetoric that this progressive move sustains. By magnifying the mutilation at the heart of the custom, while eluding any sense of liberation, Kingston and Lim thus negatively portray American laws and culture, revisit Chinese history and ideologies and ultimately reflect on Chinese immigrants' interstitial and marginalized position.

Yet, the deformed bound foot of Chinese female and male subjects refuses erasure and haunts both narratives. In addition to dramatizing the damaging effect of cultural, racial and gender offensive stereotypes, this corporeal imagery equally highlights the resilience of the Chinese body in the face of racism, sexism and heteronormative regulations. By drawing parallels of gender exploitation between Chinese and American societies, past and present, female and male bodies, both authors also contextualize their narratives in a broader transnational context to shed light on the larger hegemonic patriarchal system keeping male and female bodies in check across borders. Kingston and Lim thus unravel over-determined depictions of Chinese barbarism and contrasting American paternalism and success to suggest more ambivalent and nuanced representations of Chinese and Chinese immigrants' experience of mutilation and ground for resistance—albeit limited and contained—across geopolitical borders. By imbricating fiction and history, both authors retrace, recuperate, write and diffuse Chinese immigration history, as well as question gender inequality and discrimination dominating Chinese society, the Chinese diasporic community and mainstream America, while responding to

and complementing the patriarchal monolithic master narrative of Chinese immigration diffused by Asian American male scholars at the turn of the 1980s.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Footbinding and Detention in Lim's Paper Angels***

By juxtaposing Chinese male and female immigrants' experiences at the Immigration Station on Angel Island, Genny Lim's play *Paper Angels* (1980)<sup>2</sup> offers a broader perspective on Chinese immigration across the gender divide in the early 1900s, while filling the historical gap left about Chinese women's immigration—a female history waiting to be told in the early 1980s.<sup>3</sup> Inspired by the preservation of the Angel Island immigration center in the 1970s, and the discovery of Chinese male detainees' anonymous poems written on their barracks' walls on the one hand, and Asian American women's movement, on the other, Lim reconstructs Chinese male and female immigrants' experiences to give voice to their stories that have remained obscured. Following the publication of her co-edited book *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910–1940*,<sup>4</sup> her play diffuses more broadly this forgotten history, bringing it to the theatrical stage in 1980, and to the attention of a wider readership in 1991.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See the introduction and chapter 5 of this work for more information regarding cultural nationalists' masculinist stance and monolithic narratives.

<sup>2</sup> Genny Lim was one of the co-founders of the literary group Unbound Feet (1979-81). Footbinding continued to play a symbolic role in her work after the demise of the group. Her two plays *Paper Angels* and *Bitter Cane* present bound-footed characters. Her poetry collection *Child of War* (2003) revolving around her daughter's death is framed by two poems alluding to footbinding. However, her use of footbinding in her work also complicates the equation of unbinding with liberation that Unbound Feet's mission put forth, thus portraying her more complex and ambivalent delving into Chinese and Chinese American histories. Although *Paper Angels* was written in 1978 (*Unbroken Thread* 17), this play was not produced before 1980, and not published before 1991. For that reason, I have indicated 1980 as its official date—the date when it was first represented and shown to the Asian American community.

<sup>3</sup> Socio-historical studies accounting for Asian American women's experience in the United States began to appear in the second half of the 1990s.

<sup>4</sup> This study, in addition to transcribing and translating these poems, provides a historical insight into the establishment, development, demise and rediscovery of the Immigration Station. History and literature come together as the transcription and translation of the poems are juxtaposed to voices of old detainees interviewed for the project. Out of 39 interviewees, 8 were women and 31 were men; 32 were past detainees, and 7 worked there or visited the premises (*Island* 9). Historical documents, interviews and poems thus shed light on Chinese immigrants' experience of detainment and humiliation following their journey to America.

<sup>5</sup> In contrast to *China Men* that was widely diffused, *Paper Angels* escaped much academic attention. Published by Kalamaku Press—a smaller press distributed by the University of Hawai'i Press, Lim's plays *Paper Angels* and *Bitter Cane* have more commonly been read by scholars in Asian American and Pacific Island studies. *Paper Angels* was subsequently included in *Unbroken Thread: An Anthology of Plays by Asian American Women* (1993), edited by Roberta Uno, thus enlarging its academic diffusion. Conversely, her theatrical performances reached a broader public. While first performed in San Francisco (Asian American Theater Company and Chinese Cultural Center) and New York City (New Federal Theater) between 1980 and 1982, it was then aired by PBS as part of its *American Playhouse* in July 1985. See Lim's "Biographical Sketch" in the *Guide to the Genny Lim Papers 1982-1997*. *Paper*

*Paper Angels* is set in 1915 at the Immigration Station opened to control the new incoming wave of *paper sons* in the aftermath of the earthquake that ravaged San Francisco in 1906. This play stages Chinese immigrants' despair as they wait to be granted entrance into the United States. Set in this historical context, *Paper Angels* follows two groups of detainees: four Chinese men (one railroad worker returning to the United States, one poet and two peasants), and three Chinese women (one peasant, and two wives accompanying their husbands). This one-act play juxtaposes these male and female immigrants' stories and opposes their beliefs, dreams and expectations coming to the United States and the harsh reality they confront at the detention center. Their frustration, despair, and suffering are increased by their endless waiting, their numerous interrogations, American authority's oppressive and racist ways, as well as the illusive salvation offered by missionaries. As Lim explains in an interview, this play presents "a cross-section of different immigrants to show the diversity of their individual hopes and dreams and how these people, in a crisis situation, made different choices for survival—each in his own way trying to retain a sense of cultural integrity when driven to the edge" (qtd. in Koyama n.p.). It is indeed an ambivalent story of oppression and resistance, subjugation and survival that Lim tells across the gender line.

Yet, Chinese immigrants—male and female alike—remain trapped and suspended in time and place at the end of the play, despite their individual fights for survival and attempts at protesting the discrimination encountered. Their protests are ignored, and their liberation from the detention center—when granted—does not resemble freedom, as their fate remains bound to the discriminatory laws and racial injustice governing mainstream society. As with Kingston's protagonists in *China Men*, Lim's characters are thus left to inhabit a liminal place at the junction of China and the United States, as well as a more general liminal position between freedom and imprisonment, liberation and subjugation, assertion and Orientalization beyond the "agonizing limbo" of Angel Island (Koyama n.p.). This leaves the readers with a negative perception of the Chinese immigrant experience at the turn of the twentieth century. However, as Lim states in an interview, this darker ending also contributes to depicting different types of heroes—non-Western heroes whose heroism is not predicated on their success but on their strength and resilience: "Certain feminists would want the women of this play to triumph. I see that as a

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*Angels* was subsequently performed in the 1990s and 2000s. It was last staged in 2015 in New York, Tacoma and Seattle in Immigration-related cultural centers.

Western interpretation and definition of feminism—that women should have to take on the patriarchal value system and ... conquer in the same way that Western heroes conquer. My characters are strong but they don't function like Western heroes" (Uno, "Paper Angels" 14). By offering a different type of female heroism based on strength and resilience, *Paper Angels* thus remains transgressive of Western hegemonic narratives—literary, artistic and political—despite its somewhat negative ending.

It is notably through ambivalent images of mutilated feet that Lim portrays Chinese female immigrants' traumatic past of exclusion and detention, as well as resilience and strength—ambivalent imageries that dominate the play's script, yet remain in the background of staged representations. Indeed, footbinding is not part of the play's first staged version<sup>6</sup> directed by Amy Hill and produced by John Ng that was on view at the Asian American Theater Company in San Francisco between September and October 1980 (see *Unbroken Thread* 17).<sup>7</sup> None of the female characters are represented with bound feet, although Lim's script lets believe that Mei Lai, a traditional and conservative wife and mother-to-be, has bound feet, as will be discussed below. This visual erasure of footbinding on stage might have been for practical reasons, bound feet requiring certain props to be represented on stage. Yet, this visual erasure, as well as the omission of most of the scenes referring to footbinding in the script, also conveys a subversive message as it refuses the visual fetishization and exposition of Chinese women's mutilated feet in the context of migration. This discrepancy between written and staged versions, also amplifies the figurative and important function that footbinding has in the written script, as it is used at specific moments of the plot not only to highlight the different social and cultural values sustained by detainees, but also to magnify the apparatuses of control and racialization used at the U.S. border and by Christian missionaries in their attempt at converting and *saving* Chinese women.

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<sup>6</sup> Subsequent versions have similarly left footbinding in the background. See for instance Mu Performing Arts' *Paper Angels*, directed by Kim Hnes and shown in the spring of 1995 at the Southern Theater in Minneapolis ([www.muperformingarts.org/production/paper-angels](http://www.muperformingarts.org/production/paper-angels)); Victoria Linchong's *Paper Angels* shown in San Francisco in September 2010 ([victorialinchong.com/paper-angels](http://victorialinchong.com/paper-angels)); and SIS Productions' *Paper Angels* directed by David Hsieh and shown at Dukesbay Theater in Tacoma and at INscape in Seattle in August 2015 (Hastings, n.p.).

<sup>7</sup> See *Unbroken Thread* for more information concerning the first stage production and the actors' cast (17). The play itself can be viewed online on the UC Santa Barbara Library website: [archive.org/details/cusb\\_000172](http://archive.org/details/cusb_000172). Accessed April 18, 2017.

Indeed, by juxtaposing Chinese female characters' contrasting views of footbinding to American officials' surveillance apparatuses, and Christian missionaries' Orientalist vision of bound-footed women as child-like victims of Chinese barbarism, Lim dramatizes footbinding's victim script in her written play and simultaneously questions Chinese barbarism to expose the disabling America that Chinese immigrants—male and female—faced upon arrival. Lim suggests that it is not only footbinding as such that is disabling, but American laws and cultural imposition that reify Chinese immigrants' racial and cultural difference and regulate their life at the border and on American soil. Lim thus addresses a critique to the disabling immigration policies, racist thoughts and Christian precepts defining Chinese women's early experience in the United States, while deconstructing the liberatory unbinding rhetoric deployed by Chinese revolutionary women in their self-assertion at the turn of the twentieth century.

Footbinding appears in the prologue of the written play as a historical acknowledgment of Chinese immigrants' trauma and the intimidation tactics used by officials during cross-examinations to verify Chinese applicants' identity and testimonies.<sup>8</sup> The *in-media res* interrogation of a Chinese applicant draws attention to paper sons' history, but also to the role played by footbinding—even if secondary—in Chinese immigration history. After asking personal questions about the applicant's identity (full name, date of birth, village, parents' names), the inspector proceeds in asking him about his mother's feet:" "What kind of feet had she?" (6). It was customary for Angel Island guards to ask about the detainees' mothers' feet to determine their family's social background and respectability,<sup>9</sup> but also to verify the validity of their stories, and compare them with relatives' testimonies, when applicable. The precision of these questions deepens the intimidating conditions of interrogation applicants had to go through, as well as the trauma of uncertainty and detention that kept immigrants "*suspended in silent postures of expectation, longing and fear,*" as the stage direction reads (5). Their fate often depended solely on these interrogations whose purpose, as Lim points out, was mainly to catch

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<sup>8</sup> No reference to the applicant's mother's feet is made in Hill and Ng's staged version. Moreover, while the prologue of the written version is quite short, giving a glimpse at the types of questions immigrants were asked, the prologue of the staged version is considerably longer, thus depicting the length of these interrogations and the repetitiveness and minuteness of the questions asked.

<sup>9</sup> For inspectors at Angel Island, bound feet served to distinguish between merchant and peasant families although footbinding had already declined at the turn of the twentieth century in China. If the mother or grandmother had unbound feet, the candidate was more likely to be from a rural background, even though in reality, this hypothesis was not defensible. See chapter 2 of this work.

immigrants in their own lies, rendering these numerous questionings and the endless waiting that followed traumatizing. Their entry into the United States depended on how well they had memorized the identity and coaching papers they were given prior to immigration, or in other words, on how well they had embraced the new identity they had bought. Imitating the historical interrogation transcripts found in the Immigration Station's archives, this prologue thus indicates the historicity of the play.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to dramatizing the role played by footbinding in verifying immigrants' identity and defining their fate across the gender line, Lim uses footbinding to highlight the social, generational and ideological gap separating female immigrants. This gap is amplified and exacerbated by the confining environment of the detention center in which immigrants lived in segregated and overcrowded barracks for weeks or months on ends. Immigrants' detention, endless waiting, and repeated and intimidating cross-examinations coupled with their mixed feelings of despair, frustration, alienation and dehumanization often spurred them to hold onto past values and dreams—at times desperately so—to keep a sense of cultural and individual self in the face of subjugation. It is at times, however, by protesting and rebelling against the unjust systems that govern their lives across borders that some immigrants asserted themselves and attempted to find a sense of self outside of these constricting bounds, thus creating conflicts among detainees.

Detainees' conflicting cultural preservation and rejection can be seen at the beginning of the play in the altercation between two women, Mei Lai, the wife of a young poet also detained, and Ku Ling, a young peasant traveling alone to the United States. Their altercation regards women's position in Chinese society as defined by a woman's footbinding. This altercation is found in the written and staged versions of *Paper Angels*—the only reference indeed to footbinding that has been kept in Hill and Ng's production. Although quite young compared to Chin Moo—the third female character of the play, an old village woman and widow wife defending feudal values (Lim, in Koyama n.p.)—Mei Lai embodies a bound-footed woman defending Confucian values and codes of conduct. She is described in the characters list of Lim's 1993 written version (published in *Unbroken Thread: An Anthology of Plays by Asian American*

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<sup>10</sup> In an interview, Lim explains that her play is “drawn from true incidents. None of it is fabrication” (qtd. in Koyama n.p.). She further declares: “When I originally wrote the play, I deliberately tried to avoid depicting any of the real horror stories, because I was worried that people might think I was heightening reality by adding artificial moments of sensationalism. But history is sensationalistic.”

*Women*) as possessing “all the virtues of an ideal Chinese woman[,] [p]atient and loyal, gentle and loving, graceful and considerate,” yet “feeling a profound sense of loss and insecurity underneath her complacency” (*Unbroken Thread* 18). Her bound feet—although described by Ku Ling as somewhat unbound, or loosened—tie in with her embrace of Chinese traditional values and denote her belonging to a respectable social class when read in contrast to Ku Ling’s natural feet and peasant status.

In a scene where her words are juxtaposed to those of her husband—which dramatizes gender segregation at the detention center—Mei Lai says aside: “As a daughter, I have never questioned the wisdom of my father; as a wife, I am prepared to follow my husband; and as a mother, I will abide by my son’s wishes” (31). She appears as a traditional woman following the dictates of the *Three Obediences* that regulated Chinese women’s lives for centuries. Pregnant at the beginning of the play, she wishes for a son, a son she promises to follow as she has followed father and husband, to complete her role as woman. Mei Lai represents the Chinese immigrant wife and mother, whose bound feet speak of her devotion, submission and malleability—a model of the female immigrant historically exempted from the Exclusion Act of 1882.<sup>11</sup>

Conversely, Ku Ling, with her young age, natural feet, low social status, and lack of companionship in this journey resonates with the more dubious type of female immigrants that reached the United States—the young girls often sold into prostitution that were barred from entering into the United States since the Page Act of 1875. Indeed, Lim describes Ku Ling as a “moody peasant girl from extreme poverty,” “alone in the world,” and possessing “all the qualities considered unacceptable to a well-bred Chinese girl: headstrong and rebellious, independent and unladylike” (*Unbroken Thread* 18). Her natural feet that Mei Lai associates with her literal and metaphorical *wandering* in the second scene come to symbolize Ku Ling’s lower social status, and magnify her sad fate in the context of American exclusion laws. Not only is she raped on the ship that brought her to the United States, but she discovers at the end that her father sold her to a house of prostitution. After being raped, her attitude, trauma and angry protests against Chinese values, increased by her inability to cope with the endless waiting and the uncertainty of her condition, show her disdain at women’s disposability in Chinese culture and respond strongly to women’s blind embrace and internalization of crippling customs, values

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<sup>11</sup> See chapter 2 of this work.

and beliefs. Ku Ling angrily and sarcastically condemns Chinese sayings and treatment of daughters at the beginning, as she yells degrading sayings in reaction to her fellow inmates' discussion of a woman's virtue and role: "The gods forbid a daughter with a stomach. She'll eat you out of rice and home!"; "If it's a girl, you'd better drown her or sell her" (15).

The contrast between Mei Lai and Ku Ling culminates in scene 2 in their altercation regarding a woman's respectability and social status. After hearing the story of Chin Moo, who waited for forty years for her husband to come back to China, Ku Ling interjects with disgust: "You wouldn't catch me burning incense for forty years!" ... "Hmph to be faithful is to be foolish! Better to drown oneself in the pond than live in such misery!" (7). Shocked by Ku Ling's lack of morals, Mei Lai warns her of the risk she is taking in violating a woman's conduct: "For shame, Ku Ling! You had better mend your tongue before it is too late ... For you to remain a virtuous Chinese girl. (*Sarcastically*) There is a name back home for girls with unbound feet who wander" (17). Ku Ling's verbal protest and condemning tone, coupled with her low status and unbound feet, according to Mei Lai, speak of her dishonorable *wandering* that ironically associates her ability to walk with her sexual promiscuity. Mei Lai's sarcastic allusion hits home, as Ku Ling's respectability have already been sullied by the rape that occurred on the ship, spurring her to attack Mei Lai in retribution: "Madam, your feet are not exactly tiger-lilies. One can see they are big enough to do a bit of wandering on their own" (17). In a desperate effort to regain a sense of face, Ku Ling attacks Mei Lai's respectability and integrity by alluding to her loose feet and ability to wander, thus deconstructing the virtuous model of femininity Mei Lai unquestioningly embraces. However, the comic effect produced by these puns and tirades amplify the dramatic situation of these detainees, attacking each other in self-preservation.

More than displaying a certain rivalry between the two women, this altercation foregrounds the changing Chinese society and culture of the early 1900s, on the one hand, and the traumatic effect of migration, detention, interrogation, uncertainty, physical and verbal violence on female immigrants, on the other. Ku Ling's reaction to Mei Lai's words gives way to more angry remarks directed toward both Chinese society, and their liminal position and tragic situation at the detention center: "You can all sit and rot here with your prayer-sticks. I'm not going to wait. I'm getting out of here, do you hear me?" (18); "I wish I was dead" (18); "I hate this place. I hate the way the guards look at us. So this is *Gum San!* The land of barbarians. If I was a man and I had a sword, I would kill them all" (19). Her anger culminates with her tears, as



she is unable to cope with her powerlessness against sexism, exploitation, and incarceration. In contrast with Mei Lai and Chin Moo who believe in a better life and in the American Dream, Ku Ling's dreams are shattered from the beginning, thus reinforcing the sadness and tragedy of her condition. No longer perceived as Gold Mountain, the United States becomes in her eyes the "land of barbarians," a term that denounces the inhumane conditions detainees lived at the Immigration Station.

The rivalry communicated in this short altercation dissolves the more the play unfolds to disclose female immigrants' supportive attitude toward one another in the face of American adversity, regardless of the personal values and beliefs they defend. Mei Lai taking on the role of mother, subsequently consoles Ku Ling, helping her to deal with her post-traumatic stress disorder resulting from the rape.<sup>12</sup> While their social distinction is gradually blurred, and trivialized in their everyday life at the detention center, it is, however, magnified at the end of the play, as their fate seems to follow their social background, as will be discussed shortly.

Lim dramatizes this temporary conflict between the two women, in the written play, as she provides, a few scenes later, a counter-example to this debate about footbinding, gentility, respectability and a woman's literal and metaphorical wandering. This counter-example satirizes the use of footbinding at the border to distinguish female immigrants' social status during exclusion laws. A male detainee, Chin Gung, a former railroad worker returning to the United States with his wife after a visit in China, tells the other inmates about Gold Mountain through a short anecdote regarding a bound-footed sing-song girl who ventured outside of Chinatown:<sup>13</sup>

I remember when I first came here how big the city seemed. I was young and I wasn't afraid of anything. Chinatown was home. They warned us never to leave Chinatown because the white devils would stone you. I didn't believe them. One time I wandered past California Street and saw a group of white boys taunting a sing-song girl. She ignored them and kept right along on her bound feet. One of the boys ran up to her and snatched at her earring. Ripped it right off her ear! (32-3).

This story underlines the anti-Chinese and racist sentiments permeating California, the violence Chinese immigrants encountered when venturing outside of the segregated zone of Chinatown, as well as the Chinese prostitute's vulnerability as she is physically harassed by white men.

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<sup>12</sup> Scene 7 concludes on Mei Lai holding Ku Ling in her arms, "*cradl[ing] her like a baby*" after she wakes her up from a nightmare (stage direction, 31).

<sup>13</sup> This anecdote is not included in Hill and Ng's staged production.

Complementing the racist discourses propagated by guards and inspectors at the detention center,<sup>14</sup> this anecdote deconstructs male detainees' American Dream of gold, success and self-realization. Footbinding thus heightens the prostitute's victimization: despite her attempted resistance, she is unable to physically escape the white boys. It is not her footbinding that seems disabling, however, as she is described as "ignor[ing] them and k[ee]ping right along on her bound feet" (33). It is the American society that is made disabling through the boys' gratuitous violence that Chin Gung accentuates in his emphasis on the prostitute's earring ripped out her ear.

This passage also complicates common assumptions about Chinese immigrants' appearance and the clear-cut social categories of female immigrants at the border. Venturing outside of the confines of Chinatown, the prostitute of Chin Gung's story has wandered beyond the attributed zone, debunking the idea of bound-footed women's inability to wander literally and metaphorically. This prostitute, with her bound feet despite her low status as sex worker, contrasts with the respectable, genteel and upper-class woman that Mei Lai embodies in the previous scene. This contrast ultimately deconstructs set categories as the bound-footed woman remains an ambiguous figure ranging from the virtuous wife to the degraded prostitute.

While pointing to the ambivalence of Chinese customs and social status in the 1910s, footbinding equally underscores the somewhat contradictory vision and treatment of Chinese immigrants in the United States. Whereas footbinding strengthens the disabling effect of American racism and exclusion laws in Chin Gung's episode, the custom symbolizes Chinese heathenism and savagery when approached from the Orientalist perspective of Gregory, a female Methodist missionary. In addition to condemning footbinding for the physical mutilation it enacts, Gregory opposes it for its larger symbolism of Chinese barbarism that contrasts with her Christian values and beliefs. In her attempt at saving Chinese women's souls, Gregory perpetuates the Oriental victim script of Chinese barbarism, intensifies the United States's paternalistic attitude toward immigrants deemed racially and culturally inferior, and deploys an

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<sup>14</sup> Scene 8 presents the soliloquy of Henderson, a guard said to be "patriotic" and "bigoted:" "If I had my way, I'd ship the whole lot of 'em back to China. Goddamit, America is for Americans, they don't belong here! If they keep coming, there won't be any jobs left for decent white men. We've got to protect what's ours. The Chinamen are here to take what they can get. Do you think they give a damn about our country? Do you think they'd fight for Uncle Sam? Hell, no. If they want our jobs now, what do you think they'll want next? Our homes, our land, our money, our women? I got a daughter, you know? She's the most precious thing I got in this world. If any slimey Chink ever laid a hand on her, I'd cut off his balls!" (38). The racist insults, and the anti-Chinese sentiments propagated in this soliloquy exemplify the racist United States that Chinese immigrants encountered.

illusory rhetoric of salvation that masks the missionaries' equally oppressive and subjugating mission. Her cheerful attitude toward Chinese female detainees and her mission to baptize them—now that they have ironically become *American* (O'Connor n.p.)—attract little sympathy, but exposes the alienating effect of Christian missions on Chinese immigrants. Lim thus dramatizes footbinding's victim script by pointing to Chinese women's subjugation, infantilization and dehumanization under both American exclusion laws and the Methodist Church.

Footbinding appears as *the* physical marker of Chinese barbarism in Gregory's eyes that justifies her Christian intervention and necessity to save Chinese women physically and spiritually in the written play.<sup>15</sup> Gregory's description of Chinese women, bound-footed or not, as well as her necessary intervention is worth quoting at length:

The other day, when I took the women out for a walk, I noticed one of them with bound feet. They were so small – no more than the size of the plums! She was hobbling down the side of the path, clutching onto tree branches to steady herself. So frail, so helpless. I offered her my arm – and, do you know, she was so touched, she wept. She actually wept. (*Pauses.*) Sometimes I give them a piece of candy, an orange or something sweet to cheer them. The least bit of kindness you show them makes them so happy. They are babes-in-arms, scared little girls, waiting to be rescued. When I see their frightened and inquisitive looks, when I hear their incessant weeping and nervous chatter, I know, deep in my soul, that the good Lord has chosen me to be the shepherd of this flock—the Angel of this Island. (45)

Gregory portrays this footbound woman—and the other Chinese inmates—as infantilized and dehumanized caricatures. Although the feminist undertone of Lim's play cannot be denied, the description of bound-footed women as helpless beings in this scene goes beyond a feminist critique to the gender and cultural victimization of women under patriarchal oppression. While Lim uses bound-footed women's physical impairment to strengthen female detainees' condition at the Immigration Station, she simultaneously critiques the Orientalist scope of American missions. Indeed, Gregory's description continues to depict Chinese culture as an unwanted and barbaric cultural past, while portraying the United States as a land of success and possibilities, thus fostering the need for Asian immigrants to abandon their cultural practices to embrace and

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<sup>15</sup> Gregory's references to footbinding have been erased from Hill and Ng's staged production.

assimilate into American culture and society.<sup>16</sup> Lim's critique thus resonates strongly with Robert G. Lee's argument that the "voicelessness and passivity of Chinese women served the purpose of "her would-be rescuers," such as Presbyterian missionaries who saw Chinese women as "victims without agency whose only hope was that of being saved by their white missionary mother and perhaps eventually marrying a Chinese Christian convert" (*Oriental* 91).

This critique becomes more apparent if we consider Gregory's savior position, as she uses Chinese women's mutilation, helplessness, and vulnerability to uplift herself. By guiding the bound-footed woman's walk and soul, Gregory hopes to lead her onto the path of Christianity and salvation, taking advantage of her vulnerability to buy her conversion with kindness. However, by putting forward her role as savior, or metaphorical shepherd, Gregory infantilizes and dehumanizes Chinese women ("babes-in-arms," "scared little girls," "flock"), turning them into an undistinguished mass of frightened, weeping, chattering animals waiting to be rescued. Gregory further magnifies her savior position as she hyperbolically describes herself as "the Angel of the Island," and punningly, as the most important figure of *Angel Island*.<sup>17</sup> The crippling footbinding that dehumanizes this bound-footed inmate in Gregory's eyes is therefore echoed in her own maiming and dehumanizing description of these Chinese women. Although advancing a message of universal female solidarity, Gregory's vision re-establishes racial hierarchy, leaving Chinese women at the bottom of the racial ladder.

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<sup>16</sup> As Henry Yu underlines in *Thinking Orientals*, missionaries viewed Chinese women's native clothing as a marker of their exotic and racial difference, as well as a symbol of their heathenism (64-5). However, this *racial costume* was not immutable in missionaries' view, but could be changed, or upgraded to American civilized ways. As Yu explains, the change from Chinese women's native to American dress symbolized, for missionaries, Chinese women's successful conversion from heathenism to Christianity represented by their embrace of American values and codes (64-5). In this respect, Gregory's soliloquy on Chinese bound-footed women's vulnerability and fragility reinforces her rhetoric of salvation.

<sup>17</sup> Lim alludes to Deaconess Katherine Maurer (1881-1962) who was employed by the "Women's Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church" to do "Chinese welfare work" at the Station (*Island* 16). She was known as "the Angel of Angel Island" (16). Lim might also allude to Donaldina Cameron—the woman in charge of the Presbyterian Mission Home for Girls in San Francisco Chinatown in the early decades of the twentieth century. She was known as the *Angry Angel* of Chinatown. Cameron fought throughout her life to rescue Chinese girls from prostitution, thus organizing rescue raids, but also taking these young Chinese girls under her wing and providing them with education to facilitate their integration within society. Rescued girls were not only taught English, but also cooking, cleaning, sewing, weaving and Christian values (Harris and Cohen 64; Yung, *Unbound Feet* 73). Her rescue missions remained, however, principally oriented toward the Christianizing of Chinese girls who she saw as a "harvest of waifs gathered from among an alien and heathen people," as she herself stated in a "Report of the Mission Home Superintendent" dating to 1908 (qtd. in Yung 74). Despite her "patronizing attitude" that has been criticized by some historians (Yung 74) and the Orientalizing discourse she sustained, the importance of her work cannot be denied. For further information see Martin's *Chinatown's Angry Angel*.

Lim's critique to Gregory's savior role is emphasized by the juxtaposition of this passage to Chin Moo's interrogation following the suicide of her husband, Chin Gung. Refused entrance into the United States after spending 40 years as a sojourner, Chin Gung chose death over deportation, abandoning his wife at the gate of America after so many years of separation. Chin Moo does not co-operate: she not only refuses to answer the inspector's questions, but begs him to send her back to China now that her husband is dead. Following Chin Moo's Cantonese words that are left untranslated, Gregory's soliloquy describing Chinese female immigrants' helplessness comes as a bit of sarcasm, as Chin Moo continues to beg to be sent back regardless of the inspector's orders. This juxtaposition invites the reader to link the bound-footed woman of Gregory's anecdote to Chin Moo—this old and conservative character. However, although her words are ultimately ignored, Chin Moo does not correspond to the symbolic passive victim of footbinding and Chinese barbarism, but as a victim instead of American officials' inhumanity.<sup>18</sup>

Although Gregory presents herself in contrast to the inhumane Angel Island inspectors in this juxtaposed scene by hyperbolically foregrounding her role as savior, her action at the end of the play reveals the somewhat delusive aspect of her discourse. Despite her endeavor to liberate Chinese women from the entrapment of their culture, Gregory paradoxically confines them to yet another cultural model of womanhood—the Christian mother and wife. Footbinding therefore takes a figurative turn the more the play unfolds. Contrasted to the oppressive mechanisms that Chinese immigrants confront at the detention center, footbinding as a custom fades from focus. The crippling and disabling practices of American officials and missionaries are magnified, allowing the reader to see these practices as even more oppressive and disabling than the maiming of footbinding hindering Chinese women's movement.

While she thought that she was to meet with relatives in San Francisco, Ku Ling learns at the end that her father sold her into prostitution. Gregory steps in to save Ku Ling. Ready to circumvent the exclusion laws, Gregory decides to keep the real purpose of Ku Ling's journey secret from the authorities, and take her under the custody of the Church instead:

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<sup>18</sup> Inspectors' inhumanity toward Chin Moo is furthered at the end as she is admitted in the United States despite her begging to be deported. She is granted entrance because of the inspectors' selfish attempt to avoid a scandal and rectify the image of the detention center after negative media coverage denounced the inhumane life and treatment of immigrants there (43-4, 47). The play concludes on Chin Moo's desperate soliloquy as she, estranged, contemplates the modernity of the United States, while longing for her homeland.

I know Ku Ling, believe me, I've seen this sort of thing happen time and time again. Thirteen, fourteen year old girls sold right under their noses. By their own families. If they think their daughters are being sold into wealth and luxury, they'd better open their eyes. Those filthy houses are rife with syphilis and tuberculosis. Ku Ling won't last beyond thirty. (*Angrily*). The police will do nothing to stop it! Well, I'll have to fight it myself. Miss Chan, tell Ku Ling she needs not fear anything. I will take her into the Church's custody. (49)

Gregory's kindness is however framed in a discourse of religious colonization. Her denunciation of the delusive and corrupt system that lures Chinese parents to sell their daughters, the evils of houses of prostitution, and the uselessness of the police in protecting immigrants, Gregory once again magnifies her savior role.

Gregory's English words are not translated into Cantonese for Ku Ling to understand, but are followed by a discussion between the translator, Miss Chan, and Gregory regarding Ku Ling's destiny. Unable to understand what the two women are discussing, Ku Ling is left aside, evinced from the pending decision regarding her fate. In response to the translator's comment regarding Ku Ling's risk of deportation if her destination becomes known to the authorities, Gregory retorts: "Then you'll have to prove it, won't you? Anyway, you wouldn't want this poor girl deported on your account, would you, Miss Chan? (*No reply*) That's what I thought. (*To Ku Ling*) Ku Ling, you are a very lucky girl. The Lord has shown you divine mercy. May the Lord save you and in His goodness raise you up!" (49). As Gregory manipulates Miss Chan, she equally manipulates Ku Ling as the only words translated to her in Cantonese are the last three sentences about Ku Ling's chance at receiving the Lord's mercy. Gregory therefore decides what is best for Ku Ling without seeking her opinion, imposing the Church on her.

Gregory's imposition culminates with the erasure of Ku Ling's past identity as she renames her Ruth to complete her Christianization, ignoring Ku Ling's protests and attempt at preserving her identity:

GREGORY. Tell her from now on her name shall be Ruth. After the Moabite woman who left her own people to marry Boaz of Bethlehem.

CHAN. *Nay-ga sun meng gew-jo* Ruth.

GREGORY. It is a good Christian name.

KU LING. (*adamant*) *M'ai, Ngaw hai Gu Ling*.

GREGORY. My dear, in time you will come to accept the ways of the Lord. Your destiny is God's will, (*Emphatically*) Ruth.

KU LING. (*angrily*) *Ngaw Hai Gu Ling!*

(*Gregory ignores her and exits with Chan. Mei Lai crosses to Ku Ling and places a supportive hand on Ku Ling's shoulder.*) (49-50)

In the biblical Book of Ruth, Ruth the Moabite marries into an Israelite family and accepts the Israelite God. At her first husband's death, she remains devoted to her mother-in-law, who eventually advises her to marry Boaz of Bethlehem, a related Israelite man (Ruth 4). By choosing Ruth as Ku Ling's Christian name, Gregory symbolically marks Ku Ling's acceptance of the Lord and resulting marriage to the Church. It also stresses the transformation Ku Ling needs to go through in order to enter into the United States—from the lowly peasant and prostitute to be, to the virtuous model of Christian wife. The religious symbolism of this name remains ironic, however, as Ku Ling neither officially agrees to her conversion, nor accepts Ruth as a name.

Far from submitting to Gregory's desire, Ku Ling responds in Cantonese to her imposition—*adamantly* first, and then *angrily*—that her name is Ku Ling, not Ruth. She thus contrasts with the “frail, helpless” bound-footed woman weeping with gratitude, as well as with the “babes-in-arms ... waiting to be rescued” (45) that Gregory describes in scene 12. Yet, her Cantonese responses are left untranslated and ultimately ignored by Gregory, whose decision appears final and irreversible—echoing Chin Moo's words left untranslated and ignored by officials in scene 12. Ku Ling's hopelessness is foregrounded by the “supportive” hand that Mei Lai puts on her shoulder, on which the scene concludes. This comforting gesture amplifies Ku Ling's tragedy, as there is nothing else to be done to change her fate. Ku Ling's literal and metaphorical wandering alluded to in scene 2 is here ironically subverted as she is saved from prostitution, yet trapped by Gregory's Christian mission and her symbolic marriage to the Lord. Ku Ling falls prey at the end to the misogyny of her Chinese culture that sold her to prostitution in the first place, and to the oppressive and ironic *salvation* of Gregory's Methodist mission, shattering whatever was left of her personal aspirations, hopes, and identity. This scene thus complicates Gregory's actions: far from being the Angel that she sets herself to be, Gregory appears instead as yet another “demon,” to use Mel Gussow's words (“Stage” n.p.), governing immigrants' lives on Angel Island.

Ku Ling's tragic fate returns us to the debate that separated her from Mei Lai at the beginning of the play over the question of their feet and respectability. Ku Ling's lower social status represented by her natural feet is dramatized at the end, as her tragic fate matches with her social background. She turns out indeed to represent the lowly category of smuggled women barred from entering the United States. However, with the intervention of the Methodist Church,

Ku Ling's fate is altered *in extremis*, saved from the metaphorical wandering she was set to do. It is therefore on the premise of becoming a good Christian woman and wife that she is granted entrance into the United States. Lim addresses here a subtle critique to white women's salvation of Chinese girls, as setting them free meant embracing Christian women's moral conduct and behavior to become a *proper* wife and mother.

In Mei Lai's case, the play also emphasizes how her social background—represented by her conservatism and bound feet—defines her fate at the end. In the backdrop of her faithfulness to tradition and proper conduct, Mei Lai hopes to be rewarded by being granted entrance into the United States and realize her dream of a better life. Despite the racism encountered at the detention center, Mei Lai's wishes come true. Not only does she give birth to a son, but she is released with her husband after a few weeks of detention. Ironically, it is the bound-footed woman who is left to *wander* at the end, while the natural-footed one is taken instead into Church custody, referring again to what type of female immigrants was tolerated in the United States under exclusion laws. Footbound women's feet appealed because they ensured their subsequent confinement to both the domestic sphere and the segregated zone of Chinatown; beliefs that Lim similarly critiques and even dismantles as seen in the counter-example of the harassed bound-footed prostitute in San Francisco. However, despite the quite positive ending for Mei Lai, the reader knows that her American Dream will soon vanish. The descriptions of Gold Mountain given by returning sojourners throughout the play, as well as American guards' racism have pessimistically depicted the United States as a land of exploitation, discrimination and racism that neither social status nor respectability can alter.

*Paper Angels* remains quite pessimistic in its depiction of Chinese immigrants' fate within American society. Realistic in tone, *Paper Angels* crudely depicts Chinese female—and male—immigrants' history and experience by mostly focusing on their confinement and entrapment beyond their temporary detention at the Immigration Station, thus debunking the illusory liberation promised by the American Dream, and refusing the linear development from footbinding to unbinding accompanying the move from China to the United States leading Khaw-Posthuma's and Cassel's arguments. The custom of footbinding, although it remains in the background of the play, magnifies this entrapment, not so much because of the mutilation performed, but because the practices governing the American system appear as more debilitating than the custom of footbinding itself—a custom that the only bound-footed character of the play



praises despite the changing attitude toward this practice in the 1910s. The ambivalence of these depictions ultimately point to a complex history of Chinese immigration and the equally ambivalent positions that Chinese women were left to inhabit at the crossroads of different cultures, religions, political and social systems, gender expectations and changing traditions at the turn of the twentieth century. Their ambivalent positions leave them, however, limited ground for resistance and emancipation, in the face of American unjust laws and system.

### ***Footbinding and Emasculation in Kingston's China Men***

In her acclaimed 1980 linked stories *China Men*,<sup>19</sup> Kingston, similarly to Lim, uses footbinding to approach Chinese immigration to the United States and Chinese immigrants' pathologization in mainstream society. Yet, going a step further, Kingston proposes more subversive and ambivalent representations of bound-footed bodies—male and female—in a transnational context that link Chinese women in China and Chinese male immigrants in the United States in a subversive twist. By simultaneously using footbinding imagery to approach Chinese women's oppressive living conditions under an enduring patriarchal regime, and Chinese male immigrants' emasculation and castration on American soil, Kingston offers fluctuating representations of footbinding that reject temporal, spatial and gender fixity. Kingston thus opposes common stereotypical Orientalist depictions of bound-footed women as submissive and malleable to ambivalent and subversive representations of Chinese immigrants' experience that refuse easy categorization and blur the gender divide. The confused and liminal gender positions that Kingston's characters inhabit, as well as their conflicting unfavorable and reparative representations throughout the stories, foreground Chinese women's and Chinese male immigrants' rather ambivalent lives wavering between exploitation and resistance, Orientalization and de-Orientalization, as well as gender interpellation and self-fashioning. It is indeed through these ambivalent representations that Kingston seeks to destabilize and disrupt the invisible white patriarchal hegemony dominating both the American nation and Orientalist discourses.

Used in the opening story "On Discovery" footbinding lends a body to the historical evidence documenting Chinese men's oppressive experience on American soil, while blurring

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<sup>19</sup> *China Men*, published by Vintage Books, received the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1983.

the line distinguishing Chinese men and women's bodies. By inverting the gender dynamics at the core of both Chinese and American patriarchal societies, as well as by subjecting footbinding to a figurative sex change, Kingston not only rewrites Chinese women's position in society and history, complementing and revising her Asian American male contemporaries' master immigration narratives, but also destabilizes the hegemonic white heteronormative ideals sustained by her male contemporaries to offer counter-narratives of Chinese American masculinity, as David Eng contends in *Racial Castration*.<sup>20</sup> Kingston thus proposes a more subversive message regarding both Chinese and American histories across the gender divide.

"On Discovery" rewrites Li Ruzhen's story of Lin Zhiyang and Tang Ao to the Land of Women as narrated in *Flowers in the Mirror* (1827). In Li's story, scholar Tang and merchant Lin travel around the world in search of immortal flowers. In the Land of Women, women are ruling and wearing men's attire, while men are submissive and garbed in women's clothing. Lin is captured upon arrival, transformed into a submissive bound-footed woman and prepared to become the female King's new consort. Although he rebels, footbinding turns him quickly into a helpless being at the King's mercy. Gradually disappointed by Lin's behavior, the King reluctantly releases *her* bride to be. An avant-garde text for its time, *Flowers in the Mirror*—through this story of gender reversal—denounces women's condition in China in the early nineteenth century and the practice of footbinding to which women subjected their bodies for centuries.

By transposing Lin's adventures to America, Kingston satirizes Li's already satirist tale of footbinding and gender reversal to give a more grotesque image of disabling Chinese migration. At the crossroads between translation and creative writing, Kingston's opening parable narrates from an omniscient third-person standpoint the solitary quest of Tang Ao who, in search of Gold Mountain, crosses the ocean to arrive in the Land of Women. Merchant Lin and the men garbed in female attires who occupied the position of submissive femininity in *Flowers in the Mirror* disappear from Kingston's rewriting, giving a more dramatic turn to Tang Ao's adventures. Markers of masculinity, no longer exalted, are erased: the female King and the masculine women of Li's text, no longer dressed in male attires, appear as abstract and non-

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<sup>20</sup> Eng offers a detailed analysis of Kingston's subversive negotiation of Chinese American masculinities in his *Racial Castration*, as he reads *China Men* in conversation with Frank Chin's *Donald Duk*, a work he sees as upholding "the recuperation of a heterosexual tradition and an aggressive masculinity" (loc1982-86) and disavowing homosexuality (loc1967). See his first chapter for further detail.

descript women with no specific gendered body. Contrastingly, Tang Ao is captured upon arrival, and slowly transformed into a woman. His ears are pierced and his feet are bound so tight that he weeps with pain. The story ends with his physical transformation: his face is made up, his feet shod in delicate embroidered shoes and his body adorned with female attire. His womanization not only distinguishes him from the ruling women, but also marks his inferiorization and social degradation. The chapter concludes on a note situating the Land of Women in North America, and attributing the discovery of the American continent to the Chinese in 441 B.C.E.<sup>21</sup>

“On Discovery” has been read by many critics as a two-sided parable symbolizing both Chinese male immigrants’ emasculation in the United States, and Chinese women’s mutilation and entrapment by constricting cultural and gender norms.<sup>22</sup> The forced cross-dressing and footbinding at the center of this parable can indeed be read as exemplifying Chinese male immigrants’ metaphorical castration, as exclusion and miscegenation laws not only deprived them of their reproductive ability and family life, but also of the rights conferred to citizens (see Lowe 11). Kingston predominantly approaches this castration through a series of Orientalist stereotypes in this opening tale culminating with Tang Ao’s transformation into a submissive *China Doll*.

Castration as economic exploitation can be seen with Kingston’s transformation of Tang Ao’s position from the venerated scholar he was in *Flowers in the Mirror* to that of lowly merchant (Weldy n.p.)—a degradation increased when two female captors sit on him to immobilize him before piercing his ears.<sup>23</sup> His humiliation at being literally situated under

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<sup>21</sup> Although Kingston’s association of the Land of Women with America is subversive, the setting of her retelling during Empress Wu’s reign remains in accordance with Li’s *Flowers in the Mirror* which was itself set at that time.

<sup>22</sup> As Deborah Madsen declares, “the feminization of Tang Ao in the Land of Women functions as a parable (talk-story) for the fate of the China Men who travelled to the Gold Mountain only to find themselves deprived of their dignity, their humanity, and often their lives. But the story also presents an excruciating account of the physical mutilation of women performed in the interests of a cultural image of feminine beauty which serves patriarchal domination” (*Woman Warrior* 238). In other words, she states, “the male abuse of female bodies within ethnic Chinese culture is mirrored in the abusive treatment of cheap immigrant Chinese labour” (238). King-Kok Cheung offers a similar reading: “the opening myth suggests that the author objects as strenuously to the patriarchal practices of her ancestral culture as to the racist treatment of her forefathers in their adopted country” (240). Linda Ching Sledge, Lance Weldy, Marie-Claude Perrin-Chenour, and Donald C. Goellnicht offer similar claims.

<sup>23</sup> Being physically under women was considered in traditional China as a bad omen for men, and a sign of inferiorization. Kingston winks at this inauspiciousness when reconstructing Chinese men’s experience at the Immigration Station on Angel Islands where men’s quarters were situated under women’s: “‘The women are up there,’ the father was told. Diabolical, inauspicious beginning—to be trodden over by women. ‘Living under women’s legs,’ said the superstitious old-fashioned men from the backward villages. ‘Climbed over by women.’ It was bad luck even to walk under women’s pants on clotheslines. No doubt the demons had deliberately planned this humiliation” (55).

women is stressed when he is physically stripped of his masculinity, his ears being pierced and his feet tightly bound. Kingston minutely describes the mutilation of Tang Ao's flesh in crescendo, from the needle puncturing his earlobes and the stringing of "his raw flesh with silk threads" (4), to the breaking of his foot bones: "They bent his toes so far backward that his arched foot cracked. The old ladies squeezed each foot and broke many tiny bones along the sides. They gathered his toes, toes over and under one another like a *knot of ginger root*. Tang Ao wept with pain" (4, my emphasis). Note here the linguistic exoticization and resulting Orientalization of this footbinding process that compares the bound foot to a "knot of ginger root"—a simile non-existent in Li's original text—thus purportedly making the unfamiliar footbinding process more familiar or understandable for the Western reader.

In addition to exaggerating Tang Ao's emasculation, Kingston's vivid description of the binding process and the mutilation caused addresses a larger critique to crippling feminine ideals and practices resonating with the feminist discourses of her time. The maiming of Tang Ao's feet, as well as his weeping with pain, emphasizes the atrocity and dehumanizing nature of footbinding. By amplifying the mutilation of Tang Ao's ear piercing and footbinding, Kingston creates "a much more disturbing awareness of gender displacement," as Weldy indicates (n.p.),<sup>24</sup> but also stresses the hegemonic nature of constructed beauty ideals. By humiliating him, piercing his ears, and binding his feet, the women render Tang Ao powerless while simultaneously satisfying the dominant women's desires and tastes, later represented by the diners' arousal.

A psychoanalytic reading of this footbinding scene reinforces both the mutilation of the female body and the symbolic castration of Tang Ao's masculinity through the process of footbinding. The foot acts in psychoanalysis as a fetish, i.e., as a "substitute for the woman's (the mother's) penis that the little boy once believed in ... and does not want to give up" (Freud 152-3). In other words, the mother's castration has to be compensated for by the veneration of a utopian penile symbol. Although the bound foot has been seen as a phallic symbol, its mutilation

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<sup>24</sup> Li's description of Lin's footbinding reads: "Seizing Lin's right foot, [the black-bearded maid] set it upon his knee, and sprinkled white alum powder between the toes and the grooves of the foot. He squeezed the toes tightly together, bent them down so that the whole foot was shaped like an arch, and took a length of white silk and bound it tightly around it twice. One of the others sewed the ribbon together in small stitches. Again the silk went around the foot, and again, it was sewn up. Merchant Lin felt as though his feet were burning and wave after wave of pain rose in his heart. When he could stand it no longer, he let out his voice and began to cry" (110-1). His feet then "begun to assume a permanently arched form, and his toes begun to rot" (112). Tightly rebound after his rebellious unbinding, Lin's feet are ultimately said to have "lost much of their original shape. Blood and flesh were squeezed into a pulp and then little remained of his feet but dry bones and skin, shrunk, indeed, to a dainty size" (113).

does not resemble an erect penis, as psychoanalytic critics claim. The tip of the bound foot bending to the ground resembles instead a flaccid penis. In addition to accentuating the woman's castration, this visually flaccid penis questions men's potent virility altogether. Seen in this light, the bending, the breaking of the bones and the comparison between Tang Ao's newly shaped feet with a knot of ginger root ironically turn the foot—this fetish symbol—into a disabled and crooked mass of flesh. Tang Ao's castration thus rewrites the gender hierarchy dominating Chinese society, as well as subtly deconstructs the potency of its phallic image at the heart of Chinese *and* American patriarchies.

Moreover, Tang Ao's physical mutilation is reinforced by his linguistic castration. As the women sing and bind, Tang Ao cries and suffers.<sup>25</sup> The sarcastic tone of the footbinding song supposed to "distract him" (4), and its fake sense of compassion, contributes to his isolation and dehumanization. Tang Ao, emotionally and psychologically weakened by footbinding, surrenders to the pain. Whereas Lin resisted his feminization and the annihilation of his subjectivity by unbinding his feet when his attendants were gone in *Flowers in the Mirror*,<sup>26</sup> Tang Ao submissively accepts his plight. Instead of breaking free from the bandages compressing his feet, he "beg[s] to have his feet re-wrapped" every night (4), unable to bear the pain of the blood rushing through his veins. Helpless, Tang Ao is left to sob like an infant. His helplessness and pleas reinforce Kingston's critique of cultural beauty rituals that have kept women imprisoned for centuries in China, while dramatizing Tang Ao's powerlessness and subjugation at the hands of women. His complete victimization also resonates with the victim script at the core of 1970s feminists' discussion of footbinding; a victimization that also contributes to Orientalizing Li's text as resistance is annihilated.

Tang Ao's cries and implorations are complemented by his shame at having to display his bandages: "They forced him to wash his used bandages, which were embroidered with flowers

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<sup>25</sup> Lin in *Flowers in the Mirror* is not speechless. His protests and begging are conveyed in direct discourse: "As for my feet, please liberate them. They have enjoyed the kind of freedom which scholars who are not interested in official careers enjoy! How can you bind them?" (111).

<sup>26</sup> Li's text reads: "But Lin's feet hurt so much that he could not sleep a wink. He tore at the ribbons with all his might, and after a great struggle succeeded in tearing them off. He stretched out his ten toes again, and luxuriating in their exquisite freedom, finally fell asleep" (111-2). The next morning, Lin has his feet rebound, and is punished for disobeying the King's order. This punishment does not suffice. Two weeks later, Lin tore his bandages again. Despite "medical ablutions," the "pain persisted" (112) forcing Lin to rebel more vividly: "He sat on the edge of the bed, and began to tear off his embroidered shoes and silk bandages. 'Go tell your 'King' to put me to death at once, or let my feet loose,' he told the Matron" (112-3). His feet are once again re-bound, this time even tighter. He finally escapes both footbinding and the female King's grasp, however, as he is ultimately set free by Tang Ao.

and smelled of rot and cheese. He hung the bandages up to dry, streamers that drooped and draped wall to wall. He felt embarrassed: the wrappings were like underwear, and they were his” (4). Kingston compares the delicate floral motifs embroidered on the bandages to the smell of skin putrefaction that has imprinted the wrappings. Cheng Lok Chua explains how this imagery of embroidered flowers opposed to the smell of rotten cheese was added by Kingston in her final draft to increase the vividness of the scene with “familiarizing images of sight and smell” (“On Maxine Hong Kingston” 118). This late insertion confirms the unsettling and fetishistic nature of footbinding that juxtaposes the violence of mutilation to the eroticism of the embroidered shoes, as well as the putrefying smell of rotting flesh to the beauty ideal of golden lotuses. Also, in an ironic reversal, Kingston’s protagonist has not retrieved the immortal flowers Tang Ao was looking for in Li’s text, but flowers that cover up his putrefying skin, mutilation, and dying masculinity. The sexual innuendo behind the exhibition of this floral motif is conspicuous: the exposed bandages that Kingston associates with underwear echo the humiliating display of a newly-menstruating girl’s underwear stained with blood, and the spectacle of bed sheets marked by a girl’s loss of virginity. Kingston thus exhibits bound feet’s erotic nature linking a girl’s menstrual blood to bound feet’s putrefying and bloody flesh in a double innuendo. Tang Ao’s bandages testify, accordingly, to his debasing *de-flowering* and resulting passage from manhood to womanhood.<sup>27</sup>

The external markers of femininity imposed on Tang Ao’s body and his metaphorical de-flowering are coupled with the forced and repetitive ingestion of food and drink that are meant to ironically wash away his internal male subjectivity. Tang Ao is made female inside and out. The chrysanthemum tea he is compelled to drink stirs “the cool female winds inside his body,” as the vinegar soup he is fed is meant to improve his womb (3). Kingston sarcastically refers to an essential feminine core closeted inside his body that needs to come out, thus alluding to feminist theory of gender essentialism (see Butler, *Gender Trouble*). This essential identity is complicated, however, by the repetitive acts of imposition of a feminine self *onto* and *into* his body. Gender is presented in Kingston’s opening chapter as a social construct that ties in with Judith Butler’s definition of gender as an “identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition* of acts” in which “bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various

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<sup>27</sup> Goellnicht reads this passage as a nod to Chinese men’s work in laundry businesses in the United States and their resulting emasculation (“Tang Ao” 197).

kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (*Gender Trouble* 191). The repetitive acts imposed onto and into Tang Ao’s body lead him—figuratively too weak by the pain of footbinding—to comply with and perform this new gendered identity. Kingston’s critique of gender imposition is accentuated here by the Orientalization of the scene: the exotic ingredients ingested to hasten his feminization confirm his Oriental transformation.

Tang Ao is ultimately transfigured into an “Oriental courtesan” (Cheung 102), or an Oriental *China Doll*:

One day his attendants changed his gold loops to jade studs and strapped his feet to shoes that curved like bridges. They plucked out each hair on his face, powdered him white, painted his eyebrows like a moth’s wings, painted his cheeks and lips red. He served a meal at the queen’s court. His hips swayed and his shoulders swiveled because of his shaped feet. ‘She’s pretty, don’t you agree?’ the diners said, smacking their lips at his dainty feet as he bent to put dishes before them. (4-5)

Whereas his emasculation was described by the breaking and reshaping of his feet, his successful feminization is represented by the daintiness of his feet now shod in embroidered slippers. The narrator’s focus on the attractiveness of Tang Ao’s gait and hips swaying because of his small feet furthers his erotic appeal that culminates with the diners “smacking their lips” at his feet. The performative aspect of his appearance also points to the naturalization of this new gendered identity.<sup>28</sup> His feminization culminates with the transformation of the gender pronoun used to describe him throughout the narration. Whereas Tang Ao is referred to as “he” by the narrator, he is finally hailed as “she” by the women he serves at the court. His maleness no longer apparent to the external eye is bound to be forgotten, ensuring his ultimate subordination to the Queen.

By depicting Tang Ao’s feminization and the infliction of footbinding on his *male* body, “On Discovery” denounces the construction and damaging effect of the Asian body’s Orientalization and gendering in the United States, thus pointing to the inextricable imbrication of race and sexuality in processes of Othering. Through the enforcement of these Oriental traits of femininity, Kingston not only critiques Chinese men’s hypervisibility in the United States, trapped as they seem here in their cultural attire, but also the unmarked white heteronormative masculine ideals against which they were perceived and read. Tang Ao’s cultural and gender

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<sup>28</sup> For a discussion of performativity and the naturalization of gender conventions and cultural norms, see Butler, *Gender Trouble* 185. For a reading of gender performativity in relation to *China Men*, see Madsen, “Queering” 683-5.

entrapment is amplified at the end as his new female identity and position as courtesan seem irreversible: the pacific Land of Women which has “no taxes and no wars” (5), while nodding at the cliché about women as peaceful, highlights Tang Ao’s nonresistance, rendered physically *pacific* through the pain of footbinding.

Yet, this pacifism can be read in more ambivalent terms, as Kingston’s narrative refuses the fixity of historical and gender erasure. When read in conjunction with the rest of the collection, the imposition of gender onto and into Tang Ao’s body does not transform his self-identity in this opening parable, but only gives, to use Butler’s words again, the “*illusion* of an abiding gendered self” (*Gender Trouble* 191; my emphasis). Tang Ao’s seeming embrace of his feminization and Orientalization thus simultaneously masks and prefigures—for an attentive reader—the forefathers’ larger subversive strategies of survival narrated in the rest of the collection.

This note about the pacificism of the women’s land is additionally complicated in the narrator’s allusion to the Chinese conquest of North America under the reign of Empress Wu. By rewriting Columbus’s discovery myth, Kingston gives a twist to the foundational masculine narrative of conquest and settlement to propose a reparative empowering vision of Chinese women, and subvert the subjugation script that has confined women to the roles of submissive daughters, mothers and wives. By keeping the original setting of Li’s tale which took place during the reign of Empress Wu, Kingston enhances her critique of gender roles/expectations in traditional China, as in the context of migration.

The subversive nature of Kingston’s rewriting is echoed in the generic hybridity of this opening parable that combines history with fantasy in its allusion to fairy tales and historical narratives.<sup>29</sup> The generic juxtaposition is complemented by a juxtaposition of discontinuous temporalities that includes the time of Li’s narrative, the undefined time in which “On Discovery” is set, the time of Chinese migrant flux to America hinted at, the time of Kingston’s postmodern rewriting, as well as the atemporality of the fairy-tale narrative invoked in the opening line. These juxtaposed temporalities and histories resonate with what Homi Bhabha theorizes in *The Location of Culture* as the “time-lag of cultural difference”—the “excessive marginality” and the

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<sup>29</sup> The opening of the tale—“Once upon a time, a man, named Tang Ao...” (3)—sets Kingston’s retelling in the realm of fairy tales. Conversely, the conclusive note on the American conquest, as well as the allusion to Empress Wu, insert “On Discovery” in a larger historical narrative genre. See Slowik 247.



“disjunctive space” of modernity (238)—in which the subaltern or racial Other takes shape. Fluctuating between different times and space, Tang Ao’s misadventures question the polarization of historical facts and imagination, China and the United States, past and present, as well as gendered and cultural identities. This *disjunctive space* offers ground for subversion and destabilization of the Orientalist stereotypes deployed throughout the narration, despite Tang Ao’s apparent submission to his conquerors.

The temporal, spatial and generic liminality of this opening parable complicates as well the gender reversal it presents to suggest a more ambivalent critique to femininity. The ending which, *a priori*, substitutes men’s patriarchal hegemony with a non-normative, yet feminine hegemonic system (Madsen, “Queering” 684), does not seem a viable solution as it would only deepen gender *troubles*. Kingston addresses a subtle critique to this gender reversal and presents a more ambivalent vision of femininity that adorns *and* cripples, empowers *and* subjugates. Beyond the imposition of crippling cultural and gendered norms such as footbinding, whose detailed gory binding process reifies mutilation, Kingston critiques women’s internalization of beauty and cultural ideals—as seen with the female diners’ arousal at the sight of Tang Ao’s feminization. Kingston thus draws attention to women’s participation in the social, cultural and erotic construction and crippling of the female body.

These ambivalent portrayals of femininity find resonance with Kingston’s depictions of Chinese women from the older generation as powerful yet complicit in the physical subjugation and devaluation of female kind throughout *China Men*; women who simultaneously destabilize and sustain the overseeing normative patriarchal order. Yet, while denouncing women’s embrace and perpetration of these maiming beauty ideals, Kingston refuses the female subjugation script presented in “On Discovery.” Women—even on bound feet—appear as powerful and controlling, thus contrasting with Tang Ao, who silenced and transformed by footbinding, appears trapped in his new courtesan identity, and left at the Queen’s and diners’ mercy.

The only bound-footed woman presented in *China Men*—the narrator’s maternal grandmother Ah Po—refuses submission to her husband, but inferiorizes women. Ah Po is first described by her disabling bound feet which prevent her from moving around unassisted: “When she walked unassisted or with one maid, she touched the walls gracefully with thumb and little finger spread, index and middle fingers together, fourth finger down” (19). It normally took three maids, the narrator says, to help her walk (19). The minute description of Ah Po’s fingers with

which she supports herself when walking, while speaking of her upper-class status, also gives a comic undertone to this scene. The delicacy of her posture and appearance seems ineffective, however, in helping her move. Ah Po is unable to follow her husband “about the house” (19), and to prevent him from swapping their baby boy for the neighbors’ girl he longs for. Footbinding, thus appears, like in Tang Ao’s misadventure, as a debilitating custom disabling women, but a custom which women refuse to give up.

However, once she discovers her baby swap, Ah Po surpasses herself physically and ventures outside of the house to recover their son, ordering her husband to accompany her: “She walked in back of him, shoving him while hanging on to his shoulder. She was not used to dashing about on the roads” (21). Kingston comically, if not sarcastically, describes this disabled woman “six feet tall on toy feet” (21) yelling at her husband who traded a “son for a slave,” while he weeps leading the way (21). This scene comically subverts gender roles and expectations. The ambivalent figure of this bound-footed, yet tyrannical, woman is accentuated by her ambivalent position toward gender roles. She controls her emasculated husband and dictates to him what to do, refusing the position of submissive wife. Yet, she also devalues females by embracing and reiterating traditional sayings regarding women’s inferiority and position as slave. Her internalization and perpetuation of these damaging beliefs and values contrast with her husband’s more progressive position shown in his longing for a daughter, his care of their neighbors’ baby girl, his promise never to break her toes (20), and in his sensitivity and emotions. Indeed, while Ah Po becomes the defender of patriarchal values, her husband Ah Goong disregards, as Eng explains, “the traditional propagation of the paternal line from father to son” (loc2024). Kingston here hints at a non-normative depiction of masculinity that goes beyond the reproductive imperatives of patriarchy.

Ah Po’s ambivalent character is echoed by Mad Sao’s angry mother who harasses her son until he fulfills his filial duty. In her numerous letters, his mother devalues women and daughters suggesting that he sell his daughters and return to China to attend to her needs:

“Sell everything. *Sell the girls*, and mail the profits to Mother. ... Leave them. Come back alone. You don’t need to save enough money to bring *a litter of females*. What a *waste to bring girls* all the way back here to *sell anyway*. You can find *a second wife* here too. A Gold Mountain Sojourner attracts ten thousand rich fat women. *Sell those girls*, apprentice the boy, and use the money for your passage.” (172, my emphasis)

Sao's mother underlines the daughters' uselessness as they are married away into another family, and therefore a waste compared to sons who continue the family line. Conversely, she sustains sons' filial obligation to their parents, using her powerful status as mother to control her son, blaming him endlessly for her misery and suffering, and for having abandoned her in China.

The intensity of her reproaches culminates with her grotesque description of her bound feet mutilated by starvation: "Did you know that when children starve, they grow coarse black hairs all over their bodies? And the heads and feet of starving women suddenly swell up. The skin of my little feet split open, and pus and blood burst out; I saw the muscles and veins underneath" (177). The gory and grotesque description of her feet amplifies the hyperbolic nature of her blame, as well as the traumatic effect her words have on her son. As a ghost, she haunts her son day and night until he returns to China to give her a proper burial. Although powerful, her reproaches ultimately signal a generational and cultural shift between Gold Mountain Sojourners who, although attached to their familial and cultural background, have embraced an American life that contrasts with their Chinese past.

The liminality of older Chinese women's positions, oscillating between power and submission throughout *China Men*, is echoed in the representation of Chinese forefathers. Although described as metaphorically castrated—or physically bound—in "On Discovery," Chinese men inhabit a more nuanced and ambivalent position throughout the narrative. Their gendered, social and cultural entrapment is counterpoised to their resistance—albeit limited and contained. Indeed, the forefathers develop ways of expressing themselves despite restrictions, impositions and their individual annihilation by mainstream society, as well as invent new non-normative masculinities countering their emasculation while equally dismantling the white normative patriarchal masculinity against which they are read and defined.

Their ambivalent position already appears in the opening section of the collection. The spatial, temporal and generic liminality of "On Discovery" is furthered when read in conjunction with the second introductory tale—"On Fathers"—which has escaped much critical attention. This second and shorter parable is narrated from a girl's first-person point of view. The narrator recounts how she and her siblings, while waiting outside their house for their father to come home from work, mistakes a man for their father. They run to greet this man with hugs, before he exposes their mistake. Shocked by the resemblance between their father and this stranger—both wearing similar suits and shoes—the children return to their yard to wait for their real father to

arrive. The story concludes with the children running to the street corner to welcome their real father this time. As Slowik suggests, this ending leaves the reader with “a haunting image of a man who only from the back looks like the real father, a man easily mistaken” (246); a haunting image that she interprets—in the context of the narrator’s attempt at retracing her father’s history—as signifying Chinese fathers’ elusiveness to their daughters (246).

More than symbolizing Chinese fathers’ elusiveness, the similarity between the mistaken man and the real father both dressed in Western suits presents another Chinese immigrant stereotype: the successful assimilated immigrant who has embraced the dominant masculine order. This Americanized Chinese man contrasts with the Oriental emasculated bound-footed man depicted in “On Discovery.” The denomination of these assimilated men as *fathers* enhances this opposition. The isolated and castrated Tang Ao is replaced by two men whose reproductive abilities are defined as intrinsic characteristics of their identities. The repetition of *stylized acts* seen in the transformation of Tang Ao into an Oriental courtesan gives way in this second parable to a type of *universalizing* repetition. Through these clone-like fathers—whom are not recognized by their own children—Kingston also subtly addresses a critique to Western normative ideals of masculinity that erase individual identity. By adopting Western suits and shoes, these Chinese fathers are not only presented as assimilated Western men, but also as grotesque clone-like figures, whose similar physical appearance speaks of their loss of individuality in the name of assimilation. Juxtaposed to the pervasive *chinoiserie* of “On Discovery,” this emphatic Westernization foreshadows, however, the illusion of the Chinese forefathers’ assimilation.

Read in this broader context of interlaced historical facts and imagined stories, as well as contrasting depictions of Chinese immigrants’ masculinity, or lack thereof, Kingston’s depiction of footbinding takes a different meaning. While critics have highlighted the double-edged nature of “On Discovery,” few have mentioned the rather sarcastic and subversive function of this parable when read in conjunction with the forefathers’ immigration stories narrated in the rest of the collection. In juxtaposing the contrasting stereotypes of assimilated and emasculated, as well as Westernized and Orientalized immigrants, Kingston *does not* celebrate American ideals of manhood. The Westernized fathers in suits are not suitable figures to counteract offensive Orientalist stereotypes of Asian males as effeminate and emasculated. Indeed, the narrator’s forefathers depicted in the stories neither coincide with the image of the Western assimilated

Chinese man, nor with the image of the Oriental bound-footed courtesan trapped at the court that introduce the stories. By opening on these two opposed, yet equally damaging stereotypes and by separating them from the rest of the narration, Kingston sarcastically inscribes the narrator's forefathers' stories *against* these stereotypes. Kingston thus reimagines both Chinese male immigration and Chinese masculinity differently.

Yet, the narrator's forefathers do not completely subvert these stereotypical representations either. The strategies of resistance they develop to regain and express their severed masculinity, voice and sense of self remain limited. Kingston's male protagonists inhabit a fluctuating space at the junction of emasculation and assimilation, Orientalist interpellation and self-assertion, subjugation and survival, oppression and resistance, silence and voice. Kingston thus foregrounds the unstable ground on which Chinese immigration history rests; an unstable ground that she locates at the confines of family narration and legends, historical accounts and imagined stories, written facts and talk-stories. This liminality suggests that the real story of Chinese men's immigration that lies behind these offensive stereotypes remains to be told.<sup>30</sup>

Despite the exploitative laws governing sugar plantations in Hawai'i, and their trauma of immigration and solitude, the great grandfathers of the Sandalwood mountains refuse imposed silence and develop strategies to express their pain, frustrations, and longings, conversely to Tang Ao whose voice is annihilated by the pain of footbinding. The narrator's great grandfather Bak-Goong contests the silence imposed on them during work time: "How was he to marvel adequately, voiceless? He needed to cast his voice out to catch ideas. I wasn't born silent like a monk, he thought, then promptly said. 'If I knew I had to take a vow of silence,' he added, 'I would have shaved off my hair and become a monk. Apparently we've taken a vow of chastity too. Nothing but roosters in this flock'" (100). The comparison of his condition to a monk's vows of silence and chastity sarcastically denounces the conditions found in Hawai'i, and expresses his linguistic and physical needs. The progression from free indirect discourse to

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<sup>30</sup> Addressing her father in an apostrophe, the narrator expresses the "elusiveness," to borrow Slowik's word (246), of her forbearers' past in the novel's first section "The Father from China:" "You fix yourself in the present, but I want to hear the stories about the rest of your life, the Chinese stories. I want to know what makes you scream and curse, and what you're thinking when you say nothing, and why when you do talk, you talk differently from Mother" (15). What follows is an intertwined narration of various generations of male immigrants whose real story and experience remain inseparable from both the Gold Mountain legends and stories circulated within the community and the narrator's imagined history of her forefathers.

internal monologue to direct discourse depicts the progressive development of Bak-Goong's thoughts, and prefigures his rebellion.

Unable to remain silent, Bak-Goong tries to circumvent the no-talking-during-work rule. It is first by singing in Chinese that he finds his voice, disguising his "commenting and planning," as well as his cursing under the aria of what passes as traditional songs (100-1): "'I've solved the talking,' he sang to his fellow workers. 'If that demon whips me, I'll catch the whip and yank him off his horse, crack his head like a coconut. In an emergency a human being can do miracles—fly, swim, lift mountains, throw them. Oh a man is capable of great feats of speed and strength'" (101). The song gives him temporary, yet illusory power, here expressed through the hyperbolic and epic allusions to heroic feats that he imagines himself to accomplish against the "white demons" guarding the plantation. His singing fails, however, as his imagined epic deeds are ironically stopped by the *haole*'s whipping and yelling—leaving him not only silent but hurt. While his imagined strength collapses, his rebellion continues as he is later said to be fined for talking at work (102). The whipping did not suffice to silence his rebelling voice.

The heroic song is soon replaced by shorter and angrier words rebelliously pronounced through "deep, long, long coughs, barking and wheezing," that "were almost as satisfying as shouting" (104). These short monosyllabic words are scolds "disguised as words" (104), here represented by the repetitive use of the long dash imitating the cough-like diction: "When the demon beat his horse and dust rose from its brown flanks, he coughed from his very depths. All Chinese words conveniently a syllable each, he said, 'Get—that—horse—dust—away—from—me—you—dead—white—demon. Don't—stare—at—me—with—those—glass—eyes. I—can't—take—this—life.' He felt better after his say" (104). The coughing performs an illusion, masking the real intention of his words. Taking advantage of his poor health and constant illness, Bak-Goong fights against imposed silence, and the deadly condition they are held in; a diseased-state that he does not equate to their physical and psychological exploitation, but sarcastically to their "congestion from not talking" (115).

Bak-Goong's rebellion culminates with the exaggerated talk-stories that circulate among workers after work—giving voice to these silenced workers throughout *China Men*—but especially with the new customs he implements, inspired by the tales he narrates. Bak-Goong finds inspiration in the cat-ear story that recounts how a King hid his son's abnormally-fury ears until one day he could no longer keep the secret and dug a hole in the ground into which he

shouted and buried his secret. However, the words did not remain buried. The wind propagated his secret throughout the land, making people laugh. In imitation, the Chinese workers dig a hole in the Hawaiian soil—"an ear into the world" (117)—into which they tell their secrets, desires, frustrations and feelings hoping that their words would travel with the wind to their homeland to reach their families, hoping that through their words, a part of them would go home (117).

Kingston concludes "the Great Grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountain" on the respite Bak-Goong and Chinese workers find in this buried ear; in the metaphorical *planting* of their words (118). Immigrants find relief in the expression of their desires and feelings, as well as in the renewed, although figurative, connection with their homeland and beloved left behind. This planting of words also replaces the planting of reproductive seeds which, while nodding to Chinese men's castration, also points to countering modes of representation deconstructing heteronormative masculine ideals. Bak-Goong's liberation is accompanied by his breaking free from *haoles'* imposed silence at work, as he is said to be, "from the day of the shout party" talking and singing at work without being punished (118). Imagination and reality are confused in Kingston's narrative to highlight Bak-Goong's resistance and subversion. Through the power of the imagination, Kingston revisits historical narrative of silencing to give weight to Chinese men's resistance—although limited—and opposes the image of bound-footed Tang Ao sobbing and surrendering to the Queen.

The narration of Bak-Goong's personal journey from silence to voice is contrasted, however, by two short myths—"On Mortality" and "On Mortality Again"—which stress the forefathers' struggle against imposed silence, and hint at the illusory nature of their rebellious acts. "On Mortality" recounts the journey of Tu Tzu-Chun who silently goes through a series of tests for the human race to be granted immortality. He fails, however, when he is transformed into a deaf and mute woman—yet another scene of gender reversal—and forced to watch her husband kill their daughter. Shocked, the woman breaks silence in the name of love. This episode once again denounces patriarchal normative ideals through the compassionate love of a mother (Eng loc1070).

"On Mortality Again," inspired by the Hawaiian setting of Bak-Goong's immigration experience, recounts the tale of Maui the Trickster's journey to immortality; a journey performed in silence as he sought to rob immortality from goddess Hina while asleep. Although he manages to enter her body and reach for her heart, he is trapped in her body and killed when Hina awakes

after a bird laughs at the sight of Maui's legs sticking out of the goddess's vagina. In both tales, the breaking of silence results in the loss of immortality. By casting immortality as an illusion, and silence as a dehumanizing imposition—as previously shown in “On Discovery”—these two tales expose immigrants' difficult, if not dehumanizing, living conditions in the United States, and call for the recovery of Chinese American voices often erased from American history, while demystifying the American Dream permeating Chinese immigration.<sup>31</sup> Her juxtaposition of the forefathers' survival strategies and mythical stories of imposed silence recall the juxtaposed parables of the Oriental Courtesan and the assimilated man in its destabilizing association. By situating the immigrant experience at the junction of contradictory representations, Kingston thus refuses one or the other, but proposes an unsettling fluctuation that disempowers and empowers, victimizes and subverts.

Likewise, the figure of bound-footed and castrated Tang Ao doomed to serve at the court does not coincide with Chinese immigrants' sexual experience depicted in the rest of the collection. While Kingston gives insight into the bachelor societies that formed in Hawai'i and California, and into Chinese workers' growing sexual frustration and longing, she equally underlines their resistance and counter-modes of representation. This is the case of Ah Goong, the narrator's grandfather, who expresses insatiable sexual desires in response to the confining and emasculating environment of the Sierra Nevada Mountains where he works in building the railroads:

One beautiful day, dangling in the sun above a new valley, not the desire to urinate but sexual desire clutched him so hard he bent over in the basket. He curled up, overcome by beauty and fear, which shot to his penis. He tried to rub himself calm. Suddenly he stood up and tall and squirted out into space. “I am fucking the world,” he said. The world's vagina was big, big as the sky, big as a valley. He grew a habit: whenever he was lowered in the basket, his blood rushed to his penis, and he fucked the world. (133)

The opening of his body from his curled-up position to his standing up tall culminates with his ejaculation, representing his refusal to be contained physically and sexually. Moving away from his subaltern position, Ah Goong hyperbolically and metaphorically *fucks* the world's vagina, putting himself in an exaggerated position of power. The focus on his erect penis, swollen with desire, contrasts emasculation with hyper-masculinity and potency. Yet his reproductive ability

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<sup>31</sup> For more on these tales' denunciation of the inhuman imposition of silence, see Zhang and Wang 1029.



is simultaneously *wasted* (Eng loc2052) as his seeds are shot in the air, leaving the reader with an ambiguous vision of Ah Goong, potent, yet un-reproductive at the same time—an ambiguous image that revisits once again normative ideals of paternal masculinity.

This ambivalence is further developed throughout *China Men* as Ah Goong's hyperbolic masculinity and resistance appear easily outturned, if not illusory. His desire to *fuck* the world dissipates as the Chinese workers are gradually locked up in tunnels. Also, his faithfulness to his wife back in China results in his loneliness and frustration that equally affects not only his feeling of potency and virility, but also his reproductive capacity: "Ah Goong did not spend his money on women. ... He took out his penis under his blanket or bared it in the woods, and thought about nurses and princesses. He also just looked at it, wondering what it was that it was for, what a man was for, what he had to have a penis for" (144). His hyperbolic masculinity is replaced by an image of a somewhat emasculated man, left alone to masturbate while fantasizing about women. The hyper-masculine and potent penis is diminished here as the protagonist is questioning its manly and reproductive function; an ironic twist to the parable on fathers in the collection's introductory section.

Ah Goong's potency is also questioned at the beginning when he exchanges their son for their neighbors' daughter, an episode through which Kingston, as seen previously, ironically addresses the debilitating gender hierarchy infusing Chinese culture and society. Ah Goong is forced to return the baby girl to their parents at his wife's order when she discovers the swap. This episode leaves an indelible mark on him: it is not World War II and his being bayoneted by Japanese that caused his sexual trauma, the narrator sarcastically declares (21), but his inability to have a daughter. His trauma is expressed through his obsession with his penis which he constantly pulls out at the dinner table, "worrying it, wondering at it, asking why it had given him four sons and no daughter, chastising it, asking whether it were yet capable of producing the daughter of his dreams" (21). His reproachful apostrophes to his penis underline his destabilization of gender expectation and Chinese tradition as he venerates and longs for girls instead of boys, as well as ironically subvert his own reproductive potency and diminish his manhood. Yet, his conduct and lack of restraint, despite their subversive nature, point to his madness. It is with enjoyment that he contemplates the disturbance in his wife's face: "he laughed, laughed in Ah Po's irked face, whacked his naked penis on the table, and joked, 'Take a look at *this* sausage'" (21). By displaying his naked penis—no longer a reproductive tool, but a

objectified sausage—to the view of all, thus breaking free from the limits of proper conduct, Ah Goong paradoxically finds in madness a sense of power. Emasculation thus appears as more ambivalent in Ah Goong's story than the radical sex change inflicted on Tang Ao's body and his irreversible castration enacted by footbinding; an emasculation that goes beyond men's immigration experience and the disabling American environment encountered, as it is applied here to both China and the United States. Ah Goong is ultimately left to inhabit a fluctuating space at the junction of reproductive manhood and emasculation.

Chinese immigrants' emasculation is also complicated in the physical description of the railroad workers rendered manlier than the Chinese scholar figure permeating the stories and the bound-footed courtesan that opens it. Chinese workers posed for artists "bare-chested, their fists clenched, showing off their arms and backs" while artists "sketched them as perfect young gods reclining against rocks, wise expressions on their handsome noble-nosed faces, long torsos with lean stomachs, a strong arm extended over a bent knee, long fingers holding a pipe, a rope of hair over a wide shoulder" (141-2). These hyperbolic manly representations are counterpoised, however, to artistic depictions of Chinese men with pigtailed (142), thus continuing the offensive stereotype of Chinese men as physically effeminate. Yet, beyond these caricatures and exaggerated God-like portrayals, these bare-chested Chinese workers remain muscular and manly. Chinese sojourners' flesh, skin and bodies are made hypervisible to the reader, thus counteracting the erasure of Chinese male immigrants in the making of the United States.

Ultimately, Tang Ao's entrapment, epitomized by his footbinding, his forced cross-dressing and his confinement at the Queen's court, is contrasted in the rest of the collection as the forefathers are not only described crossing geographical borders, physically and metaphorically, but also figuratively traveling between historical facts and fantasy. The various crossings enacted leave them, however, to inhabit a liminal space—an elsewhere. Indeed, the narrator's grandfather, Ah Goong travels back and forth across Chinese and American national borders. While he temporarily comes back to China after working railroad construction, he goes back to the United States before disappearing in the San Francisco earthquake. His death remains based on hypotheses and gossips: "Some say he died falling into the cracking earth. ... Some say the family went into debt to send for Ah Goong, who was not making money; he was a homeless wanderer, a shiftless, dirty, jobless man with matted hair, ragged clothes, and fleas all over his body. ... Maybe he hadn't died in San Francisco, it was just his papers that burned; it was just

that his existence was outlawed by Chinese Exclusion Acts” (150-1). Despite Ah Goong’s gloomy ending and his hypothetical entrapment amidst rubble—symbolic of debilitating exclusion laws—his story eludes fixity. He is left to wander in an undefined territory with an equally undefined identity at the junction of his old self, and a new transgressive identity he might have taken on in the aftermath of the 1906 earthquake and fires that destroyed birth records in San Francisco.

The ambivalent message Kingston conveys regarding Chinese immigrants’ position culminates in her depiction of the narrator’s father whose story is told twice in the first section of the collection “The Father from China” and in the penultimate section “The American Father.” Opposing the father’s Chinese and American backgrounds and upbringings in their title, these two sections, when read together, situate the father at the intersection of both continents. The “Father from China” vaguely locates the father’s birth in China during the year of the Rabbit—“1891 or 1903 or 1915” (15)—and recounts the father’s development as a scholar preceding his migration to America in 1924 (making 1915 as an unlikely birth date). “The American Father” sets the father’s birth instead in 1903 San Francisco (237) and focuses mostly on his adult life in the United States. Born and raised in both China and the United States, the father remains an ambiguous character whose real life story remains to be told. By invoking the power of the imagination, the narrator fills in the gap left by her father’s silence. As she doubles up his life, she locates her father’s story in a fluctuating, transnational space joining China and the United States. This uncertain positioning resonates with Chinese men’s ambivalent depictions in the two juxtaposed opening parables as they oscillate between Chinese footbinding and Western suit, acculturation and assimilation, castration and fatherhood, China and the United States. Chinese male immigrants’ positions are therefore left ambivalent throughout the collection of linked stories as they waver between forced entrapment and free will, migration and settlement, home and return, belonging and unbelonging.

It is in the juxtaposition of the narrator’s forefathers’ ambivalent experiences between subjugation and resistance that the sarcastic function of footbinding in the opening story can be understood. “On Discovery” with the feminization and Orientalization of Tang Ao’s body sarcastically presents a double reductive vision of Chinese women’s oppression under patriarchy and Chinese male immigrants’ emasculation and pathologization, from which Kingston seeks to break free in the rest of the collection. Although unable to fully deconstruct these stereotypes,

Kingston, however, revisits immigration narratives to depict more nuanced and alternative representations of immigration, history, and gender roles that refuse fixed categorization. Ultimately, by manipulating socially-constructed masculinities and femininities to symbolize disempowering subjectivation and self-empowerment, Kingston thus turns gender into an ambivalent Orientalizing and de-Orientalizing tool.

By representing these Chinese (and) American cross-national and cross-gender histories through linked stories, Kingston further plays with the destabilizing nature of this genre that connects and separates, fragments and unites the stories told, to give sense of the protagonists' conflicts and ambivalent positionalities at the junction of individual self-assertions and communal/social strictures, as well as cultural/gender interpellation and self-fashioning. As seen with *The Woman Warrior* and Wang Ping's *Of Flesh and Spirit*, this genre of linked narratives thus represents an important counterintuitive narrative technique to address a subversive message and dismantle disabling dichotomies and polarizations, as well as oppressive racializing and gendering systems. By thus combining this destabilizing narrative technique to her eloquent alternative modes of storytelling and representations dominated by a subversive imaginative power, Kingston goes a step further than Lim in not only denouncing and deconstructing the oppressive normative systems governing Chinese and American societies, past and present, but also in ultimately providing reparative and alternative, yet ambivalent, depictions of Chinese feminine and masculine identities across borders.

Despite their different generic choices (play vs. linked stories) and diverse deployment of footbinding to approach Chinese immigration, Kingston and Lim have used the damaged corporeality of the bound foot as a “communicable” and “shareable” language, to use Andrew Hock Soon Ng's words (652). Invested with symbolic meaning, the deformed bound foot—too gory to ignore—lends a body, so to speak, to a variety of maiming or disabling experiences. Marking the body as distinctively Chinese and female, the bound foot enables representations of the mechanisms of oppression that Chinese immigrants encounter in the United States, as their feet are metaphorically bound by exclusion, restrictive and discriminatory laws, as well as racist and sexist injustice. By denouncing this disabling American system, Kingston and Lim thus revise the American Dream and the success stories of American freedom and achievement: the literal and metaphorical unbinding from this dehumanizing system is indeed rendered impossible

for male and female protagonists alike, although both narratives point to the characters' resistance and fight for survival.

Nonetheless, although building on Orientalist representations of footbinding's barbaric impairment, Lim and Kingston complicate Orientalist reductions of Chinese culture and beliefs to barbarism by presenting ambivalent and unsettling footbinding descriptions and metaphors that subvert gender, geographical and cultural boundaries as footbinding is transposed to the United States, yet inhabit both Chinese and American cultures. By drawing parallels of oppression between China and the United States, and across the gender line, Kingston and Lim emphasize the processes of racialization and gendering on which regulatory norms and laws are based. It is therefore to a larger hegemonic patriarchal system that continues to regulate Chinese and American societies that Kingston's and Lim's broader critiques are addressed. These underlying critiques thus contribute to deconstructing the geopolitical boundaries of East and West permeating Orientalist discourses, to present instead Eastern and Western hegemonic systems that are not only imbricated but also building on one another.

Both authors also subversively refuse to embrace the victim script attributed to footbinding narratives in the West, despite their rather negative portrayal of this custom. These feet representations thus become sites of contention and haunting reminders of Chinese immigrants' resilience in the face of hardship, thus capturing the ambivalent experience of Chinese immigrants and the equally ambivalent and fluctuating space they come to inhabit at cultural and gender crossroads. The footbinding trope in Kingston's and Lim's works is thus invested with a certain liminality itself at the junctions of male and female bodies, East and West, Orientalism and ethnic self-assertion, victimization and resistance.

## CHAPTER 7 – RE-ORIENTING FOOTBINDING: WRITING THE COMMUNIST FOOT IN *WAITING*, AND *BECOMING MADAME MAO*

The ambivalent feet tropes—situated at the junction between Orientalism and de-Orientalization—predominantly deployed by Chinese (American) writers and artists between the 1970s and late 1980s in their endeavor to dismantle binary oppositions and oppressive processes of subjectivation give way to a prominent return to Orientalist strategies in the late 1990s in fictions of expatriate writers who migrated to the United States to flee Communism. This highlights the changing demographics of the Chinese diasporic community in the aftermath of the 1965 Immigration Act, and the American reader’s continuing fascination for a literature depicting and exhibiting the Chinese Communist barbaric Other in the backdrop of a never-ending Cold War. Yet, this anti-Communist literature rejoins the Chinese American literature of the 1970s and 1980s in its denunciation of oppressive systems of body regulation despite its new focus on China. Returning the footbinding trope to China not only brings these somewhat Orientalist representations full circle, but also enables connections East and West. When read in conversation with Chinese American writers’ and artists’ denunciation of oppressive mechanisms of racialization and gendering in the United States, this anti-Communist Orientalist literature ultimately highlights the damaging effects of state control on subject formations across borders and political regimes.

With the new wave of Chinese immigrants coming to the United States, during and in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), numerous memoirs and auto-biographies recounting life experiences in Communist China have been published since the 1980s, leading to the creation of what Lo Kwai Cheung calls “an industry of writing Red China in the West” (6).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In the United States and Canada combined, more than thirty memoirs about life in Communist China were published between 1980 and 2010. These work include, among others: Ruth Earnshaw Lo and Katharine S. Kinderman’s *In the Eye of the Typhoon* (1980), Liang Heng and Judith Shapiro’s *Son of the Revolution* (1983), Gao Yuan’s *Born Red: A Chronicle of the Revolution* (1987), Fulang Lo’s *Morning Breeze: A True Story of China’s Cultural Revolution* (1989), Jung Chang’s *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* (1991), Nora Lam and Richard H. Schneider’s *China Cry: The Nora Lam Story* (1991), Anchee Min’s *Red Azalea* (1993), Wang Ping’s *American Visa* (1994), Jan Wong’s *Red China Blues* (1996), Pang-Mei Natasha Chang’s *Bound Feet and Western Dress* (1997), Jaia Sun-Childers’s *The White-Haired Girl: Bittersweet Adventures of a Little Red Soldier* (1996), Adeline Yen Mah’s *Falling Leaves: The True Story of an Unwanted Chinese Daughter* (1997), Rae Yang’s *Spider Eaters* (1997), He Dong’s *Ask the Sun* (1997), Zhu Xiao Di’s *Thirty Years in a Red House: A Memoir of Childhood and Youth in Communist Party* (1998), Hong Ying’s *Daughter of the River* (1998), Meihong Xu’s *Daughter of China* (1998), Ji-

These narratives of “family tragedies, emotional damage, political victimization, and sexual oppression by the Chinese totalitarian regime,” as Lo further contends, “cater for the Orientalist taste of the Western public” (6). Using their “cultural otherness” as a marketing ploy (Chae 32-3), Chinese expatriates fleeing the Cultural Revolution have not only found an ear for their traumatic stories in the West, but also revived an Orientalist tradition that their Chinese American predecessors and counterparts had tried to oppose in their ethnic and feminist assertion since the 1960s—not always successfully, however.

Footbinding—despite its supposed eradication in the 1950s—returns in these Communist fictions to appeal to the imagination of Western readers and magnify the Communist regime’s dehumanizing policies. When the Communist Party took over China in 1949, Mao Zedong officially banned footbinding as part of the regime’s endeavor to abolish the persisting feudal system holding women in bondage, and to grant women “equal rights with men in political, economic, cultural, educational and social life” (Blaustein, Article 6, 36). Footbinding, although already on the verge of decline, was seen as hindering the Party’s political mission to “unify and stabilize” China (Jackson, *Splendid Slippers* 157).<sup>2</sup> This anti-feudalism rhetoric was further supported during the Cultural Revolution with the campaign against the Four Olds—“old customs, old habits, old culture and old thinking” (Sturr 5)—that Communists saw as detrimental to the proletariat of the Chinese nation: these *bourgeois* practices and beliefs had to be eradicated. However, similarly to his predecessors, Mao did not succeed in completely wiping out footbinding, but marked the final stroke in its demise.<sup>3</sup>

References to footbinding in expatriates’ fictions, in addition to alluding to this historical context of promised liberation, predominantly vilify Chinese culture—past and present—and

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Li Jiang’s *The Red Scarf Girl* (1999), Ha Jin’s *Waiting* (1999), Anhua Gao’s *To the Edge of the Sky* (2000), Aiping Mu’s *Vermilion Gate* (2000), Ting-xing Ye’s *A Leaf in the Bitter Wind* (2000), Nanchu’s *Red Sorrow* (2001), Liu Hung’s *Startling Moon* (2001), Anchee Min’s *Becoming Madame Mao* (2001), Jung Chang and Jon Halliday’s *Mao: The Unknown Story* (2005), Shu Jiang Li’s *When Hwai Flowers Bloom: Stories of the Cultural Revolution* (2007), Charles N. Li, *The Bitter Sea: Coming of Age in China before Mao* (2008), and Moying Li’s *Snow Falling in Spring: Coming of Age in China during the Cultural Revolution*. See Lo, “Myth” 6-7.

<sup>2</sup> Notably because it prevented women from working productively in the fields (Jackson, *Splendid Slippers* 157).

<sup>3</sup> See chapter 3 of this work, especially the discussion of Jo Farrell’s project *Living History: Bound Feet Women of China*. The communist party consolidated the taboo around footbinding that took shape with the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1911. For instance, many of Farrell’s informants were “skeptical” (Wang, “Bound Feet” n.p.) or “ashamed” (“Last Living Chinese Women” n.p.) at first to have their feet photographed, and were hesitant to “show a bad side of China,” footbinding being often “considered a bad thing” (Wang, “Bound Feet” n.p.). “This is old world, this is ugly, not something you want to photograph,” Farrell remembers them saying (Strochlic n.p.). Their children also made sure that she would understand “this is not what China does, and it would not happen anymore” (Strochlic n.p.).

Orientalize the Chinese Communist Party depicted. These footbinding representations appear as sets of figurative props used by the writer, or perhaps editor, to exoticize and eroticize China narratives and increase the sale of these politically-loaded fictional works, while reifying the spatial, temporal and cultural gap separating Communist China from the United States. Indeed, by stressing Communist China's barbarity through and beyond the pain of footbinding, these narratives inscribe Communist China in a hegemonic discourse of West vs. East, and point to the constraints of the publishing industry for Asian American writers.

Ha Jin's novel *Waiting* (1999), and Anchee Min's historical novel *Becoming Madame Mao* (2001) are part of this marketing of "exotic otherness" (Chae 33), for which they have been simultaneously praised and criticized by a mixed audience of Western and Chinese readers. Ha's novel *Waiting* has stirred strong critical responses for its demonization and simultaneous exoticization and sexualization of China.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, Min's fictional depiction of Jiang Qing, Mao's last wife, has been said to exoticize, if not *Hollywoodize*, Chinese history to appeal to an American public and help them understand China.<sup>5</sup> The Orientalism of these fictional works is undeniable. By exoticizing the evils of Chinese politics and culture, these representations of footbinding, more than helping Americans understand China, have, once again, created, represented, and, therefore, contained China within the dominating framework of the West (see Said 40).

Footbinding plays an important role in this Orientalist vilification in both *Waiting* and *Becoming Madame Mao*. Not only does this footbinding imagery in Ha's and Min's respective work exoticize and sexualize the Chinese culture and the Chinese female bodies it depicts, but it also dramatizes the conflict between the individual and the Communist state, and the often contradictory discourse of liberation put forth by Mao's dictatorial regime. Footbinding contributes to the deception these narratives perform by *masking* the traumatic and crippling reality of a society in political chaos under a hypervisible symbol of physical mutilation voluntarily inflicted on the *individual* body, thus diverting attention from the problems of the *social* body. Yet, footbinding simultaneously magnifies the inhumanity of the Communist

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<sup>4</sup> See Liu Yiqing's review published in the *Chinese Reading Weekly* (2000) discussed below; and Ma, "De/Alienation" and "Asian Immigrants."

<sup>5</sup> See Joseph Eaton's review of *Becoming Madame Mao* published in the *Asian Reporter* on February 19, 2002.



regime that in the end turns out to be more barbaric and debilitating than the custom of footbinding.

Yet, although impeding any sense of liberation and dramatizing the Communist regime's cruelty, Ha's and Min's novels paradoxically underscore the humanity of the people caught in this destructive system, drawing human connections beyond cultural and geographical borders, East and West, and inscribing their work in a larger discourse of global human rights. It is in this ambivalent endeavor to dehumanize *and* humanize China that Ha and Min complement Chinese American writers' effort at subverting Orientalist practices, at destabilizing hegemonic systems of subjectivation across borders, and at writing the self at cultural and political crossroads.

### ***Ha Jin's Waiting: Dramatizing Orientalism and Universalism***

*Waiting* recounts the story of Lin Kong, an army doctor in a city hospital during the Cultural Revolution, who every year seeks to divorce his wife Shuyu—a bound-footed peasant residing in the countryside—to marry one of his comrade nurses, Manna Wu. The novel first set in 1963 spans over twenty years to depict Lin and Manna's excruciating wait. While Shuyu agrees every year to divorce her husband, she is, however, unable to say so at the courthouse. Lin has to wait eighteen years before he can divorce her, a law stipulating that only after eighteen years of separation can a man divorce his wife without her consent. Finally liberated from Shuyu, Lin marries Manna to discover, however, that his love relationship is as unfulfilling as his previous arranged marriage. The novel concludes on the same waiting that opened it. Lin's unhappiness and never-ending self-questioning depicts his inability to find individual freedom in the backdrop of the Communist regime he lives in.

*Waiting* uses footbinding in its staging of difference and oppositions between old and new, city and countryside, feudalism and Communism during and in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. Symbolizing China's backwardness and ancient erotic customs through the character of Shuyu, Lin Kong's first wife, footbinding synecdochically embodies Communism's social and cultural enemy to be eradicated. The figurative unbinding from these oppressive Olds, however, remains an illusion: while Shuyu's bound feet fall out of focus the more the novel unfolds, so does the perspective of freedom for each character involved. The mutilated corporeality of the old world gives way instead to the mutilated mind and sexuality of the individual crushed under a totalitarian society. The world Ha's novel describes appears as a stage

on which the characters recite the role scripted for them by the Communist regime; deceptive scripts that imprison characters in their illusory perceptions and wishes. By imprisoning his protagonists in a political and emotional stasis, Ha denounces the larger dehumanization of the individual caught in a time of political chaos, but equally re-inscribes his depictions of China within an Orientalist discourse that denies “development, transformation, human movement” to the Oriental Other, in Said’s terms (208; see also Ma, “Asian Immigrants” 200).

While Ha won the National Book Award in 1999, the novel has received mixed reviews from intellectuals in China as in the United States. Many Western critics have praised *Waiting* for its depiction of the damaging effect of the oppressive Communist regime on the individual in China. Martha Baker reads the protagonists’ “microcosmic lives” in *Waiting* as representing the “macrocosm of China, from the days of Mao and the Cultural Revolution to the opening of the floodgates under Deng Xiaoping” (n.p.); a macrocosm that she uniquely defines in Communist terms. Similarly, Linda Simon describes *Waiting* as “an indictment of the repressive political structure and social customs, corruption, and deeply embedded psychological constraints that shape contemporary Chinese culture” (n.p.). Ian Buruma concurs with Simon as for him the novel portrays “a society caught between the constraints of half-surviving traditions and the even harsher chains of Communist rules” (n.p.); a regime under which to “remain a decent, feeling human being, was an almost impossible task,” as another anonymous critic emphasizes (“Waiting” n.p.). What appeals to Western critics is precisely this alien Chinese world of the Cultural Revolution in which characters are psychologically traumatized.

Although Western critics recurrently draw attention to the *exotic* difference of the Chinese social and political background in which the novel is set, many underscore as well the novel’s attempt at breaching cultural difference by conveying a universal message. Chinese American journalist Wen Huang not only foregrounds Ha’s use of his “bicultural background to write stories that may seem *clichéd* to native Chinese but fresh to Americans” (n.p., my emphasis), but also to the “universal appeal” of the protagonists to whom “Western readers can easily relate” (n.p.). Note here Wen’s emphasis on the effect of the novel on the *Western* reader. Despite the universal message he praises, Wen also involuntarily pinpoints the novel’s Orientalization of China, as it is made understandable for the reader neither familiar with Chinese culture nor with Communism.

For an anonymous writer from the *Asian Reporter*, the universal message of the novel emerges beyond its Chinese background: *Waiting* “somehow skips the clutter of culture and class, of national origin, even historical context. Not that there aren’t significant differences, vast distances, between his characters and our readers. There are. Ocean-deep. But Ha Jin ... seems to have identified the neatly traced neutrally direct lines of immediate emotional communication with his Bic ballpoint” (“How Ha Does It” 14). In other words, differences are bridged by the emotions<sup>6</sup> that the novel raises for the reader across geographical and cultural borders. Yet, the reporter’s emphasis on these *ocean-deep* differences also reifies the cultural difference between the novel’s China and the readers’ America, thus accentuating both the reporter’s Orientalist gaze and the Orientalist underpinning of the novel.

Buruma, likewise, takes on the universality of the love story told, and declares that despite “characters and predicament that might seem, superficially, exotic,” “we can still recognize ourselves” (n.p.). Responding to the general tendency of dismissing *Waiting* as Oriental, Buruma additionally underlines the helpfulness of this exotic novel to “reopen subjects which most Western authors can only treat with irony: marriage, family relations, the boundaries set by social obligations” (n.p.). According to him, by reflecting on their *lost* past values, the Western readers draw different lessons from this Communist love story. Buruma, more than opposing the Orientalist rhetoric of the general press masks it under praises and accentuates the cultural and temporal distance opposing outdated China and modern America. Despite Western intellectuals’ emphasis on the universal message raised by the novel, their prominent interest in the Communist background and its damaging effect on the mind amplifies both their Orientalist taste for Chinese difference.

Instead, the *distortion* of China under Communism presented in *Waiting* irritates Chinese scholars, leading them to view Ha Jin as the “plaything of foreigners,” in Julia Lovell’s words, for having written in English about “uncomfortably, ‘Orientalized’ subject matter such as bound feet” (135).<sup>7</sup> In an article published in the *Chinese Reading Weekly* on June 14, 2000, Professor

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<sup>6</sup> While emphasizing the realistic story of people suffering under an oppressive Communist regime, Shirley Quan also describes *Waiting* as a “touching story about love, honor, duty and family [that] speaks feelingly to readers on matters of the heart” (n.p.).

<sup>7</sup> Following the publication of these negative reviews, *Waiting* was censored in China for its dishonest and offensive depiction of Chinese people and society (Stuckey and Jacquet 84). Translation and publication projects were immediately stopped due to these vilifying articles, but also because the award Ha received was seen as an

Liu Yiqing of Beijing University, in response to the National Book Award Ha received, denounces the obscenity of *Waiting*, its poor colloquial and crude language, and Ha's demonization of China to appeal to the American audience. Commenting on Wen Huang's review published in the *Chicago Tribune* on October 31, 1999 (mentioned above), Liu reflects on the aspects of the novel appealing to American readers. While she ignores the content of the review, she painstakingly describes the two marginal pictures: one being an illustration featuring small feet peeking out of a pair of trousers, the other, a copy of the book cover with its display of a long black braid. Set at a political time when symbols of femininity such as long hair were opposed and replaced by more masculine attributes (short "bob" hair), the long black braid of Ha's cover carries further significance and evokes Chinese men's queue hairstyle characteristic of the Qing dynasty. What attracts Americans, Liu concludes, is the backwardness of Chinese characteristics of imperial times, of which both footbinding and the queue are symbols. However, as if depicting Lin Kong's rural wife with bound feet was not enough to symbolize China's backwardness, she asks, why feature a queue on the front cover, when the novel has nothing to do with this peculiar hairstyle long revoked? Appalled by this display of Chinese imperialism to advertise for a book dealing with Communism, she angrily concludes: "When Ha Jin appeared on stage to receive his award, he said he was honored and flattered, I would like to ask if he was honored when he saw the imposing queue on his novel front cover" ("Na cheng" n.p., my translation). Liu explicitly alludes to the publisher's Orientalizing mediation of the book to increase sales, and to Ha's participation in this Orientalization.

Chinese critics, similarly to Liu Yiqing, have considered *Waiting* as demonizing China. It is the presence of Shuyu's bound feet that predominantly disturbs the Chinese reader, as Aijun Zhu explains:

According to the critics, the wife could not have had her feet bound in the context of the novel since it was already banned when she was growing up. As a result, the only reason Ha Jin adds this to the plot is to create a negative impression of China in order to please the American readers. The dispute over the wife's bound feet is not really about whether the wife's image is positive or negative, but that her bound feet illustrates the primitive, barbaric and backward state of Chinese men. (20)<sup>8</sup>

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"American conspiracy against China," as Ha relates (Varsava 16). *Waiting* was finally released in China years later, but still remains blacklisted (17).

<sup>8</sup> Zhu refers to Liu Yiqing's review stated above, but also to Li Zhenbing, "Ha Jin: Demonizing China?" *Multidimensional Weekly* 4, June 23, 2000; Wang Yiru, "VOA Reports: Ha Jin's *Waiting* Waits to Be Published,"

Zhu underlines three dominant factors in Chinese criticism: historical inaccuracy, footbinding's persisting symbolism of backwardness and barbarity in China as in the West, and the use of these degrading symbols to appeal to a Western audience. The historical inaccuracy paradigm needs to be taken with caution, however. It was not uncommon in rural areas of China in the late 1930s and early 1940s for women to still bind their daughters' feet to secure good marriage matches.<sup>9</sup>

Chinese Australian author Ouyang Yu, recalling a conversation with one of his Chinese friends who criticized *Waiting*, highlights a similar criticism. In his friends' words, Ha's story is "not even convincing of a country woman born in 1936, yes I calculated myself, who would have bound feet. I doubt if the author himself was *that* ill informed but I do suspect that it was probably the editor's suggestion that he put in the feet bit to capture the Western audience's imagination. I could almost hear him saying, 'No, no, leave it in. It's good'" (*Loose* 101). Historical inaccuracy features again as a problematic aspect of Ha's use of footbinding in the backdrop of the novel's Communist setting. Despite the plausibility of his fictional rendition of rural life in China in the 1960s, this anonymous informant takes what s/he believes to be a case of historical inaccuracy as proof of the publisher's Orientalist mediation of Chinese representations throughout the novel. The Orientalization of China yet again "provide[s] raw information to an ignorant Western audience," and "cater[s] for the fetishistic desires of the West" (101).

Chinese American scholar Sheng-Mei Ma similarly denounces the Orientalism of Ha Jin's works: "Presented as ignorant and savage, rural China and totalitarianism offer glimpses into politically incorrect gender relationships and primitivism, so long repressed yet still craved by the advanced, democratic First World" ("De/Alienation" 91)—relationships and primitivism predominantly exoticized and eroticized to further appeal to the Western reader. Ma's argument revisits Buruma's *positive* reading of *Waiting*'s universal message enabling Western readers to reconnect with the long lost values of their primitive past and points instead to the damaging effect of this supposedly universal message.

It is indeed the protagonist's wife's bound feet's disturbing presence and resilience, as well as deformed physicality and erotic symbolism, that continue to make footbinding's

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June 22, 2000 and Cao Changqing, "Why Are Award-winning Novels in the U.S. Not Allowed to Publish in Mainland China?" *Xiaocankao Daily News—A Subsidiary of Chinese VIP Reference* 837, July 8, 2000 (280).

<sup>9</sup> For more information, see Farrell's *Living History*, as well as the section "Unbinding: A Glance at Oral Testimonies" of chapter 3 of this work.

ambivalence emphatically present throughout the narrative. Dramatizing the numerous binary oppositions of the novel, Shuyu's bound feet ask the reader to reflect on the conflicting ideologies and beliefs raised by the novel. In the light of the waiting imprisoning the protagonists in a constant state of stasis between old and new, feudalism and Communism, state imposition and individual desire, the resilience of Shuyu's bound feet, more than questioning the Communist regime's attempt at transforming the Chinese nation into a homogeneous mass of peasant revolutionaries, symbolically lends a body to personal and collective experiences of literal and metaphorical mutilation. In other words, by dramatizing the conflict between the individual and the state, footbinding magnifies the contradictory and illusory discourse of liberation deployed by the Communist regime.

Indeed, footbinding does not represent the crippling stasis of a Chinese culture forever caught in the past, as Liu Yiqing contends, but paradoxically reinforces the humanity of the characters whose different personal and political ideologies and beliefs not only divide them, but also prevent them from evolving individually. Although Shuyu's bound feet appear in the prologue and first part of the novel as clichéd representations of a debilitating Chinese past that the Communist regime opposes and ridicules, these clichéd representations, as Seiwoong Oh asserts, more than demonizing China for its backwardness and barbarity for the sake of the American reader's entertainment, as Liu has claimed, are presented from the start as "antiquarian rarities" (Oh 425) mocked by Chinese society during the Cultural Revolution. As a result, despite their Oriental connotations, these clichéd depictions stress a Chinese culture and society "vibrantly dynamic and constantly changing" (Oh 425), not a static and homogeneously primitive China. Their emphatic presence contrastingly diverts attention from the more profound problem permeating society beyond the maiming customs of a Chinese past persisting in the countryside. By amplifying physical mutilation and barbarity, footbinding thus masks the crippling psychological emptiness surrounding the characters.

Setting the ground for the novel's main conflicts, the prologue presents the clashing ideologies opposing the characters through a play of superficial appearances, making footbinding an intrinsic marker of Shuyu's backwardness and a crucial visual element in the divorce plot. Contrary to Lin Kong, an army doctor described as "quite young for his age," with a "smooth and handsome" "pale face" (6),

Shuyu was a small, withered woman and looked much older than her age. Her thin arms and legs couldn't fill up her clothes, which were always baggy on her. In addition, she had bound feet and sometimes wore black puttees. Her dark hair was coiled into a severe bun on the back of her head, giving her a rather gaunt face. Her mouth was sunken, though her dark eyes were not bad-looking, like a pair of tadpoles. (6)

Although younger than Lin, Shuyu's shriveled and sunken face is reinforced by her old-fashion style represented by her bun, bound feet and puttees. While Lin embodies the revolutionary army doctor living in the city, Shuyu becomes a metaphoric caricature of the backward mentality persisting in the countryside despite Mao's reforms, two opposed stereotypical figures of dynastic and Communist China. Thus portrayed as a "couple [that] did not match" (6), Shuyu and Lin are staged as living embodiments of the conflicting ideologies infusing the Communist regime. The cultural significance of footbinding and the new ideologies that oppose this practice are, however, taken for granted in this introductory section. The cultural difference separating the Western reader from the Chinese characters, instead of being translated from one background to the other, is increased from the start.

Although footbinding's cultural significance is not introduced in the prologue, it is slowly integrated into the narration of Shuyu's lifestyle and attitude, further emphasizing the spatial and temporal difference separating the characters. The primitivism of Shuyu's bound feet is dramatized when read in connection with her personality. In addition to highlighting her old-fashioned appearance, her feet epitomize her feudal lifestyle as they connect with the loveless arranged marriage that ties her to Lin, as well as with her submissive attitude to her husband. As Shuyu explains to the nurses in Part III, her mother bound her feet to increase her marriage prospect: "Mother said it's my second chance to marry good, 'cause my face ugly. You know, men are crazy about lotus feet in those days. The smaller your feet are, the better looking you are to them" (206). Her feet not only divert attention from her ugliness, but become an important factors in her marriage match, thus embodying the persisting feudal ideologies and *bourgeois* beauty ideals that Mao tried to eradicate. The nurses' amusement at Shuyu's cultural presentation of footbinding forges the temporal gap between old and new ideologies, furthering the dramatic conflicts infusing the Cultural Revolution.

In addition to increasing a woman's physical appeal to men, bound feet also symbolize, in the context of arranged marriages, a woman's submission to and respect for her husband and in-law family. Footbinding not only taught a woman discipline and submission, but also

perseverance and endurance in the face of adversity. Shuyu's bound feet seem to reflect her devotion and diligence, as well as her *bound* character and her position of country housewife in the service of her husband. She not only raises their daughter alone, but takes care of Lin's parents until their death. Likewise, Shuyu repetitively consents to Lin's yearly request to accept their divorce with her same calm and submissive "all right" (7). Submerged by her emotions at the courthouse, however, Shuyu is each year unable to answer the judge. Her brother becomes her spokesperson defending her rights as she, "an illiterate housewife" who "doesn't know how to express herself clearly" in his words (12), cannot speak her true feelings. Although her inability to accept the divorce in front of the judge can be seen as a sign of resistance, her position throughout the novel as endlessly waiting for Lin to come back undermines her voluntary defiance and foregrounds instead her silent compliance with her fate and her endless devotion to the male figure of the family. Her crippled feet thus metonymically and metaphorically stand for her personality bound to the Confucian patriarchal values of the past.

Lin despises Shuyu because of her bound feet and backwardness from the start: "what is more her feet were only four inches long," he first thought (8); "This was the New China; who would look up to a young woman with bound feet?" (8). Lin's shame toward his wife, who he finds "absolutely unpresentable outside of his home village" (9), is amplified by people's reactions in the city, forging the gap between city and countryside. When Manna sees a picture of Shuyu, she laughingly exults, "Heavens, oh her tiny feet! ... Isn't she your mother?" (63). Ridiculed by Manna's laughter, Lin shamefully leaves the room without a word, while his eyes flash with discomfort. Lin's feeling of shame toward his wife's feet is interestingly the only strong feeling and opposition he repetitively expresses in the first part of the novel, making footbinding emphatically present and visible from the start. His disgust for Shuyu's feet ties in with the Communist condemnation of the Four Olds the novel indirectly points to. As Sturr explains, "the Red Guards targeted anyone who dissented from their radical program of rooting out the 'four old' elements of Chinese society ... They publicly denounced and sometimes tortured millions of individuals for having engaged in 'feudal' or 'reactionary' modes of thinking" (5). In this political context, Lin's strong disgust for Shuyu's feet exemplifies his own Communist embrace and opposition to old customs and practices.

However, his strong feeling of disgust remains just a feeling. Lin does not act against the Four Olds, but continues to sustain old feudal beliefs and habits himself by obeying his parents



in filial piety, undermining therefore the liberation rhetoric sustained by the Cultural Revolution. Despite his repulsion for Shuyu because she does not match with the new ideals propagated by the Communist regime, he nevertheless agrees to marry her to please his parents, willing to believe that she will be a good and devoted wife. His uneasy and fluctuating positioning between old and new results in ambivalent feelings toward her. Although he is repulsed by her appearance and bound feet, he respects her for taking care of their daughter and parents and paradoxically for the old beliefs she embodies:

Why couldn't he enjoy the warmth of a family? If only his wife were pretty and her feet had not been bound. Or if only she and he had been a generation older, so that people in the city wouldn't laugh at her small feet. But he was by no means miserable, and his envy for men with presentable wives was always momentary. He held no grudge against Shuyu, who had attended his mother diligently until the woman died; now she was caring for his bedridden father and their baby. (49)<sup>10</sup>

The third-person narrative voice penetrating Lin's thoughts in a stream of consciousness reveals his ambivalent feelings that never settle between old and new. He resents Shuyu for her backwardness and ugliness, yet feels gratitude for her devotion to his family. He wishes for a "presentable" wife, but only momentarily. He is ashamed of her, yet only outside of the village. Lin remains caught in a state of in-betweenness reflecting the transitional cultural and political period he inhabits, a transitional state sending him conflicting messages he is unable to fully comprehend.

While the binary opposing Lin and Shuyu slowly collapses to direct the reader's attention to the interstitial space linking them, the novel strategically and emphatically reopens the gap separating old and new, city and countryside at the beginning of Part III. It is at this moment that footbinding resurfaces in the narrative, this time in full Orientalist force. Shuyu becomes the object of nurses' and doctors' gaze when she visits the city hospital for the divorce proceedings and her feet become the focus of erotic and exotic fascination. The nurses' voyeuristic desire to see Shuyu's deformed feet and unveil their mystery recalls the early twentieth-century freak show as Shuyu comes to embody the position of exotic Other. One of the nurses, unhappy at

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<sup>10</sup> Lin similarly shows his indecisiveness when reflecting on his relationships with his wife and Manna: "He wanted a marriage based on love and a wife whose appearance wouldn't embarrass him in the presence of others (to his mind, Manna would be a fine choice). Yet the feelings of guilt, mixed with compassion for Shuyu, were draining him" (77).

Shuyu's reluctance to show them her feet, offers her a yuan to *peep* at her naked feet; an offer that Shuyu equally declines to the nurse's amazement: "Why? One yuan just for a look. How come your feet are so expensive?" (205). Counterpoising the nurse's freak show rhetoric to Shuyu's resistance and pride at her small feet, Ha not only stages once again the contrast between old and new, but also responds to the nurses' and readers' ignorance about this practice. While the naked bound foot is not unveiled physically for the nurses to see, its historical importance and symbolic meaning are made clearer for an unfamiliar audience, thus forging the temporal distance separating the nurses and Shuyu, but also the Western readers and the Chinese characters. This historical context, despite its ironic substitution for the physical display of Shuyu's bound feet, contributes to Orientalizing the China of the past that Shuyu embodies.

In explaining footbinding to the nurses, Shuyu proudly points to the preciousness of bound feet, but also gives a sense to the pain suffered when her feet were bound through a detailed anatomical description:

"Of course it *hurt*. *Don't tell me about pain*. I started to bind my feet when I was seven. My heavens, for two years *I'd weep in pain* every night. In the summer *my toes swelled up, filled with pus*, and the *flesh rotted*, but I dared not loosen the binding. My mother'd whack at me with a big bamboo slat if she found me doing that. Whenever I ate fish, the *pus in my heels dripped out*. There's the saying goes, 'Every pair of lotus feet come from a *bucket of tears*.'" (206, my emphasis)

Shuyu's account echoes common narratives of footbinding that underline the putrefaction of the flesh, the excruciating pain endured, as well as the popular sayings revolving around this custom. By narratively exposing Shuyu's deformed bones and putrefying flesh, Ha thus satisfies the curiosity of both nurses and readers.

The Orientalization of footbinding culminates in this scene with the exposition of its erotic function and the resulting sexualization of China's cultural past. Shuyu's detailed anatomical description of pain and putrefaction contrasts with her prudery: the violence of footbinding can be narrated, but the mutilated foot cannot be seen. The erotic nature of bound feet precisely stands in their concealment, as Shuyu explains to the nurses:

"You know girls, only my man's allowed to see them."

"Why?"

"Show us just once, please," a tall nurse begged with a suave smile. "We won't tell others about it."

"No, I won't do that. You know, take off your shoes and socks is like open your pants."

“Why?” the tall woman exclaimed.

“Cause you bound your feet only for your future husband, not for other men, to make your feet more precious to your man.” (206)

Associated with genitals, the bound foot is described as the most intimate part of a woman’s anatomy only for the husband to see and touch. Unbinding the foot becomes an erotic act akin to a woman’s deflowering. Footbinding, Orientalized through the double description of its mutilation and eroticism, is however complicated, if not ridiculed, as Shuyu’s precious feet have neither been seen, nor touched by her husband. When one of the nurses asks her if Lin likes her small feet, Shuyu mumbles, “I don’t know. He never saw them” (206). As Shuyu’s feet are fetishized, her body is equally portrayed as a submissive object sacrificed physically and sexually to Confucian patriarchy. The sexualization of Shuyu’s body in this description refuses eroticization, however, as Shuyu’s bound feet failed to attract her husband’s attention and desire, thus ultimately stripping Shuyu of her sex appeal. As the erotic function of her bound feet is denied, the validity, acceptability and purpose of this custom are questioned, ultimately forging the distance separating Lin and Shuyu. By similarly pointing to footbinding’s deceptive sexual function, Ha critiques, between the lines, Chinese women’s erotic sexualization in the West (see Cassel 43).

The erotic fetishism of bound feet is ironically transposed to Manna’s wounded feet early on in the novel. Conversely to Shuyu’s feet which are neither seen naked, nor touched by her husband, Manna’s blistered feet after a six-hour walk lead to Lin’s, and her own, sexual arousal, thus ironically hinting at, if not reproducing, the erotic effect bound feet should have had between husband and wife. Lin’s and Manna’s mutual attraction is first expressed through this first contact—matter-of-factly described by Lin’s pressing “the red skin around the largest blister” on her soles (40). Manna, aroused, remembers the touch of Lin’s hands on her feet: “Hard as she tried, she couldn’t stifle the thought of him. Night after night, similar questions kept her awake until the small hours. At times she felt as though his hands still held and touched her right heel; so sensitive and so gentle were his fingers. Her feet couldn’t help rubbing each other under the quilt, and she even massaged them now and then. Her heart brimmed with emotions” (44). The gentleness of his fingers and hands has left their mark figuratively on her feet and metaphorically in her heart. Although ridiculing the erotic function of bound feet, Ha sarcastically points to the pervasive fetishistic and erotic function that feet might have in modern times.

While Manna's strong feelings are undeniable from the beginning, Lin's emotional connection to Manna is characterized by the same ambivalent feelings of uncertainty, and indecisiveness he has for his wife. However, his first sign of attraction for Manna is similarly expressed through this first contact with her feet. Yet, despite his attempt at distancing himself from his desires, the feel of Manna's foot "still linger[s] and expand[s] in his palms and fingers" (43). While he refuses to look at his bound-footed wife's feet, he ironically feels aroused at the recollection of Manna's blistered feet. The irony is furthered as his arousal follows his fantasy, although short-lived, of a polygamous relationship with the nurses surrounding him, which dramatizes his transitional positioning between old and new, erotic urge and denial, passivity and action. This feet episode ultimately dramatizes the Communist Party's pervasive control over men's and women's lives, feelings and sexual relationships.

While prominently mentioned in Part I, and resurfacing at the beginning of Part III, Shuyu's bound feet slowly fall out of focus. Once Shuyu's feet are explained to the crowd of curious nurses and looked at in amazement or laughter in the city, they recede to the narrative background as the surprise fades. Moving away from Shuyu's mutilated flesh, Part III turns to broader cases of mutilation—principally of the individual mind during the Cultural Revolution—thus revealing the illusory discourse of liberation put forth by the Communist regime. The revolutionary strength individuals are asked to take on equally fades revealing their vulnerable position hidden behind illusory perceptions and wishes. The psychological trauma lingers to inhabit every nook and cranny of the characters' minds and lives.

For instance, Lin appears as "emotionally crippled" (Weich n.p.), as he constantly battles against right and wrong, old and new, in his confrontation of a restrictive Maoist regime that imprisons individuals under sets of rules governing their actions and thoughts. Ha dramatizes Lin's inner struggle through an extensive rendition of his conflicting thoughts with interior monologues. Giving depth to his inability to decide, these monologues highlight his passivity, nonchalance and crippled emotional state that prevent him from progressing toward self-realization beyond his function or role within the Communist Party. The use of this Western literary technique of the twentieth-century psychological novel ("Stream of Consciousness") further lays bare Communist China's dehumanizing nature as it penetrates into the damaged mind of the Chinese individual. Lin's sense of selfhood disappears under the social role he is asked to perform on a daily basis, conflating the political stage and his individual self in a

“paralyzing stasis” (Parascandola 46). In other words, his constant questioning and attempt at rationalizing the world he lives in engulf him deeper into deception; a deceptive perception of self-becoming and realization that imprisons him into a static unresolved in-between.

In an interview with Jerry Varsava, Ha explains the moral surveillance of the Communist regime: “The Communists wanted to control people. Not just the body, but also your soul, your psyche, your sexual energy included; all your energy was supposed to be channeled toward the cause, toward serving the cause of the Revolution. The Party basically controlled every part of the individual’s life” (12-3). Individual freedom is compromised in the name of the state and laws in *Waiting*, thus hindering human relationships to develop beyond the restrictive confines of the state surveillance. Lin is unable to divorce his wife because of a law meant to protect women from exploitation that stipulates that a man cannot divorce his wife without her consent and that for eighteen years, thus negatively impacting on his emotional state and love story. In addition, Lin is prevented from divorcing Shuyu by his brother-in-law, who defends his sister’s interest and feudal beliefs. Furthermore, the hospital rules, instead of protecting women, paradoxically exploit them by keeping men and women prisoners of restrictive laws prohibiting romantic love and sexual relationships outside of marriage. Communist laws and the old Confucian system here work together to annihilate individual freedom through the control of their sexualities, individual identities and relationships, thus keeping men and women in a limbo as they are neither able to oppose the state, nor to find self-assertion outside of the Communist Party.<sup>11</sup>

Manna is particularly vulnerable to these conflicting laws and to the Party’s restrictive sexual politics. Her endless waiting for Lin to divorce his wife and marry her, as well as her maturing age, prevents her from finding a suitable husband beyond Lin (Parascandola 44). In addition, although somewhat attracted to her, Lin refuses to take action showing passivity and nonchalance as Manna urges him to act so they could be together. While himself crippled by the totalitarianism of the Communist regime, Lin can equally be seen as a perpetrator of these crippling laws and beliefs he has unconsciously internalized (Weich n.p.). By constantly escaping his responsibilities, Lin contributes to Manna’s exploitation and her slow decline from an energetic young woman to a dying woman, as her heart literally grows weaker. It is ironically

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<sup>11</sup> For more on sexual and political exploitation in *Waiting*, see Parascandola’s article “Love and Sex.”

when they are married that her heart condition is detected, symbolically indicating the crippling of her feelings and emotions by years of waiting.

Moreover, Manna is rendered all the more vulnerable and powerless when she is raped and stripped of her virginity by Geng Yang, a revolutionary officer. Losing her virginity—her mark of value, as only “good girls,” i.e., virgins, were allowed to join the army (21)—would mean being transformed into a sullied, undesirable woman and ruin her chance to marry as well as compromise her position as a nurse in the army hospital. As confessing Geng’s crime would undermine her personal and professional future, Manna is forced into silence. Geng’s political power and financial success in an important provincial company at the end of the novel, in contrast to Manna’s vulnerability and powerlessness, foreground the way women’s bodies were used as slates on which men inscribed their political and masculine power in the highly patriarchal Communist regime. By including this rape scene in his narrative of predominant sexual prohibition and frustration, Ha denounces the depravity and bestiality of the Communist regime, as well as its use of sex as tool of social control in its regulation of people’s bodies and relationships, and in its deprivation of men’s and women’s individualities, desires and feelings.

Ha’s denunciation becomes more apparent as the raping and crippling of Manna’s body is echoed—to a certain extent—by the crippling of Lin’s identity, role and sexuality. Lin’s gender identity and role as husband and lover are questioned by his inaction and lack of power at the political, legal and sexual levels. Lin’s passivity, superfluity, indecisiveness and weakness conform to what Lo calls “the Western stereotypes of Chinese male as feminized, dependent and passive” (15). His emasculation is furthered by his inability to keep up with the sexual demands of his two wives. He declines the sexual advances of both women beyond the prohibitions imposed by the state. In addition to refusing to see and touch Shuyu’s naked feet,<sup>12</sup> he turns down her advances when she wants to fulfill her wife’s duties and give him a son. Not only does he refute the reproductive function of sex, but he equally refuses to continue the patriarchal family line, thus opposing the backbone of patriarchy. Likewise, while he refuses to sleep with Manna and break the rules during their long years of waiting, he finds little satisfaction in their

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<sup>12</sup> Read from a psychoanalytic perspective, his disgust for his wife’s bound feet, and failure to venerate them as fetish, draws attention to his own impotence and castration that becomes clearer, as the novel progresses. The phallic-shaped bound foot in Freudian terms works as fetish. Seen as a “token of triumph over the threat of castration and a protection against it” (Freud 154), a fetish precisely appeases men’s castration anxiety by diverting their gazes away from the mother’s/woman’s phallic lack.

sexual relationships after they are married, and barely keeps up with Manna's demands. In the early part of the novel, Lin compares sex to a criminal act that would ruin their lives (71). His repressed sexual desires return, however, in his wet dreams where the fantasy of making love to unknown women bring him temporary pleasure. However, it is only in these imagined encounters that he finds sexual enjoyment, pointing to both his sexual deprivation and his resulting disability in performing sexually in the physical presence of a woman. Neither able to find pleasure in his wife's bound feet, nor in sexual relationships, Lin is left to contemplate his castration.

Yet, more than representing the *Western* stereotype of Chinese men as emasculated or castrated, Ha depicts and critiques through the figure of Lin the masculine ideal of "peasant-worker-solider" typical of the Cultural Revolution (Louie 48). As Kam Louie states, based on previous models of socially-constructed *wu* masculinity—martial achievement and prowess—this Communist revolutionary masculine ideal put sexual accomplishments in the background, as political submission and loyalty to the nation prevailed over individual and sexual satisfaction (48-9). Read from this light, Lin's lack of sexual desire, if not impotency, symbolizes, more than erases, his revolutionary masculinity. However, Ha's critique to this asexual masculine ideal remains conspicuous. When read in juxtaposition to the rape scene, this asexual masculine ideal magnifies the dysfunctional sexualities and individualities of Chinese subjects under Communist rule, as well as hides sexual violence committed against the female and male bodies under illusory ideals of asexuality and sexual restraint. In this respect, Lin's dysfunctional sexuality and desires once again point to the dehumanizing nature of the Communist Party's sexual politics.

Although remaining a pawn in the hand of the Communist regime, Lin finds temporary relief from his new married life in the feudal values that Shuyu embodies. Although the narrative moves away from Shuyu's mutilated feet, and turns toward the characters' crippled minds and sexualities the more the novel unfolds, these bound feet regain symbolic significance at the end. As Ma claims, Shuyu's feet "increase in significance from an appendage of slavishness to a symbol of steadfast loyalty, the martyr-like waiting of the traditional woman in a harsh, ever-changing Maoist China" ("Asian Immigrants" 192). As Manna's heart condition deteriorates, so does her relationship with Lin in the aftermath of their marriage, leading Lin to question not only his decision to have divorced and married again, but also his love for Manna altogether. At a

climactic time of self-doubt, Lin finds comfort in Shuyu's presence, when he once again escapes his responsibility, this time, toward his dying wife. The narrative thus inverts focus. From the new to the old, or from the revolutionary to the feudal, the narration reverts to the comfort of traditional values at the end, casting once again the staging of Mao's liberation from the Old Fours as an illusion.

Indeed, the conclusive pages of the novel point to the Communist regime's reproduction and amplification of these feudal beliefs and practices. Lin, to escape the claustrophobic atmosphere of his family life with Manna, stops by Shuyu's new apartment in the city. Tired by his endless fighting with Manna and by the chores he has to perform to provide for her needs, Lin feels overwhelmed by the "feeling of being at home" with "his wife and daughter talking in the kitchen and cooking dinner" (303). Despite the divorce he patiently waited for for eighteen years, Shuyu remains *his wife*. It is in this "peaceful home," and in traditional Confucian values that Lin finds temporary comfort, happy to be taken care of by his faithful first wife, who has endlessly waited for him to come home (Ma, "Asian Immigrants" 193). With the same "all right" she repeatedly agreed to divorce him, Shuyu similarly accepts his endearing apologies uttered while drunk. Unable to contain her emotions, Shuyu promises to wait for him, thus embodying till the end a loyal wife (Ma 192). By representing the female protagonists as not only crippled by the Communist rules they are held in, but also by the husband figure they yearn for, Ha deprives women of agency as there are unable to find self-development beyond the double patriarchal confine of moral conservatism and state imposition (Ma 200). Yet, the patriarchal system pervading the novel equally collapses at the end as Lin—already emasculated by his sexual impotence—appears as a baby-like figure in need of female protection, further dismantling the gender and social order of the novel and showing the destructive power of Communist totalitarianism.

The crippling of the characters' bodies and minds ultimately resonates at the narrative level. Shuyu's, Manna's, and Lin's endless waiting open-endedly concludes the novel, alluding to the unchanged tragedy of their respective lives. The open end performs the ultimate *crippling* act as it brings the reader back to the uncomfortable feeling of waiting that opened the narrative. The exposition of the characters' tragic "paralyzing stasis," to borrow Parascandola's term yet again (46), not only stages the failure of both Communism and patriarchy, but also fixes Chinese



protagonists in an Orientalist framework that denies them any possibility of improvement, progression, transformation or movement (see Said 208, and Ma “Asian Immigrants” 200).

### ***Orientalist Humanization in Becoming Madame Mao***

*“To them, this woman is evil. How could evil possibly be in love, or know love the way we humans do?”*

(Min qtd. in Farley n.p.)

The trope of footbinding returns in Anchee Min’s historical novel *Becoming Madame Mao*, as she rewrites the life story of Jiang Qing, Mao Zedong’s last wife. Footbinding is used in *Becoming Madame Mao* as a prop in the staging of Madame Mao’s open wound created by the misogynistic society in which she grew up, theatricalizing her tragic experience of gender oppression and humanizing her slow transformation into a historical *monster*. Parallel to her debut as an actress, the rebellious unbinding of her feet provides a frame to her thirst for power and liberation. However, her liberation/unbinding is undermined the more the novel unfolds as her life becomes an act, a theatrical illusion. By deploying the trope of footbinding to explain Madame Mao’s monsterization, Min relies on Orientalist strategies to appeal to the Western reader; strategies that resonate with Said’s definition of Orientalist representations as depicting the Orient as a “theatrical stage affixed to Europe,” or more generally to the West, on which the “whole East is confined” and mediated (63). Remaining accessory to the plot development, footbinding functions, when read in the backdrop of Min’s attempt at explaining China to Americans, as a theatrical device shedding light on China’s sexual politics before and during Communism by foregrounding the oppressive misogynistic and patriarchal regime governing women’s lives, as well as women’s own sexual drives and relationships (Hayot 618). While humanizing women oppressed by patriarchy, this focus on sexual politics also contributes to Orientalizing both Chinese women’s bodies and the misogynistic Chinese society represented.

In *Becoming Madame Mao*, Min not only presents an ambivalent Chinese history by focusing on women’s oppression and self-development within and against the hegemonic regime during the Cultural Revolution, but also re-examines Jiang Qing’s historical vilification to better understand her psychological development and slow transformation into the *monster* we now know. In an interview, Min shares her frustration with the Chinese historical sources found:

My research on Madame Mao was focused on her human side, because every piece of information I gathered on her told me that she was born demon. When I was writing the book, as an educated

American, I refused to believe it. I needed evidence. She was a young girl with bound feet. She ran away from her oppressive hometown and became a revolutionary at a young age. She was an early-feminist-turned-murderer, and I was interested in the process of her straight-to-hell journey, I wanted to know how she felt, especially how she married Mao and their relationship as husband and wife. (Dowling 30)

Min's rewriting of history is framed in a pervasive contrast opposing China and the United States. While she links the United States to truth and empirical evidence, Min underlines the continuing magnification of Mao in China as "the founding father, a good guy, a people's leader" (Dowling 31) despite the horrendous deeds he committed. Min inserts Jiang's vilification in this larger context of Chinese biased depictions of Mao as a timeless national hero. "To give Madame Mao the benefit of the doubt," she says, would mean to question Mao's actions and "shake the foundation of Communism" (31). Therefore, to blame Madame Mao for "the millions of lives murdered and lost during the Cultural Revolution," Min continues, is "the only option," as demonstrated by China's long lasting historical "tradition of blaming the concubine for the emperor's faults" (31). Thus hoping to rectify Chinese history's wrongs, Min, with her *American* insight, endeavors to show Jiang beyond her demonization, while including her own experience and vision of the Cultural Revolution between the lines of the narrative.<sup>13</sup>

"She was a girl with bound feet" (qtd. in Dowling 30), Min says as first counterevidence against historical claims that she was born a demon. Born in 1914, Li Shumeng (re-named Jiang Qing by Mao) did not escape the pain of footbinding. In his biography, *Madame Mao: The White-Boned Demon* (1999), Ross Terrill narrates both her footbinding and early rebellion against this custom:

Shumeng's feet were bound, which was not too surprising in Zucheng before 1920. The compressing of a girl's feet with tight swaddling was meant to make her look dainty and to signal that she was destined not for work but for marriage alone. "She hated the whole idea of it," a classmate recalled of Shumeng. "She took off the binding! So we always called her "Renovated Feet." Of course, the binding of her feet left its ugly mark—and gave a bandy-legged look to her walk for the rest of her life" (17).

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<sup>13</sup> In an interview with Elif S. Armbruster, Min explains how introducing "the China [she] know(s)" to a Western public, would be [her] biggest contribution" (4): "I believe that we Americans can no longer afford to ignore China, for it has become our partner and rival. Understanding China is to secure our own future, so I feel that there is a place that I could be and take advantage of what I know" (4).

Footbinding affected Jiang's early life and left its indelible mark on her body; an "ugly mark" (17) perpetually noticeable in her "too-heavy ankles" and her "slightly bandy-legged walk" that Terrill describes (64). By portraying young Jiang as "a victim deeply rooted in misogyny," as A.O. Scott states (44), Min turns history to her advantage to pinpoint potential explanations for Jiang's transformation into a monstrous figure of the Cultural Revolution.

It is precisely on this *ugly mark* that Min opens her fictional rendition of Madame Mao's life. Min goes beyond this historical fact, however, and transforms footbinding into a theatrical device in the staging of Jiang's early rebellion against misogyny and female oppression. The first chapter's *in media res* opening strengthens footbinding's importance in her *becoming* of Madame Mao, as its narration precedes the introduction of the novel's setting—date, location and historical contextualization. The opening display of this footbinding process and the pain caused, in addition to exposing its intricacies to a Western audience predominantly unfamiliar with the custom, strategically marks this practice as the first turning point in Jiang's life, grounding her subsequent evilness in the dehumanizing nature of this tradition.

Footbinding acts as a metaphor for women's conditions in patriarchal China: its violence and the pain engendered are highlighted to represent a woman's physical and psychological trauma. The opening line—"She learns pain early" (5)—indicates the beginning of Madame Mao's experience of pain through the combined inferiorization, if not dehumanization, of women in society and the crippling of their bodies through the binding of their feet. Jiang's footbinding is juxtaposed to a general note on women's condition, from the mother's to the protagonist's suffering: "She [the mother] describes herself as a radish pickled in the sauce of misery. The girl is used to her mother's sadness, to her silence during family meals. And she is used to her own position – the last concubine's daughter, the most distant relative the family considers" (5). The mother's misery engenders the daughter's sense of unbelonging to and disconnectedness from her family, as well as feeling of inadequacy and hatred at being born a girl.

Told in the present tense from an omniscient third-person viewpoint, the narration of Jiang's footbinding foregrounds the dramatic present-ness of the situation for the young girl unaware of what is about to come, and for the mother about to bind her daughter's feet. The succession of short sentences furthers the episodic structure of the narration and accentuates the immediacies of the action and the theatricality of the scene unfolding in front of the reader's eyes. The style created by these short descriptive sentences recalls the stage directions in a play,

emphasizing from the start the performativity of Jiang's life and the instrumentality of her footbinding in the creation of her transgressive character.

While the girl sits on the stool, playing with “the pile of cloth with her toes” (5) and observing her mother preparing the rice porridge that will officiate as glue in the binding of her feet, the mother solemnly and silently focuses on the tasks to perform, undisturbed by her daughter's curious looks and playful mood. The narrative voice, however, pierces the mother's thoughts, revealing what the mother refuses to tell to preserve her daughter's innocence, and simultaneously increasing the dramatic effect of the scene: “She doesn't tell the girl that this is the last time she will see her feet as she knows them. The mother doesn't tell her that by the time her feet are released they will look like triangle-shaped rice cakes with toenails curled under the sole. The mother tries to concentrate on the girl's future. A future that will be better than her own” (6). The mother's unsaid sentiments paradoxically told from the external narrator's standpoint underlines the traumatic effect of footbinding on a girl's life and the equally traumatic consequence of this practice on the mother. It also contributes to the victimization of young Jiang who is left unaware of what is about to come.<sup>14</sup>

The daughter, while a participant in the binding scene, remains a spectator of her own footbinding at first, amplifying her position as victim, as well as her own objectification. Jiang “sees herself, her feet being bound, in her mother's dressing mirror” (6). This mirror episode, reminiscent of Jacques Lacan's mirror stage theory, signals an important moment in the protagonist's self-perception. Yet, although Jiang recognizes herself and her feet in the mirror reflection, the third-person narrative voice from which the scene is told simultaneously distances Jiang from her reflected image, thus creating a certain splitting of the self that complicates Lacan's theory of self-identification with the reflected Other. Reifying the line separating her positions as observer and observed—spectator and actor—this scene, more than representing Jiang's self-constitution through and with the reflected Other, accentuates her dis-identification process. By simultaneously being actor and spectator, observer and observed, Jiang separates herself from her reflection, turning her own body into a distant alienated object to preserve herself from the pain to ensue, thus keeping the bound-footed Jiang she observes at a distance. Yet in so doing, she equally controls and distorts the representation of her footbinding, first

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<sup>14</sup> This focus on the mother recalls Dong's narrative film *Lotus* in which the pain of footbinding was first and foremost represented through the mother's suffering and reaction to her daughter's footbinding.

refusing victimization. Her feelings of disconnectedness and unaffectedness are reinforced by her behavior and carelessness, as she feels entertained at the sight of her feet: “The girl looks at her feet. They are thick as elephant legs. The girl finds it amusing. She moves her toes inside the cocoon. Is that it? she asks. When her mother moves away the jar, the girl jumps on the floor and plays” (6). By mockingly underlining the ineffectiveness of her mother’s binding, the girl questions the validity of this custom, but also showcases her strength and resistance to subjugation, and manipulates the narration of her life from the start.

This double positioning and the juxtaposition of the daughter’s carelessness to the mother’s anxiety and minute work produce a dramatic effect, which is also amplified by the implicated presence of the reader. The girl’s external gaze enacted through the mirror is re-enacted by the reader who contemplates the spectacular nature of the scene. However, aware of the maiming nature of footbinding and the gap separating mother and daughter, the reader faces the girl’s vulnerability, and the progressive deprivation of her innocence with the pain to follow, despite her self-distancing and temporal resistance. Yet external to the scene, the reader is rendered powerless in this mutilation act, yet complicit in this child’s objectification and dehumanization through his/her voyeuristic gaze. The reader’s voyeuristic position and inability to act, albeit raising sympathy for the girl’s plight, deepens the cultural gap between his/her American background and Min’s Chinese subjects, while dramatizing the crippling of Jiang’s body by dehumanizing social and gender impositions.

The narrative proceeds with the worsening of the girl’s pain that rips her innocent playfulness and thrusts her into the reality of the misogynistic society she inhabits. The third person narrative voice juxtaposes again the girl’s physical pain to the mother’s internal grief, confusing the tears that both shed:

The girl has no trouble until the third week. She is already tired with her elephant legs and now comes the pain. Her toes scream for space. Her mother is near her. She is there to prevent the girl from tearing off the strips. She guards the elephant legs as if guarding the girl’s future. She keeps explaining to her crying girl why she had to endure the pain. Then it becomes too much. The girl’s feet are infected. The mother’s tears pour. No, no, no, don’t touch them. She insists, cries, curses. Herself. Men. She asks why she didn’t have a son. Again and again she tells the girl that females are like grass, born to be stepped on. (6-7)

Reduced to her elephant legs and painful toes metaphorically screaming for space, two images magnifying her fragmentation, mutilation and pain, the daughter is made accessory to the

narrative and quickly falls out of focus. This subtly alludes to and reproduces girls' marginalization in the traditional Chinese family system. The narrative perspective shifts from the girl's increasing pain to the mother's despair, tears and curses directed to the misogynistic society that physically and psychologically cripples women. Culminating with a misogynistic proverb, the narration of the girl's pain merges with Chinese women's inferiorization and dehumanization at a broader scale. Unable to guarantee a better future for her daughter, the mother ultimately reiterates her society's hatred for girls and wishes she had given birth to a son. The progressive narration of the girl's footbinding and its insertion in the larger context of Chinese misogyny Orientalizes Min's depiction of China, as it continues to stress Chinese barbarism and patriarchy through the incessant pain of footbinding and dehumanizing gender relations.

Jiang's rebellion against footbinding and the misogynistic society that bred it leads to the unbinding of her feet and the slow development of her own voice, here epitomized by the shift in narrative voice from the third to the first person that transforms her from spectator to protagonist: "My mother is shocked the moment I throw the smelly binding strips in front of her and show her my feet. They are blue and yellow, swelling and dripping with pus. A couple of flies land on the strips. The pile looks like a dead hundred-footed octopus monster. I say to my mother, If you try to put my feet back in the wrap. I shall kill myself. I mean it" (8). The grotesque revelation of her putrefying feet acts as proofs of the custom's dehumanizing nature, which is accentuated by the hyperbolic and ironic association of the smelly binding cloths full of pus to a monstrous "hundred-footed" octopus. The first person narrative strategically intensifies the protagonist's suffering and rebellion. Jiang's rebellion remains framed, however, within the self-exhibition of her mutilated feet—an Orientalist strategy on Min's part to further ground Jiang's monsterization in a larger discourse of Chinese misogynistic barbarism.

Jiang's rebellion is also represented by her slow dissociation from her mother. While the daughter's pain is engulfed by the mother's tears and curses, the unbinding of her feet signals her separation from the mother who remains trapped by the feudal beliefs that have governed her life. Whereas the daughter embraces the identity of "rebel against oppressors" (9), the mother reiterates the misogynistic proverbs and sayings she has internalized, hits and scolds her daughter while trying to prepare her to become an obedient wife and daughter-in-law, and continues to wish that her daughter were a son (9-10). Witness to her mother's trauma and torture at her

abusive father's hands, as well as the destructive power of feudalism and patriarchy, Jiang, while wishing "to satisfy her mother's wish" (10), distances herself from her mother for survival. This distancing ironically culminates with the mother's disappearance, as she runs away with a man and abandons her daughter to her grandparents, turning Jiang yet again into a victim of her unjust society, and undermining her agency in this ultimate separation act.

Jiang's rebellion against misogyny and feudalism is enacted at the narrative level by the interlacing of first and third person narrative voices. While an omniscient narrator narrates the binding scene, furthering the objectification of the girl's body, the protagonist subjectively tells about her own unbinding. After the unbinding scene, first and third narrative voices alternate to tell Jiang's life story, creating what Amy Tak-Yee Lai calls an "interchange of selves" or "subjectivities" (*Chinese Women* 132). Lai sees this technique as representing the *mise en scène* of Jiang's life from multiple perspectives, mimicking the numerous roles an actress takes on, and inviting the reader/audience to take part in Jiang's act, if not identify with her (132). In addition to portraying her multiple and split subjectivities and role acting, this alternation of voices also undermines Jiang's unbinding or liberation. While Min enables Jiang to comment on her pain and trauma and to explain the monstrosity of her acts by distancing herself from her own life (third-person voice) (Hayot 626), she magnifies Jiang's objectification, transposing the blame of her monstrosity to the larger society that molded her to paint a more sympathetic portrait of this contested historical figure. Both narrator and protagonist, actor and spectator, subject and object, Jiang is therefore left to inhabit a space between patriarchal subjugation and self-realization, as well as between reality and theatrical performances, as will be seen with her dependence on men throughout her life.

Min's staging of Jiang's rebellion against footbinding, her mother and society is amplified by the analogy made between her rebellion and her beginnings as an actress. Her rebellious unbinding from these various layers of female oppression is framed within a larger discourse of theatricality in which the pain of footbinding is taken as her stage entrance: "She remembers her fight with the pain vividly. A heroine of the real-life stage. Ripping the footbinding cloths is her debut" (7). Turned into a theatrical metaphor, the ripping of the footbinding cloths symbolically replaces the curtain opening sequence announcing the beginning of a play.

The real and the imaginary similarly confuse in the oxymoronic association of Jiang's becoming an actress—a made-up heroine on stage—with the real-life scale of her act.<sup>15</sup>

As Ragnhild Tronstad claims in his discussion of Nicolas Evreinov's theater, "theatricality appears as the solution for the individual when reality is experienced as an insufficient place to stay" (220). Indeed, acting becomes for Jiang an escape from the traumatic moments of her childhood and her growing self-dissimulation under the construction of an ever-changing seductive self: "This is how she begins her acting career. Very young. In her own house. She slips into roles. When she thinks that she is not who she is, she becomes relaxed and fear free. She is in a safe place where her father's terror can no longer reach and her mother's tears can no longer wash her away" (10). But performance comes with a vengeance. Since its early development, theater has been viewed in the West as "a place not just of dissimulation and delusion, but, worse, self-dissimulation and self-delusion," as Samuel Weber claims, thus "challeng[ing] the 'self' of self-presence and self-identity by reduplicating it in a seductive movement that never seems to come full circle" (8). By hiding behind the numerous roles she takes on, young Jiang finds refuge and protection, while slowly developing into a feminist heroine herself, thus confusing her embodied reality with her performances.

Reiterated again and again, Jiang's oxymoronic *real-life act*, instead of *acting against* the misogynistic beliefs and practices permeating her society, masks reality behind dreams and tales of heroism; tales paradoxically belonging to the imperial past that she later works to annihilate during the Cultural Revolution. It is, indeed, in ancient tales such as *The Legend of Huoxiao Yu* and *Story of the West Chamber* (15) that Jiang finds inspiration in her early life. These tales of ancient China appeal precisely because they differ from her sad everyday life in which women remain grass to be stepped on (7). They present not only love stories contrasting with her parents' unhappy and violent relationship, but also empowered women whose strength and heroism lure her to "participate vicariously in the heroines' battles," thus satisfying her dreams of happiness and freedom (Lai, "Images of Theatre" 559).

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<sup>15</sup> The analogy between theater and the unbinding of her feet as metaphor of liberation from the constrictive social position a woman is expected to embrace is echoed a few pages later in her rebellion against marriage. While she agrees to marry at seventeen to please her grandparents, she subsequently refuses to become the obedient daughter-in-law whose feet are metaphorically bound again (24). She considers her husband as "a prop in her real-life show" (24)—a prop she quickly eliminates from the stage of her life, as she runs away from marriage at eighteen (25).



This analogy between her rebellious unbinding and the successive staging of her life announces, however, the limitations of her liberation from social, political and gender oppressions. Opposing the real to the imaginary, the space of the theater complicates the power of her performances to change the society she lives in. If we consider the “theater as a metaphor for illusion,” as Lai asserts (557), Jiang’s literal and metaphorical unbinding, as well as role-playing, similarly function as metaphors for her illusive power with which she protects herself from pain.<sup>16</sup> It is through this juxtaposition of self-creation and self-annihilation that the binary opposing footbinding and unbinding set at the beginning of the novel slowly dissolves.

The backstage of opera life contrasts with the tales of heroism diffused on stage. Footbinding equally inhabits the space of the theater itself, as Jiang soon realizes, which further complicates the sense of liberation she finds in the theatrical realm. Jiang experiences jealousy and competition, but also oppression, and discrimination that she associates with footbinding: “I am not giving up acting,” she says recalling the first opera troupe she joins as a teenager. “I was not given the role I wanted to play. I was bored. The wait was too long. I became sick of cleaning backstage. Sick of my rubber-faced mistress, her complaining, long and smelly words, like foot-binding cloths” (16-7). Footbinding, metaphorically standing for the oppressive and crippling words and lies uttered by the troupe mistress, brings the reader back to Jiang’s pain felt when her feet were bound and her resulting subjugation, once again exposing the gory and grotesque physicality of bound feet: “The sticky-rice-pasted wrapping cloths. The swelling toes. The inflammation. The prickling pain at the ankles. The girl remembers how she saved herself” (17). The memory of pain justifying her need of escape materializes in the metonymic enumeration of symptoms and side effects caused by footbinding, a metonymic structure further strengthened by the juxtaposition of fragmented sentences.

Opposed to her debilitating experience in this first opera troupe, her liberated feet stand once more as symbols of her rebellion: “My feet feel strong, as if they are on wings. I run to free myself. I find another opera troupe” (17). Her feet, metaphorically called “liberation feet” (17), take the figurative shape of wings to symbolize her unbinding from oppression. However, her

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<sup>16</sup> Min underlines theater’s *numbing* effect, as Jiang recalls her grandfather’s love for operas: “it is to numb himself. In opera he relives China’s past splendor. People are fooling themselves” (19). Although the underlying critique is directed to the past splendor celebrated in operas before the Cultural Revolution, Jiang’s comment shows her own ironic *numbing* and *fooling* by using theater to forget or escape her traumatic present. Jiang transforms her love for drama into “a need, an obsession and an addiction” (19), transforming her reality into a “fantasy” (19) in which she is the leading actress.

liberation is constantly undermined as “some evil hands are always trying to bind [her] feet” (20). Min’s *mise en scène* of Jiang’s acting career and life, oscillating between footbinding and unbinding, points to the dramatic momentum of her liberation and empowerment.

Min furthers the illusory nature of Jiang’s liberation when contextualizing the footbinding and unbinding metaphors in the Communist regime infusing the story. Jiang’s subsequent political ideology and participation in the Cultural Revolution textually frames her “ripping of the foot-binding cloths” as a child (7). The slogans she shouts at rallies literally figure as structural frame to this metaphor. These slogans not only emphasize the necessity for women to free themselves from crippling customs, beliefs and ideologies, but also Jiang’s entitlement to speak for all, as she herself suffered the pain of footbinding; a pain which becomes “the evidence of the crimes of feudalism” (7) that Madame Mao later denounces in her revolutionary plays, “mak[ing] the billion population share her pain” (7). Both her unbinding and acting are thus given political precedence from the start, furthering the imbrication of politics and theater (see Chen, *Acting* 74-5). Indeed, her childhood agony becomes an intrinsic component of her development as both actress and political figure—two roles that blur the more the narration unfolds:

To understand the pain is to understand what the proletariat went through during the old society, she cries at a public rally. It is to understand the necessity of Communism! She believes the pain she suffered gives her the right to lead the nation. It’s the kind of pain that shoots through your core, she tells the actress who plays the lead in her opera. You can’t land on your toes and you can’t fly either. You are trapped, chained down. There is an invisible saw. You are toeless. Your breath dies out. The whole house hears you but there is no rescue. (7)

Footbinding becomes a staging device in representing the suffering of the proletariat, and in helping the leading actresses to convincingly perform women’s revolutionary roles in the operas Jiang directs. In this context, footbinding ironically transforms women into models of Communist and feminist heroism, their mutilated bodies becoming embodiments of their endurance and resilience.

Jiang’s unforgettable pain of footbinding finds resonance in the imagery of the wounded body of both female oppression and feudalism, a wounded body made instrumental in the creation of female revolutionary identities: “Madame Mao says, Our heroines must be covered with wounds. Blood-dripping wounds. Wounds that have been torn, punctured or broken by

weapons like shovels, whips, glass, wooden sticks, bullets or explosions. Study the wounds, pay attention to the degree of the burn, the layers of the infected tissue. The color transitions in the flesh. And the shapes that remind you of a worm-infested body” (11). Reminiscent of her own putrefying and oozing feet, the wound Jiang depicts opposes women’s subjugation and oppression to the liberation promised by the revolution. The wound—the mutilated flesh, its infestation and decomposition—becomes the prerequisite of the Communist heroine who sacrifices her body in the name of the revolution—yet another exhibition of the mutilated body in pain.

Yet, Jiang’s celebration of the wound, while praising women’s national sacrifices, sexualizes and subjects the female body to the public gaze,<sup>17</sup> thus questioning the models of feminist empowerment she conveys. These female bodies on the stage of the revolutionary theater seem less revolutionary, and liberated than gazed at, objectified, and controlled by the male leaders of the revolution, thus continuing, more than subverting, the bourgeois ideologies of older plays Jiang precisely opposes.<sup>18</sup> This objectification is furthered by the Western reader’s gaze and the implicit Orientalization of Chinese women’s display.

Jiang’s empowerment as an actress of the theatrical and the real-life Communist stage can similarly be questioned. She remains an actress in the Cultural Revolution’s “breathing stage,” of which Mao is the “playwright” (284). As Lai notes, “Jiang Qing is therefore not so much an agent, as an actress acting out the script that Mao has prescribed for her” (“Images of Theatre” 563), thus remaining trapped as a wife under her husband’s domination. Indeed, Jiang is portrayed throughout the novel as living in men’s shadows—taking her glory from her lovers’ political positions and fames, and paradoxically molding her own heroism and liberation on her lovers’ ideologies. Min foreshadows Jiang’s undermined power from the beginning of the novel when discussing her relationship with her first lover, Yu Qiwei:

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<sup>17</sup> Sexuality was viewed under Communism as “a system of bourgeois preferences that could only hinder the revolution,” as Hayot explains (627). Sexual attraction and relationships were therefore opposed by the Communist regime, as seen with Ha’s *Waiting*.

<sup>18</sup> Revolutionary operas in Madame Mao’s heyday were paradoxical and contradictory, “especially in view of the general hostility toward the past and the foreign, and the advocacy of equality between the sexes in the Communist regime” (Lai, “Images of Theater” 560, referring to Chen, *Acting* 88-9). For more on conflicts in model operas of the Cultural Revolution, as well as on the eroticization of actresses’ bodies on stage see Lai “Images of Theatre” 559, and Chen’s *Acting* 116.

She still doesn't know enough of Communism itself. This doesn't bother her. She believes in Yu Qiwei, and that is enough. She believes in the Communist Party the same way she believes in love. In Yu Qiwei she finds her own identity. If Yu Qiwei represents the conscience of China, so does she. That is how she looks at herself in 1931. It matches her image of herself, the heroine, the leading lady. Later on, the same pattern repeats itself. When she becomes Mao's wife, she thinks, logically, that if Mao is the soul of China, so is she. (32)

Her female empowerment as a Communist revolutionary and as an actress, as well as her self-definition, are grounded in her love relationships, and depend on male and national heroism, which questions the power of her rebellion and assertion outside of the social and misogynist molds she opposed from a young age. Although her life story calls attention to female bravery in many ways, she remains, similar to the heroines in the plays directed by the historical Jiang Qing, a "powerful woman on the brink of conquering the world," as Min states in an interview (Chaudhuri n.p.); powerful, yet not enough to break free from Mao's dominance.<sup>19</sup>

Yet, what is empowering in *Becoming Madame Mao* is Min's underlying message that revises the erasure of sexual politics from the revolutionary stage. As Eric Hayot contends, "female sexuality was inside the Cultural Revolution all along" (627) in the display of female bodies on stage, but especially in the life of male and female revolutionaries alike, as seen through Jiang's numerous love stories and her own submission to her lovers. In this respect, Jiang's humanization takes shape beyond her thirst of liberation from the pain of footbinding, misogyny and feudalism. Predominantly portrayed as a woman deeply and equally affected by her desire of female heroism, her love stories and her blind embrace of her lovers' ideologies, Jiang appears as a vulnerable human being who followed the course of history to survive.

Min does not, however, excuse or mask Jiang's monstrous deeds. She shifts focus instead from her participation in the manslaughter of the Cultural Revolution to her growing madness that she depicts as taking roots in being born a girl and in the binding of her feet. Min asks Western readers to reconsider their blind vilification of Madame Mao as the *white-boned demon*,

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<sup>19</sup> The narrator states: "To be Madame Mao will be her victory. She will be lower than the man she loves but above the nation" (148). Yet a few pages later, Jiang complains about how Mao "has taken away [her] identity" (189), thus undermining her sense of victory. Unable to be a leading lady in life, she becomes one on stage (40), creating an illusion of power: "I am aware of my position. My role has no flesh. Nevertheless, illusion is available if I work to create it. I am still Mao's official wife. I have to get on the stage. Although dim, there are still lights over my head. Mao's men have tried to take away my costume. I can feel the pulling of my sleeves. But I won't let go. I am holding on to my title. I won't let the magic of my character fade away. Hope guides me and revenge motivates me" (189).

and draws their attention to their participation as external voyeuristic observers in the monsterization of this human figure. However, in her appeal to Western sensibility, Min creates images of China that appear as timelessly sexist and crippling, ultimately blaming Jiang's monsterization on the feudal and misogynistic society of Jiang's childhood. By using footbinding as a metaphor for women's subjugation and indelible mutilation in life and on stage, Min thus continues to expose Chinese women's bodies, as well as Orientalize and denigrate the Communist society she once knew.

This vilification is amplified as the unbinding metaphor—dominating at the beginning of the novel—recedes and collapses the more the narrative proceeds. There is, indeed, no hope of liberation for Jiang, as her suicide and political condemnation ultimately demonstrate. This negative depiction of Communist China therefore eludes the re-connecting power of the more extreme footbinding tropes deployed by Maxine Hong Kingston and Wang Ping, for instance, in their attempt at portraying their protagonists' conflicting journey to cross-cultural assertion. This ultimately underlines the different goals of these literary currents—one seeking to recuperate the diasporic community's Chinese heritage obscured and severed by decades of exclusions and discrimination in the United States, the other finding in the West an ear for expatriates' traumatic story of political oppression.

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While deploying Orientalist representations of China's barbarism, exoticism and eroticism in their renditions of Mao's Communist regime, Ha and Min have simultaneously attempted to humanize the people caught in this destructive political system. This discursive tension translates into a borderland between Orientalist and universal representations of the human body in physical and psychological pain. The depiction of people suffering under political annihilation transcends the Oriental setting and reaches readers' hearts on a global stage, thus dramatizing the relationship between self and society and the complicated act of self-realization. In so doing, Ha and Min draw connections East and West, as they denounce oppressive hegemonic mechanisms to which people are subjected in China as in the West.

Yet, the cultural and political context in which these two fictional works are set cannot be easily subdued despite the universal message they seek to convey. Far from disentangling

Chinese subjects from Communism, these works predominantly make their humanity dependent on and inseparable from the dehumanizing practices of the totalitarian regime they live in, on the one hand, and the privileged, yet interstitial, position of the Chinese expatriate writer writing from the West, on the other. Situated at the junction of East and West, Ha and Min ultimately reproduce and project onto the reader the uncomfortable stasis in which themselves and their characters are caught. The Orientalism of their fictional works needs to be understood in this cross-cultural context as Min and Ha attempt to bridge the gaps separating China and the United States, a bridging that similarly reflects the pressures of the American publishing industry and the necessity to appeal to a larger community of readers in a prevalent Cold-War context. It is precisely this anti-Communist background that distinguishes these expatriate writers' fictions from that of their Chinese American predecessors and contemporaries in terms of the Orientalist strategies deployed, despite their similar deconstruction of the liberatory function of the unbinding process. The magnified representations of the subjugation and fetishization of the female body through footbinding tropes amplifies indeed the Orientalizing nature of these works at a time of political conflict. By reinstating—more than subverting—offensive stereotypes, these anti-Communist fictions have brought the Orientalist trope of footbinding to its climax and extreme, thus perhaps explaining the beginning of its collapse in the decades that follow.



## EPILOGUE—TOWARD DE-ORIENTALIZATION

The footbinding trope that permeated Chinese American literature from the 1970s to the late 1990s signals and symbolizes the conflicting undertaking of Chinese (American) writers to recuperate their Chinese legacy and express their cross-cultural heritage at a crucial time of ethnic revival and assertion, while reaching out to a wider audience beyond their diasporic community. This double endeavor translates into an unsettling ambivalent Orientalism that simultaneously reiterates and deconstructs Orientalist stereotypes of Chinese barbarism, exoticism and eroticism; an ambivalent Orientalism that reflects the predicament of Asian American writers and artists often constrained to put their ethnicity on the front line to be published/produced and to appeal to an American audience.

Inspired by the renewed attention to footbinding in the West that took shape in the 1970s, Chinese American writers and artists—mostly second and third generations—looked at this custom with interest. On the one hand, the diffusion of footbinding scholarship allowed them to explore part of their Chinese culture and past history often masked or obscured by their family's silence. On the other, this custom—combining mutilation and beautification, upward mobility and physical disability, praises and condemnations—provided them with an interesting conflicting imagery that would appeal to the American audience and enable them to address and represent their community's own troubling history, experience, and positionality at national, cultural, social and gender crossroads. It is, therefore, not accidental that footbinding became enmeshed in Chinese American writers' and artists' recuperation and negotiation of Chinese legacy and culture at a time when a new wave of footbinding scholarship was forming in the United States. Further influenced by this wave of feminism, Chinese American writers and artists—predominantly women writers—endowed their representations of footbinding with feminist significance and undertone, as they started to respond to and oppose the oppressive patriarchal system dominating both their diasporic community and the emerging field of Asian American studies. In so doing, Chinese American female writers negotiated, and re-appropriated their Chinese legacy, while predominantly re-writing it along maternal lines.

The custom of footbinding also enabled male and female writers and artists to connect with their immigrant forbearers and fill in the gaps left by their silences regarding their immigration experiences, footbinding having played a crucial role in the immigration of Chinese



women under exclusion laws, and in the development of a Chinese American community and identity at the turn of the twentieth century. Verging between Orientalization and de-Orientalization, these historical records of footbinding attest to the ambivalent function of this custom in the history of Chinese America, as well as to the ambivalent positionality of the Chinese American community since its inception, torn between the Orientalist stereotypes constructed by the emerging American society—they themselves contributed to upholding in their self-exhibitionism, for instance—and their attempt at dismantling these stereotypes to improve their self-image in the United States and advance their recognition and rights. The Chinese American footbinding imagery, and its ambivalent Orientalism, thus inserted itself in, and complemented this larger history and legacy of immigration, exclusion, and fight for human rights as it continued to depict the diasporic community's ongoing fight at the end of the twentieth century toward recognition as ethnic American subjects.

In this persistent battle toward recognition and acceptance, as well as in the changing demographic face of post-1965 Chinese America, footbinding offered yet another double-edged tool to Chinese American and Chinese expatriate writers/artists alike to explore a variety of topics. The unsettling mutilation at its roots provided them with a potent corporeal metaphor to represent and denounce oppressive, disabling and dehumanizing systems that held Chinese women and men across generations subjugated, and in a state of inferiority to a dominating patriarchal system, a colonialist power or a totalitarian political regime. In these cases, the deceptive liberatory power of the unbinding process is exposed in all its disturbing reality, shedding light on larger processes of racialization and gendering that Chinese immigrants and American-born Chinese encountered. Footbinding's mutilated physicality serves to denounce, indeed, the subordination of the individual to the state across national borders, enabling subversive parallels to be drawn East and West. While Maxine Hong Kingston and Genny Lim used footbinding to denounce the imbricated mechanisms of racialization and gendering Chinese men and women confronted in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through metaphors of footbinding, Winston Tong and Arthur Dong also tackled female oppression, while exploring their own psychological bindings and cultural/gender impositions through the mutilated foot, whose gory physicality made hypervisible, in their respective solo performance and film, people's physical and mental sufferings in transnational, cross-cultural and/or cross-gender contexts. Likewise, Ha Jin and Anchee Min explored the dehumanizing effect of Maoism's

totalitarianism on individual subjects, thus drawing connections East and West of political and sexual exploitation of male and female bodies.

Yet, the *unruly* physicality of the mutilated foot also holds subversive potential. Too gory to ignore, yet beautiful when shod, the bound foot refuses easy categorization. This ambivalence enabled writers such as Maxine Hong Kingston and Wang Ping—to a certain extent—to confer considerable empowering potential to this custom. What these narratives of empowerment did, despite their unsettling exaggeration, was to write the Chinese (American) fight for survival and resistance into focus and history, and revise Chinese women's positions as victims and subaltern Others in China and in the West, thus undermining the hegemonic discourse subordinating the East to the West in the United States.

It is in the juxtapositions of these extremes that Chinese American writers and artists have subverted the progressive move from footbinding to unbinding, from oppression to liberation, and from China to the United States, that Bonnie Khaw-Posthuma and Susie Lan Cassel have read in their general analysis of the footbinding trope in Chinese American literature. These juxtaposed literary and artistic extremes complicate the liberatory function of the unbinding process sustained by these equations: either reconnecting with an ancestral culture they had sought to oppose, or annihilating self-realization and liberation, unbinding representations in Chinese American literature and theatrical representations, despite their ambivalent meanings, refuse the assimilationist script that depicts the United States as a land of success and subordinates China to the West, thus contributing as well to unsettling the Orientalist underpinnings of these footbinding representations. This ambivalent Orientalism can, therefore, be seen as characteristics of Chinese (American) writers' and artists' interwoven endeavor, in the last decades of the twentieth century, to assert their ethnic identity, write/represent their conflicting history, and build a community of readers/spectators among Asian Americans, while appealing to a larger American audience.

Although the history of footbinding continues to fascinate the American public nowadays,<sup>1</sup> the trope of footbinding in Chinese American literature and art is dying out along with the last bound-footed women in China. No longer used to symbolize Chinese immigrants'

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<sup>1</sup> The publication of revisionist histories of footbinding including Wang Ping's *Aching for Beauty* (2001) and Dorothy Ko's *Cinderella Sisters* (2005), the numerous museum displays of footbinding artifacts and lotus shoes, the many interviews of the last footbound women and documentaries retracing their lives attest to this prominent interest in footbinding at the turn of the twenty-first century. See the introduction of this work.

disabling immigration experience, Chinese American conflicting negotiation of Chinese heritage and cross-cultural identity, and Chinese subjects' dehumanization in Communist China,<sup>2</sup> footbinding has been stripped of its symbolic significance and predominantly re-contextualized within its ancient historical and cultural background. While this change testifies to Chinese (American) writers' and artists' distancing from self-Orientalizing practices to explore their identity struggles, it also retrospectively amplifies the crucial role played by the trope of footbinding in Chinese American literature and culture between the 1970s and the early years of the twenty-first century to express artists', writers' and protagonists' conflicting ethnic self-assertion between American expectations and the preservation of their ethnic cultural background, as well as between conflicting Chinese and American societies and political regimes in a persisting Cold War.

This de-Orientalization of Chinese American narratives/representations of self-construction and assertion coincides with a larger de-Orientalizing turn in Asian American studies that took shape at the beginning of the twenty-first century. This new wave of scholarship denounces the Orientalist practices and representations that have hindered Asian American lives in the United States since the 1850s. It not only deconstructs the figure of the Oriental permeating representations of Asians and Asian Americans in American literature, media and popular culture, but also draws attention to Asian American writers' own internalization and reproduction of these stereotypes. Asian American scholars' call for de-Orientalization is reflected by the number of publications on the topic of Orientalism that have appeared since the turn of the century including John Kuo Wei Tchen's *New York Before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture, 1776-1882* (1999); Sheng-Mei Ma's *Deathly Embrace: Orientalism and Asian American Identity* (2000); Anthony W. Lee's *Picturing Chinatown: Art and Orientalism in San Francisco* (2001); Robert G. Lee's *Orientalists: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (2001); Henry Yu's *Thinking Orientalists: Migration, Contact and Exoticism in*

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<sup>2</sup> A look at Amy Tan's work—which has been acclaimed, yet highly criticized for its Orientalist nature—attests to this progression. While her four novels *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), *the Hundred Secret Senses* (1995) and *the Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001) produced in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s include references to footbinding—although marginal—her most recent novel *The Valley of Amazement* (2013) which is set in the early decades of the twentieth century in Shanghai has moved away from this ancient custom despite the Chinese setting and topic at its core. Tan's other novel *Saving Fish from Drowning* (2005) follows the mis-adventures of a group of American tourists kidnapped in Burma. References to footbinding in such a novel would be hard to sustain.

*Modern America* (2002); Darren Lee Brown's "The Heathen Chinese:" *Stereotypes of Chinese in Popular Music* (2003); Mari Yoshihara's *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism* (2003); Russell C. Leong's article "Before and After Orientalism: From the Oriental School to Asian American Studies" (2005); Rahul Gairola's article "Queering Orientalism: Sexual Otherness and Asian American Studies" (2005); Sylvia Shin Huey Chong's *The Oriental Obscene: Violence and Racial Fantasies in the Vietnam Era* (2011); Jane Naomi Iwamura's *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture* (2011); and David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu's co-edited volume *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History and Media* (2015). Although not exhaustive, this list shows the urgency among Asian American scholars to tackle the damaging effect of pervading stereotypical depictions of Asian (American) groups in the United States.

In this process of de-Orientalizing Chinese America, the trope of footbinding has been returned to China, a shift also accelerated by the wave of Chinese expatriate narratives about Mao's regime appearing since the late 1980s, and by the increased publishing of historical fictions about imperial China in the West since the beginning of the twenty-first century.<sup>3</sup> In the wake of a more threatening China on the economic scene and the resulting Orientalization of Capital in American popular culture as Robert G. Lee has shown in his *Orientalism* (see concluding chapter), the dominance of fictional narratives about ancient China seems to appear in this crucial time as a *taming* response to this growing threat. By reimagining China's imperial, feudal, and misogynistic history, Western authors cast China in a distant and frozen past, thus figuratively suppressing China's threatening progress to capitalist domination. Chinese American writers have once again played a crucial role in this enterprise.

Footbinding remains a symbol of the mutilation and subjugation of the female body under an oppressive feudal and patriarchal system that deprives women of physical and intellectual freedom in contemporary historical fictions about China. Taking part in this return to ancient China, Chinese American authors once again refuse, however, the passive victim script of patriarchal subjugation, but depict instead Chinese women resisting and fighting against

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<sup>3</sup> See for instance Ruthanne McCunn's *The Moon Pearl* (2001); Alma Alexander's *The Secrets of Jin-Shei* (2005); Anchee Min's *Empress Orchid* (2005) and *The Last Empress* (2007); Shan Sa's *Empress* (2006); Adeline Yen Mah's *Chinese Cinderella, Secret Dragon Society* (2006); Lloyd Lofthouse's *My Splendid Concubine* (2007); Lisa See's *Peony in Love* (2007); Douglas J. Penick's *Journey of the North Star* (2012); and Weina Dai Randel's *The Moon in the Palace* and *The Empress of the Bright Moon* (2016). This list is not exhaustive.

oppressive and misogynistic beliefs, codes of conduct and cultural traditions, despite the limited outcome of their rebellion. Lensey Namioka, and Lisa See have, for instance, attempted to deconstruct the stereotype of bound-footed women as passive victims of Confucian patriarchy still predominantly diffused in the West and write Chinese women's accomplishments and resilience into history in their respective work *Ties that Bind, Ties that Break* (2000) and *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* (2007).

Namioka's juvenile novel *Ties that Bind, Ties that Break*, set in the early twentieth century at a time of internal reforms, narrates a young girl's fight against footbinding, recalling Arthur Dong's 1987 film *Lotus*. In addition to teaching young adults about Chinese society, this novel denounces subjugating practices, but mostly highlights Chinese women's resilience, resistance and fight for liberation.<sup>4</sup> See conversely contextualizes footbinding in her novel *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* in nineteenth-century rural Hunan, at a time when women's liberation from strict codes and cultural practices was not yet in vogue. See's novel follows the hardship of Lily and her sworn sister (*laotong*) Snow Flower from their footbinding to their arranged marriage and demeaning position as women in a highly patriarchal society, as well as their fight for survival and voice in this destructive world. In so doing, See illuminates nineteenth-century women's suffering *and* resistance, while giving them voice, and breaking their historical silence which reflected their subjugation in a male-dominated world.

Yet, despite See's more subversive approach to Chinese history, *Snow Flower* continues to inhabit an ambivalent space at the junction of Orientalism and subversion. *Snow Flower* has been compared to the work of Maxine Hong Kingston (*Philadelphia Inquirer*), on the one hand, and Jane Austen (*Cleveland Plain Dealer*), on the other, and thus inserted in an important legacy of women's works on female strength and resilience (both qtd. on See's official website). Yet, it has similarly been praised for the exotic Chinese-ness of its setting and story, and the universal message it conveys (see the reviews of the *Washington Post*, and the *Entertainment Weekly* posted on See's website). Praised for both its depiction of a Chinese exotic past and for appealing to the human heart across borders, See's novel has much in common with controversial works such as Ha Jin's, and Anchee Min's novels about Communist China, whose

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<sup>4</sup> Namioka's novel is echoed a few years later by the work of Kathryn Harrison's novel *The Binding Chair, or a Visit from the Foot Emancipation Society* (2004).

reception in the United States speaks of the still dominating taste for Oriental exoticism among American readers.

Yet, this pervading appeal for exotic narratives set in distant times and spaces in our era of globalization also speaks of the *dis-orienting* incitement of these fictional works for the readers who seek temporary escape or relief from their embodied experiences, daily realities and anxieties. It is not this interest in other worlds and cultures that remains problematic, however, but the darker realities they contribute to obscuring or erasing, as well as the stereotypes—negative and positive—they often convey in media, literature and pop-culture. By focusing on the extremely-oppressed women of color, these narratives in the West—See's novel included—deflect attention from the white patriarchy dominating mainstream society; a too-often invisible white patriarchy which continues to oppress women across the board in the United States and governs the American nation-state's subjugation of non-Western people at home and abroad.

This pervading erasure of white patriarchy accentuates the urgency of de-Orientalizing discourses in the United States that would expose the apparatuses of control and oppression that not only impact ethnic groups, but also women and the LGBT community in the United States and in the West more generally speaking. Only when stereotypical depictions of ethnic minority groups are no longer desired and no longer internalized and reproduced in self-loathing by minorities themselves will de-Orientalization be completed. Until then, ethnic groups will continue to battle against stereotypes and discrimination in their scholarship, fiction, and everyday life to defend their integrity, rights, legacies and beliefs.

Indeed, a general call for de-Orientalization is urgent in the West as Orientalism has looped back to its early tradition, in an ever-ending hegemonic assertion of the West against the East. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, Orientalist stereotypes in the United States have shifted once again to respond to the growing anxieties of our contemporary era in the context of an increasing war against terrorism. East-Asian (American) groups are no longer the main targets of American Orientalism, but the Arab populations in the Middle East, the United States, Europe and the African continent are. The involvement of the United States in the Middle East since the end of WWII, notably in the Yom Kippur War of 1973 opposing Israel to Egypt and Syria and in the still on-going Israeli-Palestine conflict, as well as the U.S. military operations in Iran, Iraq (Persian Gulf War of 1990–1991 and the Iraqi War of 2003–2011), Afghanistan (2001–2014)

and Syria (2011–)<sup>5</sup> brought the United States in closer contact with Muslim populations, and led to the development of islamophobic discourses and representations in the United States. The 9/11 attacks on the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City in 2001 marked a turning point in this American islamophobia at home and abroad, not only leading to the production of reductive stereotypes of Muslims as religious extremists and terrorists in the American mind, but also to the stigmatization, surveillance, discrimination, oppression and physical abuse of Muslim populations at and within U.S. borders.

This new wave of American Orientalism once again puts the Muslim woman at the center of focus, using her veiled body to propagate ideological discourses of liberation, emancipation and freedom. These discourses continue to mask the hegemonic patriarchal positions of the United States and Europe under a rhetoric of salvation that confines women to the position of victims of barbaric Muslim patriarchal traditions, and erases their voices and agency in their religious faith and practices. These discourses rely on and sustain invisible norms of Western universalization that subordinate non-Western cultures to unmarked white and Christian ideals of womanhood. Yet, this illusive rhetoric of liberation is undermined by cases of physical harassments against veiled women in Europe and the United States reported in media, as well as by the continuous discussions and legal attempts at banning the wear of the burka, niqab and hijab in Europe and the United States.<sup>6</sup> These physical, psychological and legal persecutions constantly infringe the freedom and rights of Muslim women, whose bodies are used and re-used in the service of Western hegemonic patriarchy across borders.

The similarities that can be drawn between the Orientalization of bound-footed Chinese women and Muslim women in U.S. discourses emphasize how Orientalism is constantly

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<sup>5</sup> This list is not exhaustive but gives an overview of the major U.S. involvements and conflicts in the Middle East. For further reading see Peter L. Hahn's *Crisis and Crossfire: The United States and the Middle East Since 1945* (2005); Michael B. Oren's *Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East 1776 to the Present* (2007); Lawrence Freedman's *A Choice of Enemies: America Confronts the Middle East* (2008); Geoffrey Wawro's *Quicksand: America's Pursuit of Power in the Middle East* (2010); Gregory Harms's *Straight Power Concepts in the Middle East: U.S. Foreign Policy, Israel and World History* (2010); Debra A. Miller's *U.S. Involvement in the Middle East: Inciting Conflict* (2014); Andrew J. Bacevich's *America's War for the Greater Middle East: A Military History* (2016).

<sup>6</sup> See for instance Adam Hamze's "Muslim Women Across America Face Attacks in the Wake of Donald Trump's Win." *Huffington Post*, November 11, 2016; updated November 22, 2016; Masood Farivar's "Attacks Against U.S. Muslims Growing in Frequency, Violence." *VOA*, August 17, 2016; Matthew Weaver's "Burqa Bans, Headscarves and Veils: A Timeline of Legislation in the West." *The Guardian*, March 14, 2017; Adam Taylor's "Banning Burqas Isn't a Sensible Response to Terrorism." *Washington Post*, August 12, 2016; and Radhika Sanghani's "Burka Bans: The Countries Where Women Can't Wear Veils." *The Telegraph*, July 8, 2016.

deployed to benefit the West, and re-fashioned to tackle the newly-emerging threat posed by the non-Western Other in its destabilization of Western ideals, norms and hegemony. Yet, these connections also point to the subverting potential that lies behind Orientalism. The resilience and past endeavors of North-African, Middle-Eastern, Asian populations and their respective diasporic communities to resist and subvert the Orientalist strategies of the West, as well as to write the self into history and focus have much to teach us for the de-Orientalization of present and future.

The de-Orientalization of Western discourses and representations of non-Western women will be a challenging task in the years to come. Despite scholars' and writers' striving efforts to dismantle the hegemonic discourses and representations that continue to exoticize, differentiate, and inferiorize, if not dehumanize, minority groups on the basis of racist constructions, the end of de-Orientalization in the United States is far. With the election of Donald Trump as forty-fifth President of the United States, offensive stereotypes against minority groups are here to stay. Trump's travel bans, re-establishment of immigration quotas and exclusion laws targeting Muslim populations in a so-called act against terrorism, his decision to build a wall between the United States and Mexico to bar illegal immigration,<sup>7</sup> his highly homophobic, xenophobic, racist and sexist slurs, as well as his capitalistic and imperialist desires of power and territorial expansion, notably in the China Sea, announce a dark and uncertain future for ethnic and minority groups in the United States. This dark future paradoxically seems to bring us back sixty years ago before the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Immigration Act of 1965, the American feminist movement, the gay rights' movement, and the ethnic revival and assertion that followed.

Yet, these political, racial, religious, cultural, social, sexual, and gender conflicts to come will not only lead to new waves of offensive Orientalism, but also to new countering modes of representations. It is with this present time of ambivalence that I would like to conclude. Within a few days of Trump's inaugural address and passage of his first Executive Orders, people gathered to protest in the United States and abroad against his sexism, his discrimination against the LGBT community and his immigration bans, bringing millions of people together across borders and differences. The Women's March that took place on January 21, 2017 in

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<sup>7</sup> See for instance his two Executive Orders "Border Security and Immigration Enforcement Improvements" and "Enhancing Public Safety in the Interior of the United States" passed on January 25, 2017.



Washington D.C. has been presented as the largest single-day protest in U.S. history (Broomfield n.p.). Putting forward the need of justice and equality for all, the Women’s March committee called on women and “all defenders of human rights” to stand up and march together as a “first step towards unifying our communities,” especially marginal communities whose voices still need to be heard at the government level—“immigrants of all statuses, Muslims and those of diverse religious faiths, people who identify as LGBTQIA, Native people, Black and Brown people, people with disabilities, survivors of sexual assault”—to make a change “from the grassroots level up” (Women’s March webpage: “Mission & Vision” n.p.). Organized to contest Trump’s sexism and homophobia, but also his promised immigration, climate, and health care reforms, as well as the persisting disenfranchisement of certain groups in the United States, the Women’s March was a first step indeed in diffusing resisting and countering voices.

More protests have taken place since Trump’s inauguration, notably in reaction to the passage of Executive Order 13769 banning Muslim people from seven countries to enter the United States (Trump, “Protecting the Nation” n.p.), and leaving many refugees seeking asylum and people in transit stranded at the U.S. borders.<sup>8</sup> Marches and strikes organized in response to Trump’s anti-immigration policies and travel bans have been accompanied by oppositional reactions coming from various fronts, including states and courts, political parties, academia, religious organizations and individuals across the country and abroad.<sup>9</sup> The new revised travel ban (Executive Order 13780) issued on March 6, 2017<sup>10</sup>—a redraft of Executive Order 13769—

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<sup>8</sup> See for instance Anjali Singhvi and Alicia Parlapiano’s “Trump’s Immigration Ban: Who is Barred and Who Is Not.” *New York Times*, January 31, 2017; and Matt Zapposky’s “The Government Now Says 746 People Were Held Due to the Travel Ban. Here’s Why that Number Keeps Changing.” *Washington Post*, February 24, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> See as examples: Nicholas Fandos’s “Some Top Republicans in Congress Criticize Trump’s Refugee Policy.” *New York Times*, January 29, 2017; Jeffrey Gentleman’s “State Dept. Dissent Cable on Trump’s Ban Draws 1,000 Signatures.” *New York Times*, January 31, 2017; Susan Svrluga’s “40 Nobel Laureates, Thousands of Academics Sign Protest of Trump Immigration Order.” *Washington Post*, January 28, 2017; Siobhan Fenton’s “Christian Leaders Denounce Donald Trump’s ‘Muslim Ban.’” *Independent*, January 30, 2017; Marisa Fox-Bevilacqua’s “Holocaust Survivors Respond to Trump’s Refugee Ban with Outrage, Empathy.” *Haaretz*, January 28, 2017; Edward Isaac Dovey’s “Democratic State Attorneys General Vow Action Against Refugee Order.” *Politico*, January 29, 2017; Delvin Barrett’s “Acting Attorney General Orders Justice Dept. Not to Defend Trump’s Immigration Ban.” *Wall Street Journal*, January 30, 2017; Dan Levine’s “Washington State to Sue Over Travel Ban, Pressures on Trump Grow.” *Reuters*, January 30, 2017; Mark Landler’s “Trump Officials Move to Appeal Ruling Blocking Immigration Order.” *New York Times*, February 4, 2017; Dan Melvin, Ali Arouzi and Shamar Walters’s, “Homeland Security Suspends Implementation of President Trump’s Travel Ban.” *NBC News*, February 4, 2017; and Leonie Brinkama’s “Federal Court Rules Against Trump’s Immigration Order Because it Discriminates against Muslims.” *Washington Post*, February 13, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> This revised draft no longer includes Iraq in the lists of countries representing national threat to the United States, and abandons the indefinite suspension of Syrian refugees. The travel ban no longer apply for green card holders,

has faced similar reactions as it has been banned by courts in Hawai'i and Maryland for its propagations of anti-Muslim sentiments.<sup>11</sup> Although Trump is determined to appeal against these rulings and “take the case as far as it needs to go” (qtd. in “Trump Travel Ban” n.p.), the legal challenges that these various travel ban drafts have encountered since the passing of Executive Order 13769 also show a developing support for the Muslim populations in the United States which gives hope for more waves of resistance against Trump’s discriminatory practices.

These numerous protests and anti-Trump reactions in the United States and worldwide have started to make visible the white Christian patriarchal ideals on which the U.S. nation-state is built through the hypervisibility of Trump, this white male figure thirsty of capitalist power. These past, present and future coalitions thus bring hope for a brighter future, despite the early signs of this presidential catastrophe. In this current state of ambivalence, it is therefore crucial to look at the past to learn from and rectify the mistakes made to move toward a just and sustainable future in the United States and across the world. Then, only then, will de-Orientalization be completed.

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lawful permanent residents, visa holders, people granted asylums and refugees already admitted in the United States. For more information, see the full revised Executive Order of March 6, 2017 on the government webpage.

<sup>11</sup> See for instance Ben Nuckols and Gene Johnson’s “Trump Travel Ban Put on Hold Again.” *The Boston Globe*, March 15, 2017; Alexander Burn’s “Federal Judge Blocks Trump’s Latest Travel Ban Nationwide.” *New York Times*, March 15, 2017; and Alex Johnson’s “Judge Blocks Second Travel Order, Trump Slams ‘Judicial Overreach.’” *NBC News*, March 15, 2017.



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