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The bound foot and its adornment in the Chin P'ing Mei

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THE BOUND FOOT AND ITS ADORNMENT IN THE *CHIN P'ING MEI*

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Jingwoan Chang

December 2001

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ABSTRACT

THE BOUND FOOT AND ITS ADORNMENT IN THE *CHIN P'ING MEI*

by Jingwoan Chang

This thesis examines notions surrounding the bound foot in the context of the Ming novel *Chin P'ing Mei*, published around 1618. Cosmological notions of the body and its sartorial state provide a basis for the conception of footbinding as a form of body adornment. Established scholarship has elucidated the various meanings of footbinding, which personified female virtue, beauty, creativity, and Chinese ethnicity. In addition, textual evidence from the novel illustrates the way in which the body and body adornment served as political tools within a large polygamous household. Through her adorned body, a woman could obtain material benefit, manipulate her husband's affections or actions, and form strategic alliances within the household. Ultimately, the *Chin P'ing Mei*'s depiction of the bound foot supports a reading of the novel as a harbinger of Ming demise.

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INTRODUCTION

By examining the bound foot and foot adornment in the context of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) novel *Chin P'ing Mei*, this thesis elucidates the relationship between the body, its sartorial state, and issues of power for women in a large polygamous household. Recent footbinding scholarship has done much to subvert previous. Orientalist notions of the practice as a barbaric form of mutilation inflicted upon helpless women. While many scholars including Dorothy Ko and Patricia Buckley Ebrey have addressed the complex and multifarious values embodied by the bound foot. historiographical problems still limit our understanding of the woman's perspective with regard to her own feet. This study shows that beyond the associations of footbinding with notions of female beauty, virtue, eroticism, or Chinese civility, there exists an enabling relationship between women and their bound feet.

The painful and crippling effects of footbinding and its repugnance to twentieth-century Western sensibilities cannot be denied. Yet, in accomplishing the goals stated above, this work presents some views of footbinding which may strike contemporary readers as "positive" rather than "negative." However, the underlying purpose of this analysis is neither to censure the practice nor to glorify it. The intention of this thesis is to shed some light on how Chinese women themselves may have perceived their bound feet and to challenge to some degree the belief that footbinding categorically dispossessed all women subjected to the practice. Such an inquiry goes beyond

conventional condemnatory perspectives in order to acquire a deeper understanding of the practice in the appropriate historical and cultural contexts.

While the *Chin P'ing Mei* is a work of fiction, there are many reasons supporting the use of this novel as a primary source in this inquiry. The *Chin P'ing Mei* is a gold mine for the cultural and social historian for it provides a vast array of information regarding Ming dynasty Chinese ideas of the body, sexuality, and body adornment; moreover, it is a valuable resource for the gender historian because of its focus on the roles and relationships of women in a large household. Well-known for its naturalistic narrative and rich detail about the everyday existence of a Ming dynasty family, the *Chin P'ing Mei* is also perhaps the first to deal with female characters and their domestic lives with such intimacy. From a literary perspective, its delineation of women goes beyond the established female archetypes of previous works, giving readers a more realistic, sympathetic picture of women from all social strata, including wives, concubines, prostitutes, and maids. The *Chin P'ing Mei* also presents P'an Chin-lien to its readers, the most notorious female sexual predator in Chinese literature, a figure that both draws upon and transcends the literary conventions in female characterization.

The *Chin P'ing Mei's* descriptions of sexual, political, and social activities often border on the burlesque. This reflects upon the author's design to condemn Ming dynasty extravagance and ostentatious consumption through allegory. Authorial intent is relevant to this inquiry for many reasons. The author uses the body and body adornment in allegorical ways to indict ill conduct. He calls upon Chinese cosmological conceptions by presenting the body as a microcosm of the greater society. Also, the *Chin P'ing Mei's*

portrayal of the bound foot parallels the growing ambivalence towards the practice of footbinding during the Ming dynasty. While the novel uses footbinding to evoke a sense of female virtue and handiwork, it also suggests a link between the bound foot and lasciviousness. This depiction reflects upon historical evidence that the popularity of footbinding had reached its peak during the Ming dynasty, and that the practice was beginning to lose its association with virtue and status.¹

Authorship and interpretation of the *Chin P'ing Mei*

In the same way that recent scholarship has revealed various possible meanings of the bound foot, there are multiple interpretations of the *Chin P'ing Mei* and the putative author's intention in penning this work.² Believed to have been published around 1618, it is now recognized as a Chinese literary classic open to various interpretations: a novel of manners, a work of pornography, a Buddhist indictment of overindulgence in bodily appetites, or a critique of the decaying Sung dynasty (960-1127) which uses the six wives of the central character to represent the six evil ministers of that time. Furthermore, some *Chin P'ing Mei* scholars believe that the novel is largely influenced by Hsün-tzu's philosophies regarding the intrinsically evil nature of man and its effect on the moral and social order. It is possible that all these interpretations are valid in some way, but most

¹ Dorothy Ko, "The Body as Attire: The Shifting Meanings of Footbinding in Seventeenth-Century China," *Journal of Women's History* 8, no. 4 (Winter), 9.

² The ambiguous authorship and complicated textual history of the *Chin P'ing Mei* has been the source of much scholarly debate and speculation. See, for example, Andrew H. Plaks, *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987). While an inquiry into such issues falls outside the scope of this study, some rudimentary discussion about authorship and textual history appears in a later part of this chapter.

scholars will agree that at the very least, the *Chin P'ing Mei*, through indirect critique and direct depiction, denounces the poor moral and political leadership during the author's life.³

There has also been a considerable amount of controversy surrounding the textual history of the *Chin P'ing Mei*. Most scholars acknowledge the existence of three different versions of the text, the earliest dating from the Wan-li period (1573-1620) of the Ming dynasty.⁴ This version of the novel cites the author as Lan-ling Hsiao-hsiao Sheng (Scoffing Scholar of Lan-ling). Most authors of this time did not wish to be identified with their novels. The *Chin P'ing Mei*'s explicit nature probably also contributed to this enigma. One legend regarding the writing of the *Chin P'ing Mei* depicts it as an act of filial piety: its alleged author Wang Shih-chen (1526-90) is said to have presented this work to an evil minister responsible for the death of Wang's father. The reader, a fan of pornography, licked his finger to turn the pages, the corners of which were tinged with poison. Thus, he slowly poisoned himself as he read the work.⁵ Legends aside, there has been much controversy over the questions of whether the *Chin P'ing Mei* is the work of a single author or a compilation of the works of different authors, and whether it was

³ Hsiao-hsiao Sheng, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, vol. 1, *The Gathering*, trans. David Tod Roy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), xvii; William H. Nienhauser, Jr., ed. and comp., *The Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1986), 287-88, 290.

⁴ Roy, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, xx-xxi; Plaks, *The Four Masterworks*, 57-71.

⁵ C. T. Hsia, *The Classic Chinese Novel: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press 1968; reprint, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 167; Plaks, *The Four Masterworks*, 56-58.

written during the Chia-ching period (1522-1566) or the Wan-li (1573-1620) period. Apparently, twenty or more names have been proposed as possible authors of the novel, including Tang Hsien-tsu (1550-1616), a leading playwright of his day.⁶

Besides the issue of authorship, there is also much speculation on the philosophical intent of the author. David Tod Roy, a leading scholar of the *Chin P'ing Mei*, argues that the original intent of the author in penning this work is based on Hsün-tzu's philosophy that human nature is essentially evil rather than good, and that social decay results directly from poor rulership. Roy provides a long list of arguments to support this proposal. First, Roy proposes that the author's moniker, Lan-ling Hsiao Hsiao Sheng (Scoffing Scholar of Lan-ling), is actually a reference to Hsün-tzu (310-219 B.C.). Roy provides two reasons for this belief. According to Ssu-ma Ch'ien's (145-90 B.C.) biography of Hsün-tzu in the *Shih-chi (Records of the Historian)*, Hsün-tzu was appointed to the post of magistrate of Lan-ling in the state of Chu, late in his life. In addition, the description of the scholar as "scoffing" can be traced to another early biography of Hsün-tzu by Liu Hsiang (79-8 B.C.) in which he says "Su Ch'in and Chang I endeavored to persuade the feudal lords with their false doctrines, and thereby attained great prominence. But Hsün-tzu retired and scoffed at them, saying, 'He who does not advance himself by espousing such doctrines will also escape destruction for so doing.'" Roy argues that the author of the *Chin P'ing Mei* intended in his choice of pseudonym to

⁶ Roy, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, xliii.

invoke the image of Hsün-tzu, one who expounded against and scoffed at the evils of his time.⁷

Roy also argues that the novel is full of analogues for Hsün-tzu's ideas. The novel's beginnings, which brings its two major protagonists together, is copied almost directly from the Ming novel *Shui-hu chuan*.⁸ Yet, the author of the *Chin P'ing Mei* shifts the setting from the town of Yang-ku to that of Ch'ing-ho (Clear River). This purposeful relocation, Roy argues, evokes the ancient legend that the Yellow River will run clear only if a true sage rules the country. Hsün-tzu elaborates on this, using the analogy of a clear-running source of water to place the responsibility for social order on the ruler: "If the wellspring is clear, the outflow will be clear; if the wellspring is muddy, the outflow will be muddy."⁹

Roy also uses various other aspects of the novel to prove his theory. Of particular relevance to this work are Roy's ideas regarding the novel's portrayal of a middle-class family as a microcosm of the greater society, the explicit sexual descriptions, and the analogy between economic and sexual waste. To the Chinese, the idea that an individual's body, his moral conduct, and his family relations are microcosmic representations of the greater society in which he lives is a familiar one. This certainly resonates with Hsün-tzu's idea that the ruler is responsible for the morality of the society

⁷ Ibid., xxiii-xxiv.

⁸ This novel's title has been translated variously as *The Water Margin*, *All Men are Brothers*, or *Outlaws of the Marsh*.

⁹ John Knoblock, *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works*, Volume 2 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 177. Roy quotes this line and provides his own translation as well in Roy, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, xxxvi.

under his rule, as well as with *Chin P'ing Mei*'s portrayal of Hsi-men Ch'ing as a *hun chün*, a muddle-headed ruler.

In addition, both Hsün-tzu and the author of the *Chin P'ing Mei* engaged in extensive use of double entendre. Although the author of the *Chin P'ing Mei* mostly used this literary technique to evoke sexual images, Roy believes that the author's depiction of sexual activity in explicit terms was meant to convey scorn and disgust for overindulgence in these activities. By the symbolic correlation of the sexual, economic and political realms, and the exaggerated depiction of these activities, the author imbues the reader with a sense of revulsion for immoderation in any of these three areas.¹⁰ Finally, Roy also uses Hsün-tzu's economic theory to explain the "symbolic interchangeability of money and semen" in the *Chin P'ing Mei*. The author uses excessive sexual activity as a literary device to "call attention to the dangers of excess and immoderation in all spheres of human activity."¹¹

Structure and characterization in the *Chin P'ing Mei*

C. T. Hsia, a renowned scholar of Chinese literature, considers the novel inferior for including too many contemporary songs, jokes, and tales. This quality, he argues, tarnishes the *Chin P'ing Mei*'s naturalistic narrative. He describes the *Chin P'ing Mei* as the "most disappointing novel" considered in his work *The Classic Chinese Novel: A Critical Introduction*.¹² While Hsia has criticized the novel as structurally anarchic,

¹⁰ Roy, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, xxxvii.

¹¹ Ibid., xxxix.

¹² Hsia, *The Classic Chinese Novel*, 166.

literary scholars today consider it a landmark in the development of the Chinese narrative tradition. Recent scholarship, including that of David Tod Roy, has emphasized the *Chin P'ing Mei*'s sophistication in terms of structural unity and symmetry. Roy argues that the *Chin P'ing Mei*, like the works of Vladimir Nabokov and James Joyce, requires multiple close readings for full appreciation.¹³ The symmetrical structure of the novel has clearly influenced later works, including the Chinese literary classic *Hung-lou meng* (*The Story of the Stone*).¹⁴ Each of the *Chin P'ing Mei*'s one hundred chapters contains two episodes which mirror or contrast each other, each ten-chapter unit has a particular theme as well as an internal structure of its own, and every twenty chapters makes up a unit in terms of plot development.¹⁵

The *Chin P'ing Mei* depicts highly memorable, vivid characters like the infamous P'an Chin-lien, perhaps the most famous virago in Chinese literature. She appears in the *Shui-hu chuan* briefly as one of several archetypal adulteresses who betray righteous men and meet grisly deaths. It almost seems as if the author of the *Chin P'ing Mei* could not bear to see this character appear and disappear so quickly, so he picked up the narrative from the *Shui-hu chuan* and fabricated a rich and sophisticated extension of her life with Hsi-men Ch'ing, her lover. Not only did the author of the *Chin P'ing Mei* immortalize her as an archetype of female lasciviousness in his novel, she survives into modern

¹³ Roy, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, xix.

¹⁴ Also known as *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. David Hawkes's translation of this Chinese classic in five volumes is available as Cao Xueqin, *The Story of the Stone*, trans. David Hawkes (London: Penguin Books, 1973).

¹⁵ Nienhauser, *The Indiana Companion*, 289; Plaks, *The Four Masterworks*, 72-78.

popular culture in many ways. The Hong Kong film *The Reincarnation of Golden Lotus*, which depicts the life of P'an Chin-lien after reincarnation, is just one example of the *Chin P'ing Mei*'s influence.¹⁶

Of particular interest to this study is the value of the *Chin P'ing Mei* to the social historian, for it provides copious particulars about the experiences of women in Ming dynasty Chinese life. It is China's first novel to deal with the domestic lives of women, portraying their personalities, inner lives, relationships, and motivations in great detail. In particular, the *Chin P'ing Mei* depicts harem politics and the domestic life of women in a large household like that of Hsi-men Ch'ing's. Unlike earlier Chinese fiction that rendered women within the boundaries of defined archetypes, the author of the *Chin P'ing Mei* depicted women in a more realistic and empathetic manner.

A comparison of P'an Chin-lien in the *Shui-hu chuan* and P'an Chin-lien in the *Chin P'ing Mei* supports this notion. In the *Shui-hu chuan*, a decidedly misogynistic tale about heroic men, female characters fall easily into a limited number of archetypes: the damsel-in-distress, the evil adulteress, the money-grubbing bawd, and the female hero (of which there are only a handful) who essentially espouses the same values as the male heroes and becomes part of the male fraternity at Liang-shan p'o.¹⁷ P'an Chin-lien

¹⁶ Stefan Hammond and Mike Wilkins, *Sex and Zen & a Bullet in the Head: The Essential Guide to Hong Kong's Mind-Bending Films* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 132.

¹⁷ Scholars including C. T. Hsia and Phillip S. Y. Sun have agreed that the portrayal of women in *Shui-hu chuan* is unfriendly at best, and often, decidedly misogynistic. See C. T. Hsia, *The Classic Chinese Novel*, 105 and Phillip S. Y. Sun, "The Seditious Art of the Water Margin--Misogynists or Desperadoes?" *Renditions* 1 (Autumn 1973), 99. In the *Shui-hu chuan*, Liang-shan p'o is the male-dominated bandit stronghold formed by various heroic men who are persecuted by the law for deeds considered righteous and brave. Out of the one hundred and eight heroes, only three are

appears as a lascivious and amoral woman who kills her husband Wu the Elder so that she can be with her lover, Hsi-men Ch'ing. Her punishment, in the form of a grisly death, is meted out swiftly and mercilessly in the novel: her brother-in-law Wu Sung cuts open her chest, rips out her "heart, liver, and entrails," cuts off her head, and presents P'an's remains on her dead husband's altar.¹⁸ In the *Chin P'ing Mei* however, this revenge is delayed. Between the time she kills Wu the Elder and dies at the hands of Wu Sung, the reader sees P'an Chin-lien as a more complex, three-dimensional character. On the one hand, a reader might feel contempt for her cruel and greedy nature; on the other hand, it is hard not to feel sympathy for a woman who shares her husband with five other women, whose happiness is so entirely dependent on her husband's fickle interest, and whose attempts to manage her own destiny and to fulfill her own sexual and material needs result in severe punishment, and eventually, death.

Structure of this study

The first chapter of this thesis presents a brief history of footbinding and some information about the multiple meanings of the bound foot. Modern conceptions of it as a barbaric practice foisted upon defenseless Chinese women by a Confucian patriarchy, rendering them into crippled sex objects, are, to use the words of a leading footbinding scholar, "dead wrong."¹⁹ Instead, keeping in mind the historiographical problems of

women.

¹⁸ Shi Nai'an and Luo Guanzhong, *Outlaws of the Marsh*, trans. Sidney Shapiro (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1980), 1:425.

¹⁹ Ko, "The Body as Attire," 9.

footbinding sources, chapter one presents some information about the bound foot's complex and layered meanings: as a symbol of status, culture, ethnicity, civility, feminine beauty, feminine virtue, and a form of body adornment.

After a discussion on footbinding, it is necessary to address Chinese notions regarding the body. The body as a discrete physical entity separate from its social and political environment did not exist in Chinese thinking; instead the body was a microcosmic representation of larger forces at work in society and in the universe. Such ideas existed in religious Taoist texts on sexual alchemy, which formed the foundation for the Chinese literary archetype of the female sexual predator. Sexual activity can be a means of becoming a *hsien* (immortal) but overindulgence in the bodily appetites can result in dissipation and death. The *Chin P'ing Mei* teems with allegories of the body and body adornment, presenting symbolic meanings in its delineation of the corpus and its functions. In particular the novel connects sexual activities to the economic and sociopolitical realms. The two main characters of the *Chin P'ing Mei*, Hsi-men Ch'ing and P'an Chin-lien, engage in sexual battles which become increasingly animalistic as the novel progresses. The inevitable denouement of the novel is directly tied to the physical violations they have visited upon each other and other characters. Sexual consumption is simply a bodily analogy for economic and political consumption, and extinction of the flesh is linked to social and political death.

After studying notions of the body, it is necessary to address the issue of body adornment in the context of Chinese thinking. In many ways, the body and its adornment cannot be separated, for they both serve essential cosmological functions. Body

adornment refers not only to clothing, accessories, and coiffure, it also includes the bound foot as well as the tiny shoes designed and created by women and presented to each other as tokens of friendship and intimacy, and coveted by men as fetishistic objects. Using examples from the *Chin P'ing Mei*, this work elucidates the significance and intent of dress with a focus on female apparel. Body adornment in the novel embodies various meanings. It is a marker of culture and status, an expression of one's emotional state, a sign of womanly handiwork and virtue, and a token of intimacy between individuals. Beyond all these attributes, a study of body adornment reveals the importance of attire to a woman's role in a household. Not only did it signify her status in the hierarchy, what a woman wore held subtle meanings in terms of alliances, relationships, and implicit power.

Finally, this work narrows its focus on the bound foot in the context of the *Chin P'ing Mei*. All the arguments that apply to adornment also apply to the foot and shoe. Moreover, since footbinding was an exclusively-female practice, a study of the foot and shoe can reveal much more about the significance of body and attire from the woman's perspective. Throughout the *Chin P'ing Mei*, body and body adornment furnish women with means and opportunity to gain material profit, form strategic alliances, and most importantly, to secure the favor of Hsi-men, the central male character. In particular, this applies to women's small feet and shoes.

This thesis proposes that the *Chin P'ing Mei* can be a valuable source of information for historical ideas regarding the body, the bound foot, and body adornment during the Ming dynasty. First of all, no reader of the *Chin P'ing Mei* can ignore the

motif of P'an Chin-lien's feet and the role they play in her relationship with Hsi-men as well as with the other women in the harem. Even her name, which forms part of the novel's title, means "golden lotus," an euphonious, euphemistic term for the bound foot. While the appeal of the bound foot lay in its concealment, P'an's feet are blatantly visible throughout the novel. This visibility is pregnant with meaning, for it suggests growing ambivalence towards the bound foot, and foreshadows the demise of an exalted tradition. Such a transformation in the conception of the bound foot as a marker of civility suggests greater shifts in social and literary traditions. Finally, the novel makes clear that the adorned body is much more than an aesthetically-pleasing configuration of clothing and accessories. The *Chin P'ing Mei* teems with instances of women using body and body adornment to gain material wealth, form intimate and strategic alliances, and obtain favor and political advantage within the harem. These tactics defy the notion that women were merely objects of beauty in resplendent garments or passive victims of footbinding; instead, it suggests that women used body and body adornment to their advantage.

CHAPTER ONE

THE BOUND FOOT

This chapter provides a brief history of footbinding, with a focus on the era during which the *Chin P'ing Mei* was written and the various notions that the bound foot embodied during this time. Throughout this discussion, it is important to keep in mind the fact that footbinding sources are intrinsically problematic for the historian. Almost all records about the practice date from the nineteenth century or later, which coincides with the demise of the bound foot. Footbinding literature from this era is heavily imbued with racial, sexual, or nationalistic agendas, and was meant to extol or condemn the practice. Also, most of this literature was written by men. Thus, it is hard to know anything about the woman's experience with regard to her bound feet.

Two of the most significant English language sources on footbinding can be found in Howard Levy's *The Lotus Lovers: The Complete History of the Curious Erotic Custom of Footbinding in China* and Robert Van Gulik's *Sexual Life in Ancient China*.²⁰ Levy's work is perhaps one of the most often-cited sources of scholarship on the bound foot. It translates large sections of the Chinese source *Ts'ai-fei lu*, a collection published in Tien-tsin in 1936, which contains copious amounts of footbinding material. In addition, it contains the results of interviews conducted by Levy in China and Taiwan with many

²⁰ Howard Levy, *The Lotus Lovers: The Complete History of the Curious Erotic Custom of Footbinding in China* (New York: W. Rawls, 1966; reprint, Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1992); R. H. Van Gulik, *Sexual Life in Ancient China* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974; reprint, 1964).

women who may have been the last generation to bind their feet. Van Gulik's work is a classic in the study of Chinese sexuality; he presents in historical sequence a comprehensive array of information ranging from Taoist sexual alchemy, bedchamber manuals that provided sexual instruction, to late imperial erotic art and literature. However, both are classic Orientalist works. In particular, Van Gulik delineates Chinese sexuality as healthy and essentially opposed to the repressed sexuality of Victorian Europe. This perhaps stemmed from a desire to find the sexual normalcy his contemporaries desired at home."²¹

For the purposes of this study, it may be convenient to think of footbinding in terms of three stages of development.²² The first is the era of its incipience and growth, from the late T'ang dynasty (618-907) through the Sung dynasty (960-1279). There is little evidence that T'ang dynasty women bound their feet. However, myths date the birth of the practice to the late T'ang period, when court dancers bound their feet loosely to accentuate their pointed toes. Legends aside, many scholars have associated footbinding with Sung dynasty Neo-Confucianism and its conservative attitudes towards women. However, recent scholarship has cast some doubts on such a direct connection between Neo-Confucianism and footbinding.

²¹ Charlotte Furth, "Rethinking Van Gulik: Sexuality and Reproduction in Traditional Chinese Medicine," in *Engendering China: Women, Culture, and the State*, eds. Christina K. Gilmartin, Gail Hershatter, Lisa Rofel, Tyrene White (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 128.

²² This simplistic categorization of the evolutionary stages of footbinding is suggested here only as a guide to conceiving the practice in historical context. This approach does not purport to provide for a comprehensive understanding of the practice, nor does it suggest that the characteristics of footbinding in each era are mutually exclusive.

The second stage of this evolution, and the primary focus of this chapter, is the period spanning the Yüan (1264-1368) and Ming dynasties. During this time the bound foot embodied multiple meanings including female virtue, Chinese ethnicity, and social status. Footbinding increased in popularity during this time, spreading from the elite to the masses. Women bound the feet of their daughters in the hope of improving their marriage potential and thus raising their social status. A pair of bound feet was synonymous with female allure as well as female virtue. While China was under Mongolian rule, there is evidence that footbinding served as an important marker of Chinese womanhood and culture. During the Ming dynasty, footbinding reached the height of its popularity, at which time the sources begin to show a sense of ambivalence towards the practice. It is even possible to think of the decline of footbinding as analogous to the disintegration of the traditional literati monopoly over political power.

The final stage features the disintegration of a thousand-year old tradition. During the Ch'ing dynasty (1644-1911), footbinding once again served as a sign of a distinct Chinese identity under foreign rule. While Ch'ing rulers failed to eradicate the practice, the foundations for the anti-footbinding movement were laid during this time. Thus, the late Ch'ing dynasty and the early Republican era (1911-1949) can be thought of as the age of foot emancipation, during which time the feet of Chinese women took on a powerful, symbolic role in the rhetoric of political and social reform.

The origins of the footbinding

A preference for small feet in Chinese thought, for both men and women, goes back to Chinese antiquity. An admiration for small feet was expressed in poetry, which

praised women who took “small and measured steps.” This was part of an approved code of feminine behavior emphasizing grace and poise. Women as well as men with large feet were associated with a lower social status.²³

Poetic references to small feet have led some scholars to believe that the practice of footbinding existed even before the tenth century, but no one has been able to resolve the question of whether these references refer to bound feet, or simply to small feet. Various legends surround the origin of the bound foot, but there is no definitive source that tells us exactly when or how the practice came about. The Buddhist pilgrim Hsüan-tsang (596-664), who traveled from China to India to obtain Buddhist scriptures, recorded the sighting of a woman borne of a deer who had hooves instead of feet. Each step she took left lotus-shaped prints in the ground. An imperial consort of the Northern Ch’i dynasty (550-577) who walked on a gold structure shaped like a lotus was described as “giving rise to lotuses with every step.” Perhaps these earlier legends fed into one most often associated with footbinding, that of T’ang emperor Li Yü (r.961-975) and his favored concubine Yao-niang. This emperor had his concubine wrap her feet in bands of cloth and dance upon her pointed toes atop a six-foot-high, ornate gold platform shaped like a lotus flower constructed specifically for this purpose.²⁴ Thus, the term *chin-lien* (golden lotus) came to be associated with bound feet.

There is a lot of evidence suggesting that T’ang dynasty women did not bind their feet. Figurines and paintings featured T’ang dynasty women as robust and vigorous

²³ Levy, *The Lotus Lovers*, 28.

²⁴ Van Gulik, *Sexual Life in Ancient China*, 216; Levy, *The Lotus Lovers*, 39.

figures, wearing boat-like court shoes that resembled men's shoes. There are also many sources indicating that T'ang women participated in athletic activities such as horseback riding. Thus, it seems that footbinding did not match T'ang dynasty feminine ideals and was not in vogue during that time.²⁵ T'ang dynasty women were also unfettered in the pursuit of intellectual development. It was not deemed immoral or unfaithful for a widow to remarry. T'ang dynasty Empress Wu ruled the country effectively between 690-705 and established a precedent for female leadership in Chinese government.²⁶ Dresses exposing the necks and décolletage were in fashion during the T'ang. In the Sung dynasty however, it seems that attitudes towards female education, widow remarriage, female dress, and female behavior changed, ostensibly due to the influence of Neo-Confucianism. Sung dynasty scholars expressed great concern over issues of female morality and rejected the T'ang dynasty's liberal attitudes towards women. More austere, high-collared jackets replaced T'ang dynasty female attire, which was considered less than decent.²⁷

Some prominent Sung dynasty figures expressed conservative views regarding female education and the separation of male and female spheres. Eleventh-century historian Ssu-ma Kuang (1019-1086) believed that female education should be limited to reading the proper classics for women and disapproved of women expressing themselves

²⁵ William Watson, *Tang and Liao Ceramics* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 1984), 182, 190-192. This source, as do many other pictorial books on T'ang art, presents photographs of T'ang dynasty figurines of women.

²⁶ Charles O. Hucker, *China's Imperial Past: An Introduction to Chinese History and Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), 142-143.

²⁷ Van Gulik, *Sexual Life in Ancient China*, 219.

through poetry or song.²⁸ Sung philosopher and father of Sung Neo-Confucianism Chu Hsi (1130-1200) emphasized “the inferiority of women and the strict separation of the sexes, and forbade all manifestations of heterosexual love outside the intimacy of the wedded couch.”²⁹ Ch’eng I (1033-1107) is famous for this quote: “To starve to death is a small matter, but to lose one’s chastity is a great matter.”³⁰

Many scholars, ranging from Levy and Van Gulik to twentieth-century feminist scholars such as Elizabeth Croll, have drawn a direct link between the conservative Neo-Confucian ideology of the Sung dynasty and the practices of female seclusion, footbinding, widow suicide, and female infanticide starting in the Sung dynasty and continuing throughout the late imperial age. In particular, the Neo-Confucian ideas expressed by Chu Hsi and Ch’eng I are accused of being responsible for these misogynistic practices. The spread of footbinding during the Sung dynasty appears to corroborate this theory: by incapacitating women, footbinding would prevent “barbarous running around.”³¹ However, while it is true that Sung scholars were conservative and believed widow remarriage to be immoral, Sung intellectual historian Patricia Buckley Ebrey argues that there is no evidence from Sung sources to suggest that scholars like

²⁸ Levy, *The Lotus Lovers*, 44.

²⁹ Van Gulik, *Sexual Life in Ancient China*, 223.

³⁰ Patricia Ebrey, “Women, Money, and Class: Ssu-ma Kuang and Sung Neo-Confucian Views on Women,” *Papers on Society and Culture of Early Modern China* (Taipei: Academia Sinica, 1992), 613. In this work, Ebrey examines the nexus of widowhood, female property ownership, and the scholarly anxiety over the permeability between the worlds of the courtesan and the respectable woman from a gentry family.

³¹ Levy, *The Lotus Lovers*, 41.

Chu Hsi, Ch'eng I, or Ssu-ma Kuang actually promoted other forms of female constraint like footbinding or widow suicide.³² Instead, Ebrey proposes that footbinding became an important practice that differentiated between male and female bodies. She associates the birth of footbinding with changing ideas about gender during the Sung dynasty. The ideal member of the Chinese intelligentsia during the Sung dynasty was a "subdued and refined figure" who might seem effete unless women were even more "delicate, reticent, and stationary."³³

The bound foot as cultural and ethnic symbol

Songs, poems, and plays of the Yüan era abound with references to bound feet. Under Mongolian rule (1264-1368) the popularity of footbinding spread throughout China, perhaps as a way for the Chinese to differentiate themselves from the "uncultivated" northerners. The frequent threat of alien incursions during the late imperial age led to scholarly anxiety over cultural miscegenation. In this political climate, the bound foot as a distinct symbol of Chinese civilization became part of the complex interaction between Chinese and non-Chinese peoples. During the Ming dynasty, the restored Chinese government forbade Mongolian men in the Che-chiang area to engage in studies and Mongolian women from binding their feet.³⁴ From this it can be seen that a woman's bound foot had become an integral part of her Chinese identity. At

³² Ebrey, "Women, Money, and Class," 616.

³³ Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 41.

³⁴ Levy, *The Lotus Lovers*, 47, 49.

the same time, a woman's bound feet became the cultural equivalent of an orthodox, Confucian education for a man.

There is further Ming dynasty evidence of the bound foot's role in military and racial tensions between Han Chinese and the encroaching Manchus. Beijing official Shen Te-fu (1578-1642), in his history of the Wan-li period of the Ming dynasty, tells of a proposal made by Ming official Ch'ü Chiu-ssu as a method to debilitate the Northern "barbarians." In this proposal, Ch'ü suggests that the Chinese government should "entice them to civilize their customs by having their women follow the Chinese method: have them all tie up and bind their feet into an arch shape." Accordingly, the men of the warlike Northern tribes would "thus be indulgent; their spirit would diminish and they would become lax in striking and lancing." While Ming dynasty readers may have found this an amusing anecdote, Ch'ü Chiu-ssu was a "Ming patriot and military affairs expert whose opinions were not to be dismissed lightly. Holder of a provincial degree (1573). Ch'ü was the author of a treatise on national security."³⁵ From this anecdote, one can see the intricate relationship between the bound foot and Chinese ethnic identity, especially when the threat of racial intermingling appeared. Other studies have shown a generally positive correlation between the proximity of ethnic minorities living close to Han populations and the practice of footbinding. For example, in Taiwan around 1900 when the distinction between Han and Aborigine identities was an important issue, footbinding was practiced at about 95%.³⁶

³⁵ Shen Te-fu, *Wan-li Yeh-huo pien* (Kuang-chou: Fu-li shan-fang, 1827; preface 1606), 23.26b-27a, as cited in Dorothy Ko, "The Body as Attire," 11.

³⁶ Christena L. Turner, "Locating Footbinding: Variations across Class and Space in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century China," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 10.

Footbinding as a sign of social status

Footbinding spread from the court to the aristocracy. Then, it spread to the masses, largely due to its association with an elite social status. In the seventeenth century, a woman's bound feet served as a sign of her gentility and her lifestyle of leisure. The famous courtesan Liu Ju-shih took great care in her adornment and made sure that her bound feet peeked out from beneath her robe during her first visit to her future husband. She exhibited her feet as symbols of privilege, distinguishing herself from prostitutes of a lower status.³⁷ For a female poet who had fallen on hard times, her bound feet served as a memento of a happy childhood in an aristocratic family. Her poem evokes a sense that her feet signified beauty as well as an elevated social position:

Remember those bygone days in the depth of my inner chambers.
Fragrant pieces of jade adorned my tender skin.
My little maid stood by me under canopy of flowers.
So that my tiny shoes wouldn't slip on mosses so green.
Little did I know that in mid-life I would have to roam around.
Braving the scorching sun and furious storms.³⁸

The bound foot as a signifier of status offers many similarities to the corset. Like the corseted waist the bound foot was prevalent first among the elite, then spread to the masses who hoped to benefit from its ennobling influence. The small foot was also directly related to a woman's marriage potential and the possibility of a woman

no. 4 (December 1997), 455.

³⁷ The term courtesan refers to a woman who provided entertainment and companionship for prominent and literate men, usually of the scholar-gentry class. A later chapter in this study addresses the way in which the patronage of such men lent prestige to the status of a courtesan.

³⁸ Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 170-171.

improving her situation in life. Corseting, like footbinding, was not a homogenous practice. Rather, women of differing social classes practiced these forms of body adornment differently. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, European ladies of the bourgeoisie and the nobility wore corsets as a way to distinguish themselves from the lower classes. Working women and peasants could not afford the expensive corsets, and so wore a *corselet* (little corset) which laced in the front instead of the back and did not require the assistance of a servant to put on.³⁹ Similarly, women from wealthy Chinese families could afford to bind their feet earlier and much more tightly than working-class women, who practiced a looser form of binding which enabled them to walk and work more freely. Adele Field, a missionary who lived in Swatow between 1877 and 1887 noted that wealthy families started binding their daughters' feet around the ages of six to eight years, and that poorer families waited until the girl was thirteen to sixteen. She also observed that only the very wealthy could afford to incapacitate their women completely for any kind of manual labor.⁴⁰

Several other scholars refer to the bound foot as a mark of gentility in Chinese society. John F. Davis observed that the purpose of footbinding was to exempt a woman from labor, and that since "small feet make cripples of the women, it is fair to conclude that the idea of gentility which they convey is from a similar association."⁴¹ Florence

³⁹ Marilyn Yalom, *A History of the Breast* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 164.

⁴⁰ Adele Field, *Pagoda Shadows: Studies from Life in China*, (Boston: W. G. Corthell, 1890), 44.

⁴¹ John Francis Davis, *The Chinese: A General Description of the Empire of China and its Inhabitants* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1836; reprint, Wilmington:

Ayscough poses this question: "What mother would condemn her child to go through life marked as a 'big-footed' woman of the coolie class when by binding the feet a door to advancement in the social scale might be opened? . . . At the cost, therefore, of long-drawn agony the feet were bound and slowly crushed."⁴² Thorstein Veblen, in his study of the leisure classes, explores the issue of economics and its relationship with "men's sense of beauty of women." He compares corseting to footbinding and explains how both practices render a woman "completely incapable of useful effort and must therefore be supported in idleness by her owner." Thus, the woman with bound feet, as well as the woman with a corseted waist, were both extremely attractive to a man as "evidence of pecuniary strength," a demonstration of his fiscal power.⁴³

Feminine virtues attributed to the bound foot

By the Ming dynasty, Chinese women saw their bound feet as connected to perseverance, beauty, civility, and productivity. Footbinding had become a fundamental facet of a woman's life. All the rites of passage in a young Chinese girl's life were associated with this practice.⁴⁴ The pain of footbinding was also an important aspect of female virtue. A woman, having survived the pain of footbinding, wore her tiny feet

Scholarly Resources Inc., 1972), 256.

⁴² Florence Ayscough, *Chinese Women Yesterday and Today* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1937), 28.

⁴³ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1899; reprint, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1912), 148-49.

⁴⁴ Julie Broadwin, "Walking Contradictions: Chinese Women Unbound at the Turn of the Century," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 10, no. 4. (December 1997), 428-429.

proudly as a sign of her stoic and enduring nature.⁴⁵ Bound feet were an expression of “perseverance through adversity . . . a badge of courage proving that one had lived through . . . one or two years of excruciating pain . . . and a lifetime of aching feet.”⁴⁶ Ning Lao T’ai-t’ai (Old Lady Ning), born in 1876, testifies to the virtues attributed to small feet and their importance in marriage: “Matchmakers were not asked ‘Is she beautiful?’ but ‘How small are her feet?’ A plain face is given by heaven but poorly bound feet are a sign of laziness.”⁴⁷

There is much evidence that women with large feet were often derided. One fan of the bound foot, under the pseudonym of Lotus Craver, argued that women without bound feet looked just like men, and that the practice of footbinding maintained the difference between men and women. Natural feet were “heavy and ponderous as they steal into bed, but tiny feet lightly steal under the coverlets.” In addition, Lotus Carver argued that women with large feet, termed lotus boats, did not adorn and perfume their feet in the same way that bound foot women did, and were therefore, less feminine and less attractive.⁴⁸ The large-footed were also ridiculed in poetry:

Her face is passable,
But those feet, laughable!
A large-footed woman tarries,
For no one wants to marry her.
You say they resemble feet?

⁴⁵ Levy, *The Lotus Lovers*, 23.

⁴⁶ Broadwin, “Walking Contradictions,” 427-428.

⁴⁷ Ida Pruitt, *A Daughter of Han: The Autobiography of a Chinese Working Woman* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1945), 22.

⁴⁸ Levy, *The Lotus Lovers*, 182.

They look more like twin boats in a fleet.
You there, with the two large feet,
You've nothing to lose:
Wear your husband's old tattered shoes...⁴⁹

It is clear from this poem that the size of a woman's feet had an important impact on her potential for marriage. In addition, the reference to wearing her husband's old shoes shows the association of bound feet with femininity.

Indeed, the bound foot served as an important marker of gender differences throughout the late imperial age. According to Ebrey, gender reconstruction contributed to a rise in the practice of footbinding during the Sung. Ebrey argues that the popularity of footbinding increased in response to changing ideals of masculinity. As scholarly men become more refined and reticent, women had to become even more docile and fragile so as not to make the men seem too effeminate.⁵⁰ Erotic paintings from the late imperial age showed both men and women with pale skin and smooth limbs: the hoof-shaped feet, swathed in binding cloths and embroidered shoes, were the only obvious physical difference between the man and woman.⁵¹

Thus, poorly-bound feet reflected upon a woman's lack of essential female virtues. In an eighteenth-century play by Ch'en Tuan-sheng (1751-1796), the female

⁴⁹ Ibid., 110-111. Levy cites the Chinese source *Ts'ai-fei lu* as the source of this ditty, without providing specific information on the original author or date.

⁵⁰ Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters*, 41.

⁵¹ Evidence of this can be found in various sources, including *Erotic Art of China: A Unique Collection of Chinese Prints and Poems Devoted to the Art of Love* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1977), Phyllis Kronhausen and Eberhard Kronhauser comps., *Erotic Art: A Survey of Erotic Fact and Fancy in the Fine Arts* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1968), and *Dreams of Spring: Erotic Art in China* (Amsterdam and Kuala Lumpur: The Pepin Press, 1997).

protagonist Meng Li-chün, by donning male attire and hiding her tiny feet in a pair of men's boots, passes for a brilliant scholar and attains the position of prime minister in the emperor's court. The narrative deals with the attempts of many people to expose her masquerade. In one scene, an impostor who tries to pass herself off as Meng receives sarcastic praise for her less than diminutive feet; at the same time, she is accused of being spoiled for being unable to tolerate the pain of footbinding:

Round, plump wrists and long nails.
Jade and gold rings on many fingers.
A spoiled brat, unable to bear pain.
A pair of high heels to pass for lotuses.
Big and tall, a face full,
From which family is this girl? ⁵²

Like one of Cinderella's stepsisters, the impostor knows right away that her large feet cannot conceal her identity. She becomes flustered and embarrassed by the size of her feet and the implication that she lacks the ideal feminine values of stoicism and endurance.

Shoes and shoemaking were also associated with female virtue, because it exhibited the important feminine craft of embroidery. The erotic appeal of the bound foot lay in its secrecy and mystery, masked under multiple layers of footbinding cloths and beautiful, elaborately-embroidered shoes. These shoes were also seen as an important fashion statement; designing and making the shoes allowed women to express their individuality, creativity, and superior embroidery skills. Embroidery motifs were auspicious and symbolic in nature, ranging from mandarin ducks for nuptial bliss,

⁵² Ch'en Tuan-sheng, *Tsai-sheng yüan*, ed. Chao Ch'ing-sheng (He-nan: Chung-chou ch'u-pan she, 1982), 752, as cited and translated in Wang Ping, *Aching for Beauty: Footbinding in China* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 215.

peonies for prosperity, to peaches for longevity.⁵³ Embroidered motifs of the plum blossom, bamboo, and pine, all plants admired for thriving in harsh winter conditions, also symbolized perseverance under pain for women with bound feet.⁵⁴ Bedroom shoes, made exclusively for wear when sleeping, sometimes contained erotic images.⁵⁵ One footbinding apologist even argued that smaller feet required less fabric with which to make shoes and was therefore less expensive.⁵⁶ This notion fit well with the ideal of feminine frugality.

Footbinding played an essential role in the mother-daughter relationship.⁵⁷ While Western critics of the practice saw it as cruel and sadistic, it seems that some Chinese girls shared a relationship of “empathy and endurance” with their mothers during the footbinding years. Ning Lao T’ai-t’ai suffered so much pain when her feet were being bound that she crawled around on her hands and knees for two years. She recalls: “Sometimes at night they hurt so much I could not sleep. I stuck my feet under my mother and she lay on them so they hurt less and I could sleep.”⁵⁸

⁵³ Broadwin, “Walking Contradictions,” 430-431.

⁵⁴ Levy, *The Lotus Lovers*, 111.

⁵⁵ Beverley Jackson, *Splendid Slippers: A Thousand Years of an Erotic Tradition* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1997), 58.

⁵⁶ Levy, *The Lotus Lovers*, 182.

⁵⁷ Broadwin, “Walking Contradictions,” 428.

⁵⁸ Pruitt, *A Daughter of Han*, 22.

The bound foot's demise

Much of the material available to a historian of footbinding comes from the age of its demise, the late Ch'ing dynasty and the early Republican years. The social and political turmoil of this era makes it such that the sources on footbinding are inherently unreliable. Imbued with a sense of "national shame" and revulsion towards the tradition that footbinding embodied, emancipatory literature portrayed the bound foot as a symptom of China's internal weaknesses.⁵⁹ These writings exhibit China's fears of alien domination and imperialism as well as the Western zeal for proselytizing. Underlying such literature is the missionary belief that Chinese women needed God to rescue them from the oppression of Chinese men who would inflict such a painful and debilitating practice upon them. Thus, a historian "cannot assume that reformers' depictions of boundfoot women mirrored women's . . . own understandings of the custom."⁶⁰

On the other hand, connoisseurship literature attempted to justify the practice by detailing the erotic appeal of the bound foot. The pornographic nature of such writing also bespeaks the fact that the bound foot was no longer associated with female allure and aristocracy. In fact, the very explicitness of such writing defied the *raison d'être* of footbinding, that of concealment and mystery.⁶¹

Even though China's Manchurian rulers failed to eradicate footbinding, late Ch'ing Chinese scholars themselves began to speak out against the practice. Perhaps the

⁵⁹ Ko, "The Body as Attire," 9.

⁶⁰ Broadwin, "Walking Contradictions," 419.

⁶¹ Ko, "The Body as Attire," 9-10.

best example of this lies in the late Ch'ing novel *Ching-hua yüan* (*Flowers in the Mirror*) by Li Ju-chen (1763-1830), which addresses the role of women in Chinese society. Li's representation of the oppressive practice and the explicit details he provides about the bound foot's rotting, shrunken flesh attests to the fact that the bound foot had lost much of its association with female allure and aristocracy.

Set in the reign of T'ang dynasty ruler Empress Wu (r.690-705), Li's work depicts three men traveling to the Country of Women, where gender roles are reversed. One of the protagonists, Merchant Lin, is forcefully detained by the local female ruler who wants him as part of her harem. Lin goes through various humiliations and hardships during his stint in the inner palace, including having his ears pierced, having his face heavily powdered and creamed, being thrust into female clothing, and the most painful of all, having his feet bound. The author describes Lin's experience in unequivocal terms: "Merchant Lin felt as though his feet were burning, and wave after wave of pain rose to his heart." Lin begs in vain for some compassion:

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?

When no one was watching, Lin tore the foot bindings off and "stretched out his ten toes again . . . luxuriating in their exquisite freedom." Unfortunately, his refusal to endure the binding process led to cruel beatings and other forms of torture until he submitted once again to the agonizing process. Lin's plea to be put to death instead of being subjected to such torment fell upon deaf ears. Finally, Li's feet "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.” He was no longer able to walk by himself, but had been transformed into an object of lust for the female emperor.⁶²

In the late nineteenth century, anti-footbinding organizations appeared in the treaty ports under the exhortation of foreign missionaries and residents. In 1895, foreign women living in Shanghai founded the Natural Foot Society. Between 1896 and 1898, a native Chinese anti-footbinding organization, the Anti-Footbinding Society, was established in Canton.⁶³ Success was not immediate, perhaps because much of the anti-footbinding rhetoric neglected to address the intricate values that women attributed to their bound feet. However, it seems that these anti-footbinding societies were much more effective in the cities than in the rural areas. By the 1930s, fashion trends gave many urban Chinese women misgivings about having bound feet: after all, the modern *ch'i-p'ao*, a Chinese gown with high slits up the sides, was meant to accentuate a woman's leg in high-heeled shoes.⁶⁴ However, the practice persisted outside of the urban centers. In villages of Yün-nan province for example, women continued to bind their feet through the 1950s. Finally, the Communist regime which came to power in 1949 ended the practice completely. In their plan to bring the country together and stimulate the

⁶² Li Ju-Chen, *Flowers in the Mirror*, trans. Lin Tai-yi (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), 111-113.

⁶³ Turner, “Locating Footbinding,” 456. Turner provides a geographic account of the anti-footbinding movement from the late 1800s through the early 1900s.

⁶⁴ Jackson, *Splendid Slippers*, 154. See also Dorothy Ko, “Jazzing into Modernity: High Heels, Platforms, and Lotus Shoes,” in *China Chic: East Meets West*, comp. Valerie Steele and John S. Major (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 141-153 which provides an account of the semiotic relationship between footbinding and high heels.

economy, women who sacrificed their labor potential for the sake of beauty had “no place in the scheme.”⁶⁵

Footbinding is “a practice for stable times,” one that existed through “continuities between the worlds of grandmothers, mothers and daughters.”⁶⁶ This statement perhaps provides the best testimonial to the chaos that plagued China during the late Ch’ing and most of the Republican age, as well as the revolutionary spirit for reform and modernization that led to a conclusive chapter in the evolution of the bound foot. Ultimately, it took “a new economic and political order,” under which women were expected to participate as equal individuals in the labor system, to emancipate the foot from its bindings.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Jackson, *Splendid Slippers*, 155-157.

⁶⁶ Turner, “Locating Footbinding,” 473.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 472.

CHAPTER TWO

THE BODY IN THE *CHIN P'ING MEI*

The idea of the body in the Western sense of the word did not exist in Chinese ideology. While the human figure was a dominant subject in Chinese art and sculpture, these figures were always clothed, which leads to the question of why the physical human body, as represented in Western nude paintings, did not surface in Chinese art. In his investigation of this issue, art historian John Hay concludes that "such bodies were not represented in art because they did not exist in the culture. And . . . the culture itself did not so represent its own body." Hay proposes that the body in Chinese art is only visible through "metaphors locating it in the natural world by transformational resonance and brushwork that embodied the cosmic-human reality of *ch'i*, or energy."⁶⁸

Chinese ideas of the body are based on the notion of correlative cosmology: the perception of the body as a microcosmic representation of man's relationship with the natural and sociological universe. Such cosmology relates to Taoist sexual alchemy, a doctrine of strategies for attaining immortality. These strategies are concerned with bodily functions, in particular, digestive and sexual activities and the role that they play in becoming a *hsien* (immortal). The connection between religious Taoist ideas and

⁶⁸ John Hay, "The Body Invisible in Chinese Art?" in *Body, Subject & Power in China*, ed. Angela Zito and Tani E. Barlow (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press: 1994), 43-44.

Chinese literature lies in the character archetype of the female sexual predator, of which P'an Chin-lien is a prime example. Using this scholarship, I examine the role of the body in the *Chin P'ing Mei*. One sees the significance of the body through the author's allegorical depiction of transgressions visited upon the bodies of the characters. These activities concerning the body are micro-representations of the realms of politics and economics. Such a delineation serves not only as an admonishment against sensual overindulgence but also as an indirect indictment of Ming rulership.

The body as microcosm

There is much scholarship on "correlative cosmology" in Chinese medical thought. Joseph Needham, in his extensive and erudite investigation of scientific thought in China, identifies the "correlative thinking" that is the basis of all Chinese science. Fundamentally, different parts or functions of the human body correspond to greater cosmic forces such as those depicted in the *I-ching (The Classic of Changes)* or the workings of the natural world based on Taoist principles of *yin* and *yang*. Between the individual corpus and the greater universe dwell systems of society and government, each of which have governing units and functions analogous to those in the physical body.⁶⁹

The Chinese body, rather than a mere object of contemplation, was "an organ in itself," according to John Hay in his quest for images of the "body" in Chinese art. Such a social body was based on correlative ideas which saw the body as an analogy for the

⁶⁹ For more information on such studies, see Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 2, *History of Scientific Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956; reprint, 1975).

economy, the government, and the society. First, Hay cites the example of the “body economic,” by which a first century B.C. Chinese writing “Debates on Salt and Iron” likened the physician’s technique of reading the pulse to that of “applying pressure in the distribution of wealth.” Then he presents a comparison between the body and government, in which bodily functions and bodily structures are seen in a sociological mode, paralleling that of the government bureaucracy. For example, the role of the *hsin* (heart-mind) equaled the function of the ruler while *fei* (lungs) matched those of the prime minister. Such an organization of the body was as methodical, hierarchical, and centralized as the political body of the Chinese nation.⁷⁰

Charlotte Furth, in her study of gender in Chinese medical thought, introduces the term “the Yellow-Emperor’s body” as an interpretive model with which to understand Chinese notions of the body, *shen*. One must, Furth says, keep in mind two issues when thinking about the “Yellow-Emperor’s body.” First, the *shen*, rather than a discrete physical object, is a concept that embodies an array of bodily functions, the intellect, and the emotions. This concept challenges the boundaries between the mind and the body implied in the English use of the word “body.” This concept also places process above structure, locating the *shen*’s bodily functions over its anatomical foundation. Second, “the Yellow-Emperor’s body” is named after one of the sage kings of Chinese antiquity, the mythical founder of Chinese civilization as well as an inventor of acupuncture. Furth argues that this association between China’s early medical writings and the symbolic

⁷⁰ Hay, “The Body Invisible,” 64-65. The “body economic” analogy comes from Huan K’uan. *Yen-t’ieh lun*. *Ssu-pu pei-yao* ed., 3:3a-b.

body of a sage king, “a body politic of kingly power,” forms the basis for the notion that concepts of the Chinese body are based on cosmology rather than biology.⁷¹

Such notions were pervasive in medical manuscripts from the first century B.C. through the seventh century A.D. In particular, the medical canon *Huang-ti nei-ching* (*The Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon*) sits upon a Han dynasty (202 B.C.-A.D. 220) belief system that categorized all heavenly, earthly, and human phenomena and their respective transformations. It drew upon the fundamental notions embodied by this belief system: *ch'i*, *yin* and *yang*, and *wu hsing* (the Five Phase theory). *Ch'i*, the fundamental life force bestowed by heaven at the point of conception, sustains life and growth. Death occurs when *ch'i* is exhausted. *Yin* and *yang* energies, as forces of change, regulate the process by which *ch'i* generates natural phenomena. *Yin* and *yang*, analogous to the forces of growth and decline, also govern the cyclical changes in the natural world. *Wu hsing*, consisting of wood, fire, earth, metal, and water, were also dynamic elements constantly interacting with each other, correlating to the body's liver, heart, spleen, lung, and kidney. Using these cosmological notions to explain health and disease, the *Huang-ti nei-ching* drew a correlation between the body and the natural universe. In addition, the *Huang-ti nei-ching* relates the workings of the body to that of the imperial body. Like the government bureaucracy, the body has “officials” who are responsible for certain designated realms.⁷²

⁷¹ Charlotte Furth, *A Flourishing Yin: Gender in China's Medical History, 960-1665* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 19-21.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 23.

Chinese conceptions of the body as a dynamic, social body rather than a discrete, physical entity resonates with the concept of “ambivalent corporeality” in early eighteenth-century Europe.⁷³ Barbara Duden, through her research on eighteenth-century female patients in the German town of Eisenach, unveiled the “distinctly premodern” way in which these women viewed their own bodies: “There was neither a demarcated, self-contained body nor a social environment that stopped abruptly at the skin. On the level of the body, the Eisenach stories . . . point to a society in which the concept of a body that could be isolated did not yet exist because an isolated individual did not exist. What did exist were people who were bound into social relations down to their innermost flesh.”⁷⁴

In situating the bound foot as a form of body adornment rather than body mutilation, Dorothy Ko calls upon this cosmological view of the body. The view of footbinding as a form of mutilation assumes that the foot is a “fixed, integral, and physical entity,” with established and unchanging boundaries. In a time and place where such boundaries were fluid, Ko speculates that the bound foot could very well have been seen as a part of female attire. Beyond this, the bound foot as a form of female attire was

⁷³ Ko, “The Body as Attire,” *Journal of Women’s History*, 18.

⁷⁴ Barbara Duden, *The Woman Beneath the Skin*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 145. See also John Hay, “The Body Invisible”, *Body, Subject and Power*, 42-77.

extended in the late imperial age to embody notions of Chinese civility and cultural superiority.⁷⁵

Taoist sexual alchemy

Taoist ideas about sexuality are based on a microcosmic model of the natural universe, the mutual benefit of *yin* and *yang*, the finite and precious nature of the male essence, and the correct techniques of sexual intercourse which can help a man to reverse the flow of his *ching* (essence or semen) up the spinal column to nourish the brain.⁷⁶ The discovery of "Tending Life" manuals dating back to the second century B.C. in the archaeological site *Ma-wang-tui* shows the importance of the sexual arts in early Taoist ideology. These "Tending Life" techniques dealt with sexual methods meant to preserve health. According to these texts, correct practices of sexual intercourse can aid the man in nourishing himself by absorbing the *yin* energies of his female partners.⁷⁷ Such practices involved bringing about female orgasm on the one hand, and preventing male emission on the other. The *Lieh-hsien chuan*, an old Chinese text dating from the Han dynasty testifies to these beliefs:

Master Jung-ch`eng . . . absorbed new semen in the mysterious vagina. The main point of this art is to prevent the spirit of the male from dying by preserving man's vital power and nurturing the male essence. Then man's gray hairs will turn black

⁷⁵ Ko, "The Body as Attire," *Journal of Women's History*, 19.

⁷⁶ Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, 2:149-50. This concept is known as *huan ching pu nao*: reversing the flow of the essence to nourish the brain.

⁷⁷ *Dreams of Spring: Erotic Art in China* (Amsterdam and Kuala Lumpur: The Pepin Press, 1997), 18.

again and new teeth will replace those that have fallen out. This art of sexual intercourse with a woman consists of restraining oneself so as not to ejaculate, making one's semen return and strengthen one's brain.⁷⁸

While most Taoist sex manuals focused on how the man can absorb the *yin* energies of his female partners to his advantage, there are also writings on how the female practitioner can nourish herself by using her male sexual partners. For instance, *Hsi-wang mu*, the Queen Mother of the West is known to have attained the *Tao* by cultivating her *yin* energies through sexual intercourse with many young men.⁷⁹ The idea that the female element of the cosmos, or the *yin*, benefits by drawing on the *yang*, exists in the Taoist classic *Tao-te ching*, as well as in the "Tending Life" manuals of *Ma-wang-tui*. Chapter six of the *Tao-te ching* describes the infinite quality of the *yin* as such:

The Spirit of the Valley never dies:
She is called the Mysterious Female.
The Gate of the Mysterious Female,
Is what is called the Root of Heaven and Earth.
Unwinding forever and yet lasting;
Spend it: it will never be exhausted.⁸⁰

While the *yin* was thought to be inexhaustible, the male essence was believed to be precious and finite. According to an ancient "Tending Life" manual, the female genitals are the agents of "life and death." Therefore, men should try to preserve their essence as

⁷⁸ Phyllis Kronhausen and Eberhard Kronhausen, comps. *Erotic Art: A Survey of Erotic Fact and Fancy in the Fine Arts* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1968), 240.

⁷⁹ Livia Kohn, ed., *The Taoist Experience: An Anthology* (New York: State University of New York, 1993), 153-154.

⁸⁰ *Dreams of Spring*, 18.

it is the “concentration of semen which gives life.”⁸¹ It may be for this reason that Chinese erotic art far more often depicts traditional sexual intercourse rather than the act of fellatio or masturbation, as these activities may lead to the non-procreative waste of semen.⁸²

Taoist writings on the infinite quality of female sexual energy served as a warning to men against sexual dissipation. While early Taoist writings regarded sexual activity as an essential component of obtaining immortality and did not depict women as sexual predators per se, it seems that these ideas evolved over time to provide a foundation for the conception of women as sexual predators.⁸³ By the Ming dynasty, ideas on Taoist sexual alchemy tended towards a battle-like, antagonistic relationship between men and women. A Ming dynasty compilation *True Classic of the Complete Union* on sexual alchemy based on ancient Taoist ideas compared sexual intercourse to a military battle in which the man’s role was to vanquish his enemy, the woman. In this “sexual battle,” he must retain absolute control over himself to prevent the emission of semen, while at the same time, bringing the woman to orgasm at which point he can benefit by absorbing her *yin* essence. Like military strategy, this text recommends sparing one’s own force while taking advantage of the opponent’s strength.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Kronhausen and Kronhausen, *Erotic Art*, 241.

⁸³ *Dreams of Spring*, 18.

⁸⁴ Van Gulik, *Sexual Life in Ancient China*, 277-280.

Such Taoist ideas of female sexuality pervaded Chinese mythology as well as literature. Chinese folklore provides the fox demon figure who disguises herself as an alluring woman and exploits men sexually, leaving them to wither away and die.⁸⁵ The female sexual predator in Chinese literature also personifies these beliefs. In late imperial literature, this character archetype lives not only in the *Chin P'ing Mei* but also in other great works of Ming fiction including the *Hsi-yu chi* (*Journey to the West*) and *Shui-hu chuan* (*The Water Margin*). In the *Hsi-yu chi*, the recurring female sexual predators represent the temptations on the road to Buddhist enlightenment. In the *Shui-hu chuan*, the female sexual predators threaten as well as contribute to the formation of the male fraternity at Liang-shan p'o. In the *Chin P'ing Mei*, P'an Chin-lien is a prime example of this sort of *femme fatale*, ultimately killing two husbands through her sexual rapacity.

Bodily violations and hierarchy in the *Chin P'ing Mei*

Based on the cosmological conceptions of the body discussed above, I argue that the portrayal of bodily violations in the *Chin P'ing Mei* is the author's indictment of the values corrupting Ming society, which start at the level of the individual in his family life and permeate all levels of society up through the *hun chün*, the incompetent emperor. The role of bodily violations in the *Chin P'ing Mei* serve various purposes. First, it is clear that transgressions inflicted upon the body illustrate power relationships within the novel. Physical punishment, a form of bodily violation, not only reinforces these relationships but also reflects upon the immorality of the inflictor. On a political level,

⁸⁵ Kohn, *The Taoist Experience*, 153-154.

these bodily violations are abuses of authority. The scenes analyzed in this section indict those in power and also provide indirect denunciations of a tyrannical government.

Bodily violations in the *Chin P'ing Mei* illustrate power relationships within the novel. For example, P'an exerts power over her stepdaughter Ying-erh and one of her maids, Ch'iu-chū through physical punishment. Her abuse of their bodies symbolizes her domination of them, but also serves as a release for her jealousy or frustration towards a third person. In addition, whipping their bodies and scratching their faces may be acts of deliberate defacement meant to eliminate potential female rivals.

When the author first introduces P'an to us, we see her as having a sharp tongue and mean nature. This image is reinforced when we see her punishing her stepdaughter Ying-erh for eating a dumpling she had prepared for Hsi-men. P'an "stripped the clothing off the little chit's body and picking up a riding crop proceeded to give her twenty or thirty strokes with it. She whipped the girl until she . . . howled like a stuck pig." Through this torture, P'an extracts a confession from Ying-erh but is not content. She proceeds to whip her and "gouged two bloody scratches in her cheeks with her sharp fingernails before letting her off."⁸⁶ This scene takes place a month after Hsi-men has brought a new wife, Meng Yü-lou, into his household. Consequently, he has neglected P'an for a long time. Confined to her abode, she can do nothing but wait and hope that he will visit her again soon. Thus, her violent treatment of Ying-erh's body serves as an outlet for her pent-up feelings of frustration and powerlessness.

⁸⁶Roy, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, 151.

Similarly, P'an's maid Ch'iu-chü also suffers under her tyranny. Ch'iu-chü, being the less attractive and less clever of P'an's two maids, is a frequent scapegoat for P'an's tantrums. One night, P'an is feeling especially jealous of Hsi-men's sixth wife Li P'ing-erh who has given birth to a son and thus diminished P'an's control over Hsi-men. She steps in some dog excrement, ruining her scarlet silk shoes which adds to her ire. After having the dog beaten, she unleashes her jealousy and anger by abusing Ch'iu-chü's body. Blaming the maid for not putting the dog out of the compound, she strikes Ch'iu-chü in the face with one of the shoes, cutting her skin and causing her to bleed. Then she calls for the whip, has the girl stripped naked, and rains lashes upon her body. The pandemonium wakes and frightens Li's sickly baby. Twice, Li sends a maid pleading with P'an to stop the punishment. Finally, P'an's mother, who is visiting, begs her to desist out of concern for Hsi-men's only son: "I don't mind your beating this donkey, but we must not harm the treasure of the household." This reference to the newborn son was like adding oil to fire, infuriating P'an beyond control. She physically and verbally abused her mother and continued to whip Chiu-chü for what "seemed like two or three thousand stripes," tearing the girl's skin and flesh.⁸⁷

In addition to using Ch'iu-chü as a punching bag, P'an uses her to circuitously express resentment towards Li P'ing-erh, the object of P'an's jealousy and hatred. After

⁸⁷ Hsiao-hsiao Sheng, *The Golden Lotus: A translation from the Chinese original of the novel Chin P'ing Mei*, trans. Clement Egerton (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), 3:63-64. First published in 1939 by the same publisher, Egerton translated the explicit parts of the novel into Latin. The 1972 edition contains these passages translated into English.

Li's baby boy is betrothed. P'an's jealousy falls upon Ch'iu-chü's body. Stripping her,

P'an struck and cursed at Ch'iu-chü while giving vent to her bitterness towards Li:

You thievish slave . . . where did you learn to give yourself such airs? Others might forgive you but I never will. Sister, you know I understand your little ways, and you would do well to restrain yourself. Who are you to put your face forward and show what a great person you are? Sister, don't count on getting help from any other quarter. I shall keep my eyes skinned and watch you.

This tirade wakes the baby, and Li, hearing these words, knew that they were meant for her. She sent a maid with a plea for P'an to stop the beating, but only suffered more vitriolic diatribe:

You thievish slave . . . you shout as loudly as though someone were sticking ten thousand knives into you. But I am a queer person; the louder you cry, the more I shall beat you. I did not expect outsiders to interfere because you were having a beating. Why do you come to have a look? My good sister, you ought to tell our husband to get rid of her.³⁸

In contrast, P'an's relationship with her other maid Ch'un-mei shows how shrewdly P'an uses the body of someone under her dominion to her advantage. Ch'un-mei's body has been appropriated by Hsi-men, with P'an's permission. P'an offers the use of her room and agrees to arrange an opportunity for Hsi-men to seduce Ch'un-mei on three conditions: that Hsi-men should henceforth give up visiting prostitutes, obey P'an's every command, and recount to her in great detail the particulars of his relationship with Li P'ing-erh. Thus, she uses Ch'un-mei's body to reinforce her jurisdiction over Hsi-men. This transaction also changes the nature of the relationship between mistress and maid. After Hsi-men has sex with Ch'un-mei, P'an treats her less

³⁸ Ibid., 2:200-201.

like a maidservant and more like an equal. No longer asking Ch'un-mei to do kitchen work, she has Ch'un-mei perform lighter duties such as making the bed or serving tea. In addition, she gives Ch'un-mei some clothing and jewelry, and "encouraged her to bind her feet in order to keep them delectably tiny."⁸⁹

From the triangular relationship between Hsi-men. P'an, and her maid Ch'un-mei, we can see how the body serves as a tool in gaining advantage. P'an employs the bodies of those beneath her in the power hierarchy to obtain political advantage for herself in the harem. Knowing that she cannot monopolize Hsi-men's sexual attention, she tries to secure his affection by allowing him to seduce her maid while at the same time controlling the environment and conditions under which this tryst takes place. This act elevates Ch'un-mei's status in the household, thus diminishing the difference between the two women. While this may be a threat to P'an on the one hand, it seems that by treating Ch'un-mei with favor and overseeing Hsi-men's contact with her, P'an forms an alliance with someone who might otherwise have become a potential rival.

After Hsi-men's death, P'an again uses Ch'un-mei's body to conceal her illicit relationship with Chen Ching-chi, Hsi-men's son-in-law. Having caught them in the act, Ch'un-mei assures P'an of her loyalty and discretion. P'an is dissatisfied however, and extracts a stronger guarantee from Ch'un-mei by demanding that she sleep with Chen immediately. This relationship cements secrecy on the part of one maid, but P'an's other maid Ch'iu-chü, after years of abuse, finally wreaks her revenge by going to the first lady

⁸⁹ Roy, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, 204.

Wu Yüeh-niang with news of this affair.⁹⁰ This leads to P'an's ejection from the Hsi-men household and her eventual death at the hands of Wu Sung, in revenge for Wu the Elder's death.

Bodily violations and corrupt rulership in the *Chin P'ing Mei*

The author also uses scenes involving bodily punishment to draw an analogy between Hsi-men and a *hun chun*.⁹¹ Hsi-men is a classic muddle-headed ruler: he overindulges in sensual pursuits, lacks a moral center and sense of priorities, and is easily manipulated by P'an, an embodiment of the evil minister. When we first meet Hsi-men, the novel describes the high turnover of women in his establishment. He takes women into his harem easily, but should one offend him in any small way, "he would call in a go-between and dispose of her without much ado. It was said that he sometimes resorted to the services of such brokers as often as twenty times in a single month."⁹² Hsi-men boasts to a prostitute about meting out frequent beatings to keep his concubines and maids in line.⁹³ While he tries to convey the idea that he is in control of his harem, it is clear that he is slowly losing this power and that his remarks are just empty threats. In his

⁹⁰ Egerton, *The Golden Lotus*, 4:130, 4:157.

⁹¹ *Hun chün* literally means muddle-headed king. The term typically depicts a ruler who is too indulgent in food and sex, and is easily manipulated by those around him.

⁹² Roy, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, 53.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 244.

own words. "When a family lacks a ruler / The household is topsy-turvy."⁹⁴ Through his weaknesses as head of the household, he is unable to maintain harmony within the harem and his subsequent acts of cruelty and tyranny, while not essential qualities of the *hun chün*, occur because of these faults.

Once P'an has entered Hsi-men's harem, she exploits his favoritism to turn the household upside down. P'an is especially adroit when it comes to using Hsi-men to take revenge on her enemies. She bears a grudge against Sun, Hsi-men's fourth wife, who because of her background as a maidservant, is a second-class citizen in the domicile. Through her acute mastery of language, P'an indirectly provokes a vitriolic exchange of words between her maid Ch'un-mei and Sun. Then, P'an's sharp-tongued prodding incites an already enraged Hsi-men to give Sun several kicks, a verbal attack, and a harsh beating, all over a tardy meal. With ease, P'an, like an evil minister, manipulates Hsi-men the muddle-headed ruler and creates an environment of disharmony and unrest within the family. Moreover, she uses her power over Hsi-men to bring about physical abuse of Sun's body to requite previous indignities.

P'an's body features in another episode, in which she narrowly escapes disaster and gets away with adultery thanks to Hsi-men's poor judgment. Hsi-men hears that P'an has been committing adultery with his page boy Ch'in-t'ung. This seems to be confirmed when he finds the boy wearing a scent bag belonging to P'an. Hsi-men has him bound hand and foot and beaten with heavy bamboo poles. Next, he proceeds to see P'an with a

⁹⁴ Ibid., 79.

riding crop in hand. He orders her to strip and kneel before him and whips her once. Weeping pitifully, she explains that she had lost her scent bag in the garden and that the boy must have found it and picked it up. On seeing P'an's "flowerlike body, which had been stripped stark naked, kneeling before him," Hsi-men's anger "flew to Java."⁹⁵ His abuse of her exposed and vulnerable body reinforces his ownership of her flesh; it appeases his wrath and he is persuaded to believe her story.

From a Confucian perspective, one might argue that this entire incident is Hsi-men's fault. He began patronizing a prostitute in the pleasure center of the city, lodging at her place for over half a month and neglecting his family affairs. From home, his primary wife Wu Yüeh-niang tries in vain to get him to return, but he ignores these pleas and sends back a threatening message through a servant. For the sexually insatiable P'an, waiting for Hsi-men was an unbearable hardship: "Each half hour was like three months of autumn." To gratify her sexual needs, she inveigles the page boy Ch'in-t'ung into her chambers, gives him wine and proceeds to couple with him. The description of this encounter portrays them as animals. Ch'in-t'ung, sounding like "an ox snoring in the willow's shade" deposits "a glob of donkey's spunk" in Chin-lien's body.⁹⁶ The reader sees several levels of criticism here. First, P'an is clearly behaving in an immoral way and the page boy Ch'in-t'ung has allowed his lust to get the better of him, but ultimately,

⁹⁵ Roy, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, 235-237.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 233.

the author seems to place more culpability on Hsi-men's head for shirking his duties as a husband. The author derides him thus for this neglect:

How laughable is the parvenu Hsi-men Ch'ing;
Whoever possesses money is welcomed as a patron.
His whole household is in a state of disorder;
Who cares about standards of decency or propriety. . . .⁹⁷

Later in the narrative, the prostitute Li Kuei-chieh takes on a new patron, Ting the Second, in Hsi-men's absence. When Hsi-men finds out, he is furious and orders his four page boys to "smash up the doors, windows, walls, beds, and curtains of the Li family establishment."⁹⁸ This scene is perhaps a critique of Hsi-men's excessive sexual consumption. Bed mates both within and without his household are betraying him due to his neglect.

Hsi-men's death seems to be an inversion of the bodily violations he has inflicted upon his lovers. At exactly the midpoint of the novel, Hsi-men encounters a mysterious Indian monk from whom he acquires a potent aphrodisiac. This monk is described as a phallus:

His head was like a leopard's and his eyes were round. His colour was that of purple liver, and upon his head he wore a cock's crest. His tattered robe was flesh-coloured; his shaggy beard all matted together The stream of matter from his nostrils looked like chop-sticks of jade.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Ibid., 224.

⁹⁸ Roy, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, 424.

⁹⁹ Egerton, *The Golden Lotus*, 2:305.

Eager to use this new drug, Hsi-men forces himself upon his favorite wife Li during her menstrual period. She tries to persuade him to go to P'an instead, but he insists, and suggests that a maid bring her some water so she might wash her genital area. Li is somewhat appalled, telling him that "If, at a time like this, my juices meet a man, bad luck follows," but she could not get rid of him, so she had no choice but to yield.¹⁰⁰ By breaching a ritual taboo against sexual intercourse during menstruation, Hsi-men inflicts a transgression upon her body.¹⁰¹

While P'an Chin-lien, a concubine in the Hsi-men household, is in many ways Hsi-men's object and plaything, she does subvert his authority in many ways. Indeed, from the time she enters his harem, we see a slow and insidious reversal in the balance of power in their relationship. The ultimate result of this inversion of forces leads to Hsi-men's death, as if the transgressions visited upon the bodies of his bed mates have caught up with him. P'an gives him an overdose of the aphrodisiac, leaving him in a state of priapism and bringing about his subsequent death. The description of this encounter is particularly explicit and meaningful because the violator has become the violated. P'an, named after the *san-ts'un chin-lien* (three-inch golden lotus) fetishized by men, has been a sexual object in Hsi-men's harem. In their final scene together Hsi-men becomes the object, a reversal symbolized by P'an administering the aphrodisiac to Hsi-men, astride his inert body in the female-superior position, using him for her sexual needs with no

¹⁰⁰ Egerton, *The Golden Lotus*, 2:321-322.

¹⁰¹ Roy, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, xxxiii.

regard to his well-being. This results in an eruption of his penis: it spurts out semen continuously and then proceeds to emit blood. Hsi-men remains unconscious throughout this ordeal and eventually dies of this experience.¹⁰² This may provide the best illustration of the fact that P'an, despite being a sexual object in Hsi-men's harem, is not a passive victim by any means. Yet, since Hsi-men was her sole source of power within the household, his death soon leads to her own destruction. Thus, the bodily violations that they inflict upon each other in the form of increasingly animalistic sexual encounters eventually lead to demise for both.

Consumption in the *Chin P'ing Mei*

As Roy has proposed, the *Chin P'ing Mei* draws analogies between the three realms of sex, economy, and politics, allowing the reader's reactions to the burlesque and aggrandized portrayal of Hsi-men's sexual exploits to spread to his economic and political activities.¹⁰³ By presenting an analysis of the *Chin P'ing Mei*, this work also argues that the detailed, often quotidian descriptions of food and the author's use of food and wine throughout the novel are intimately tied to an indictment of sexual extravagance, and that such consumption is a microcosmic representation of insatiable bodily appetites, not just for food and sex, but for money and power as well. This idea

¹⁰² Ibid., 4:85. See Wang Ping's analysis of this scene in Wang Ping, *Aching for Beauty: Footbinding in China* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 115. See also Roy, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, 106-107: in this earlier scene, P'an murders her husband Wu the Elder. She sits astride his prone body, administers poison, and holds a quilt over his face until he dies, foreshadowing Hsi-men's death in like fashion.

¹⁰³ Roy, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, xxxvi.

then ties in with Roy's argument that the *Chin P'ing Mei* is primarily based upon Hsün-tzu's idea of man's intrinsically evil nature which can never be sated.

Gastronomical and sexual consumption are often linked in Confucian, religious Taoist, and Buddhist ideas. Religious Taoist strategies for attaining longevity and immortality involve consuming elixirs and regulating sexual activity to cultivate the body. Buddhism espouses abstinence from all bodily desires, including those of food and sex. An ancient Confucian saying *yin shih nan nü, jen chih ta yü ts'un yan* (Drink, food, man, woman, these are where the greatest human desires exist) testifies to the connection between these bodily appetites. It is a Chinese tradition to use the basic human needs for food and sex in a way that displays social and political position. For example, a wealthy man's consumptive behavior might include throwing a sumptuous banquet with a multitude of delicacies for his friends, with a bevy of concubines or courtesans to provide entertainment. Such a spectacle displays the fact that he has available to him a wealth of resources to feed his primal needs for food and sex, and distinguishes him from the common man.¹⁰⁴

Another issue connected to sexual and gastronomical consumption is that of "edible beauty," the way that women's features and body parts are described in terms of consumable items, such as fruits, seeds, or vegetables. Euphemisms for the bound foot included many edible items, including the lotus root, bamboo shoot, and water chestnut. Wang Ping, in her study of footbinding using Western fetishism and linguistics theories,

¹⁰⁴ Wang Ping, *Aching for Beauty*, 83. An instance of this occurs in Egerton, *The Golden Lotus*, 2:46-57.

talks about footbinding as a form of “cooking” the body, a permanent, painful, violent, transformation which metamorphoses the natural female body from raw material to a consumable entity, an object of beauty and a cultural artifact fetishized by scholarly men.

¹⁰⁵ Throughout Chinese literature, the archetypal beauty is always described in terms of food: she has lips of cherry, a peach-like complexion, a melon-seed face, and almond-shaped eyes. A poetic description of the ideal Chinese beauty testifies to this notion:

Hands soft like rush-down,
Skin smooth like lard.
Neck long and white like a tree-grub,
Teeth like melon seeds
Cicada’s head and moth’s eyebrows.
Smiling a charming smile,
Her beautiful eyes have the black and white clearly marked.¹⁰⁶

The connection between sexual and gastronomical consumption is apparent in writings about the bound foot. The *Tsai-fei lu*, a collection about the bound foot, is full of anecdotes describing lotus lovers engaging in oral enjoyment of the bound feet of their lovers during lovemaking. One foot-lover could only satisfy his own desire to “swallow” up his lover by putting her tiny feet into his mouth. Another man was known to have soaked his concubine’s tiny feet in hot water to make tea, which he drank before going to bed. A third lotus lover using the moniker of Lotus Knower, in his essay addressed to other foot-loving gentlemen, refers to the connection between sex and the bound foot

¹⁰⁵ Wang Ping, *Aching for Beauty*, 83.

¹⁰⁶ Van Gulik, *Sexual Life in Ancient China*, 18-19. This poem dates from 750 B.C.

thus: "the relation of sex to lotus was like that of mouth to taste." Yet another foot fetishist regretted that he could not swallow his lover's entire foot, but instead, satiated himself by placing part of her foot in his mouth and chewing on her sole.¹⁰⁷

In similar fashion, P'an Chin-lien is served up as gastronomical delight over and over again throughout the *Chin P'ing Mei*. When she first meets Hsi-men, he perceives her "almond eyes . . . cherry lips most inviting . . . her fingers as slender as the tender shoots of a young onion." The description goes beyond the fabric of her attire, she is described as having a "dough-white tummy," and later, as having a *mons veneris* with "all the fragrance and tenderness of fresh-made pastry, the softness and the appearance of a new-made pie" and tasting "better than lotus root."¹⁰⁸ Pan is also "edible" when the author describes her incompatibility with her husband Wu the Elder, a man of unsightly appearance less than three-feet tall: "How did a piece of fine mutton / End up in the mouth of such a dog?" P'an laments her own fate: "What right's he got to my mutton-fat jade body? / I'm like a magic mushroom growing out of the muck."¹⁰⁹ This calls to mind a Chinese expression *lai-ha-ma hsiang ch'ih t'ien-e jou* (a toad longing to eat swan's meat) which derides a poor, homely, or lowly man who covets a beautiful woman.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Levy, *The Lotus Lovers*, 125, 141-142, 158.

¹⁰⁸ Egerton, *The Golden Lotus*, 1:71; Roy, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, 91.

¹⁰⁹ Roy, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, 28-29.

¹¹⁰ Wang Ping, *Aching for Beauty*, 96.

The ultimate melding of gastronomical and sexual functions takes place in chapter twenty-seven of the *Chin P'ing Mei*, in a rather notorious scene considered the most obscene in Chinese literature.¹¹¹ After enjoying a feast of food and wine in the garden, Hsi-men and P'an wander off into the arbor. P'an has anticipated Hsi-men's lust and lies on a mat waiting for him, naked except for her crimson lotus shoes. Hsi-men loosens P'an's footbindings, using them to tie her ankles to the grape trellis, thus connecting her body with the fruit that grows on this structure. He toys with P'an for a while, and then decides to leave P'an tied there and dallies with her maid Ch'un-mei. Then he picks up plums from their feast and starts pitching them at P'an's vagina. One plum lodges in her "gate of womanhood" which he later removes and gives to her to eat before engaging in sexual intercourse with her.¹¹² Wang Ping's analysis of this episode speaks of the interchangeability of mouth and vagina in this scene. In addition, Wang proposes that the word *mei* (plum) is laden with sexual connotation. It is a component of the word *mei-tu* (syphilis) and is often used as metaphors for women, female beauty, and female genitalia. Thus, through the presence of Ch'un-mei (whose name means plum blossom) and the use of a plum as a sex toy, the author blurs the distinction between sexual and digestive functions.¹¹³ In describing this scene, the leisurely pace and attention to detail also testify

¹¹¹ C. T. Hsia, *Classic Chinese Novel*, 191.

¹¹² Egerton, *The Golden Lotus*, 1:384.

¹¹³ Wang Ping, *Aching for Beauty*, see 89-90.

to the fact that Hsi-men is capable of “ostentatious consumption of the most intricately refined sort.”¹¹⁴

In this fashion, the activities of food and sex are so intertwined in the novel that it is often impossible to isolate one from the other. Seduction scenes in the *Chin P'ing Mei* are always accompanied by food and wine. In particular, this is evident when it involves someone of wealth like Meng Yü-lou, Hsi-men's third wife, or Li P'ing-erh, Hsi-men's sixth wife. When Hsi-men visits Meng for the first time, a servant serves him fragrant fruit-flavored tea. When she enters the room, Hsi-men is dazzled by her beauty and the author paints a vivid picture of the woman, focusing on her dress and accessories. Quickly afterward, a servant arrives with a subsequent serving of “tea flavored with candied kumquats” served in exquisitely-carved lacquer cups and with teaspoons shaped like apricot leaves. This description, like that of Meng before, focuses on the details, evokes the senses, and conveys a cordial hospitality and a willingness to marry Hsi-men. In contrast, Meng subsequently receives an unwelcome visit from her late husband's maternal uncle Chang the Fourth, who tries to convince her not to marry Hsi-men. Meng has already decided on Hsi-men, rebuffs Chang, and sends him off after he finishes his cup of plain tea.¹¹⁵ In this subtle manner, the author conveys Meng's rejection of Chang's

¹¹⁴ Frederick W. Mote, “Yüan and Ming,” in *Food in Chinese Culture: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives*, ed. K. C. Chang (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 252.

¹¹⁵ Roy, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, 132-34, 140.

suggestions through a cup of tea. Indeed, "Romantic affairs are consummated over tea, / and Wine is the go-between of lust."¹¹⁶

Later, when Hsi-men meets Li P'ing-erh, the wife of his neighbor and friend Hua the Second, she also serves Hsi-men fruit-flavored tea in a lacquer cup with a silver teaspoon. Ostensibly, this act is one of gratitude to Hsi-men for encouraging Hua to end his drunken carousing with prostitutes and go home early. Immediately after this meeting, Hsi-men decides to "make a conquest of this woman."¹¹⁷ When they are finally able to meet secretly for a tryst, Li lays out a sumptuous feast of "wine and delicacies, condiments and appetizers." The fragrant wine breaks the ice, soon they are drinking "shoulder to shoulder and thigh over thigh. / Exchanging cups as they drank," which soon leads to "amorous sport" behind the bed curtains.¹¹⁸ Li does not have a procuress per se, but one might argue that the food and wine which appears so often in Hsi-men's encounters with Li plays the part of the facilitator in paving the way for the affair. When she proposes that he marry her, she invites him to a feast with aromatic wine and unusual delicacies. Again, they indulge in the food and wine, wrapping up the evening by "indulging their lusts without restraint."¹¹⁹ When Hsi-men later recounts the details of his

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 294.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 257.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 262-264.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 317-321.

affair with Li to P'an, he tells about how they often bring a box of delicacies and wine into the bed with them, so as to be able to combine the two activities.¹²⁰

When Hsi-men begins his affair with P'an, it is he who pays for the food and wine but it is nevertheless omnipresent and plays an essential role in the seduction. Dame Wang gives him specific instructions on when to show up, and plans to leave them alone on the pretext of obtaining food and wine. During her first trip to get provisions, Hsi-men and P'an steal meaningful glances at each other, conveying their desire. Dame Wang returns with "a plump cooked goose, a roast duck, baked meats, salted fish, and other delicacies" and of course, wine. After drinking for a while, Dame Wang leaves a second time, during which time, Hsi-men drops a chopstick under the table. While retrieving it, he pinches P'an's embroidered lotus shoe, which makes his intentions crystal-clear. It is only then, after indulging gustatorily, that Hsi-men and P'an actually engage in sexual activity.¹²¹ Subsequently, Dame Wang eagerly provides food and wine whenever Hsi-men and P'an meet, the consumption of which is always a prelude to the game of "clouds and rain."¹²²

Wang Liu-erh is married to Han Tao-kuo, Hsi-men's servant. Before becoming one of Hsi-men's many bed mates, she had been conducting an affair with her brother-in-law Han the Second. On becoming Hsi-men's mistress, she receives large

¹²⁰ Ibid., 271.

¹²¹ Ibid., 78-83

¹²² *Yün yü*, or "clouds and rain," is a common euphemism for sex in Chinese literature.

amounts of money, food, jewelry and clothing from him, so much so that even her husband encourages her to milk Hsi-men for every penny she can.¹²³ Financially, Han the Second can no longer satisfy Wang's greed. Bearing gifts of some "little sausages," Han the Second shows up at her home and demands that they drink together. Clearly, Han's invitation is laden with sexual expectation; after all, sharing food and wine does seem to precede the sharing of a bed throughout the *Chin P'ing Mei*. Wang however is no longer interested in him and treats Han the Second with great contempt.¹²⁴ Han the Second's meager offerings of some "little sausages" imply that he can no longer fulfill Wang's new expectations, sexually and economically.

Food also provides an analogy for the squandering of Hsi-men's economic and sexual resources. Hsi-men's bed mates drain him sexually while his good-for-nothing friends drain him financially through their voracious appetites for wine, food, and entertainment. With monikers like Blabbermouth Sun, Heartless Wu, Welsher Yün, and Scrounger Pai, this pack of unemployed leeches follow Hsi-men around the pleasure quarters hoping to benefit from his wealth and extravagance. Every time they meet, Hsi-men pays for the food, wine, and entertainment. On one occasion, criticized by a prostitute for never returning the favor, they pool together their resources and make a show of playing host to Hsi-men in return for his past generosity. Yet, they devour the feast like "a swarm of locusts" in the time it takes Hsi-men to have two cups of wine.

¹²³Egerton, *The Golden Lotus*, 2:160.

¹²⁴*Ibid.*, 2:154.

The supposed guest has only had “a few meager gleanings from the dishes on the table, before everything was gobbled up by the ravenous horde.”¹²⁵

The author even goes so far as to meld excretory functions with the other activities in the book, suggesting the odiousness of Hsi-men’s activities in the sexual, political, and social realms. In one scene, Hsi-men is discussing business with an “influence peddler” from the district court, one who leaks information about judicial proceedings to interested parties. Wu Sung appears, seeking revenge for Wu the Elder’s death. Hsi-men escapes over a fence and literally runs into the unclad “beefy behind” belonging to a maidservant about to relieve herself. In this sequence of events, all of Hsi-men’s iniquities tangle together: his affair with P’an which has led to the murder of Wu the Elder, his underhanded political dealings with the local government with regard to the case, and his flight from the wrath of the vengeful Wu Sung which almost lands him in someone’s toilet.¹²⁶

The body as commodity

The idea of consumption applies not only to sex and food but also to economic expenditure. The *Chin P’ing Mei* provides many instances of the female body as a consumable item, not just gastronomically but economically as well. The mercantile nature of such transactions can be seen through the activities of the archetypal procuress, a greedy, bawdy older woman who helps facilitate romantic liaisons for material gain. In

¹²⁵ Roy, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, 229-231.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 184-188.

the *Chin P'ing Mei*, Dame Wang and Madame Hsüeh are just two of the archetypal procuresses who benefit from finding bed mates for Hsi-men. Beyond obtaining women for sexual purposes, Hsi-men also acquires women for financial reasons; two of his six wives were wealthy widows who brought much property with them.

The commercial aroma to marriage negotiations in the *Chin P'ing Mei* is a realistic portrayal of the problems posed by female property ownership and widow remarriage, issues of great concern to scholars from as early as the Sung dynasty and throughout the late imperial age. Sung intellectual historian Patricia Ebrey, in her analysis of the nexus of women, money, and class in the Sung dynasty, highlights some of these issues as sources of anxiety to the scholarly intelligentsia that contributed to Neo-Confucian ideas on women and their rightful place in society. Fundamentally, female property ownership threatened the woman's dependence on and allegiance to her husband's family after his death and, by lending a commercial flavor to marriage negotiations, blurred the boundaries between respectable wives and concubines who could be purchased from brothels or through procuresses.¹²⁷ The commercial flavor of such connections is palpable throughout the *Chin P'ing Mei*, in particular, through the unions of Hsi-men with P'an Chin-lien, Meng Yü-lou, and Li P'ing-erh.

¹²⁷ See Patricia Ebrey, "Women, Money, and Class: Ssu-ma Kuang and Sung Neo-Confucian Views on Women," *Papers on Society and Culture of Early Modern China* (Taipei: Academia Sinica, 1992), 613-669 and Patricia Ebrey, "Women, Marriage and the Family in Chinese History," in *Heritage of China: Contemporary Perspectives on Chinese Civilization* ed. Paul S. Ropp (Berkeley: University of California Press), 197-223.

Hsi-men, having seen and become interested in P'an, makes frequent visits to the teahouse across the street from her house. This teahouse is run by Dame Wang, a widow who specializes in arranging illicit affairs for money. Hsi-men assures Dame Wang that he will make it worth her while: "Whenever one gets so much as a tangerine peel to eat; / One should never forget Tung-t'ing Lake from whence it came." By this statement, he compares P'an's body to an edible morsel and promises financial gain for Dame Wang should she succeed in facilitating their liaison. The resulting ten-step scheme is elaborately designed to benefit Dame Wang at every opportunity. Under the pretense of making burial garments, she invites P'an over to her house where Hsi-men will have an opportunity to meet her. From this intricate plan, Dame Wang gets ten taels of silver, the finest quality pongee, damask, and silk for her burial garments, and also partakes of the food and drink that Hsi-men and P'an share. In return, she provides a convenient place for them to meet and guards the door.¹²⁸

Such commodification is particularly obvious in Hsi-men's engagement to Meng Yü-lou. Meng is a wealthy widow in possession of "two Nanking beds . . . four or five trunks full of clothing for all four seasons, figured gowns and so forth, packed so tightly you can't stick your hand into them; and pearl headbands and earrings, gold jewelry set with precious stones, and gold and silver bracelets and bangles" In fact, this description of her pecuniary status precedes a description of her physical appearance and personality, illustrating the idea that this transaction is commercial rather than romantic.

¹²⁸ Roy, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, 65-83.

The procuress Auntie Hsüeh mentions Meng's ability to play the moon guitar, which strikes Hsi-men's interest. The procuress says: "How could anyone be as lucky as you, sir, to get all that dowry and a young lady to boot?"¹²⁹ In a less than subtle way, Aunt Hsüeh tells Hsi-men that he is actually getting three women for the price of one: Meng's personal maids, at fourteen and eleven, will also become part of Hsi-men's household once he marries Meng. Aunt Hsüeh tells him that one of the maids "already dresses her hair in adult fashion," implying that she is old enough to serve him sexually.¹³⁰

A dispute between two relatives of Meng's late husband also reveals some of the economic problems behind widow remarriage. Aunt Yang, her late husband's paternal aunt, recognizes Hsi-men as a source of material benefit for her and is eager to approve the match. Chang the Fourth, her late husband's maternal uncle, on the other hand, had hoped to take advantage of the widow's wealth and proposed his own candidate for her remarriage. On the day Hsi-men's servants come to move Meng's belongings to her new home, an ugly verbal battle breaks out in Meng's courtyard between Aunt Yang and Chang the Fourth, both with material interests affected by this union.

Subsequently, Hsi-men meets and has an affair with Li P'ing-erh, the wife of his friend and neighbor Hua the Second. Li initiated the relationship with the willing Hsi-men. After her husband Hua is arrested over a property dispute, she seeks Hsi-men's help and pledges her financial resources to him. She hands over to him three thousand

¹²⁹ Ibid., 126.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 132.

taels of silver to use as bribes in getting her husband acquitted. "If there's anything left over, you can keep it for me, sir," she says to Hsi-men, and continues to present her other possessions to him: trunks full of silver, elegant clothing, jewelry, and fine art objects. However, this fortune in Li's possession had actually been embezzled from the imperial palace by Eunuch Director Hua, her father-in-law. In turn, Li commandeers this fortune to foster her relationship with Hsi-men, hiding the money from her husband Hua even after he loses his home and falls into abject poverty. This sign of corruption within the highest echelons of Ming government is thus intricately linked to Li's iniquities with regards to her husband Hua. Li's relationship with her husband disintegrates after this point. They are reduced to poverty because she has allowed Hsi-men to appropriate most of Hua's property, and Hua eventually dies.¹³¹

Ultimately, Li becomes Hsi-men's sixth wife. While their relationship starts out as an illicit affair, the exchange of money is what solidifies it. It is this transaction that leads to Hua's demise, and it is with this money that Hsi-men builds an extension of his abode, part of which becomes Li's new quarters. Furthermore, the source of Hsi-men's newfound wealth points to political corruption at the topmost levels of government. Thus, it is no coincidence that Li's entry into Hsi-men's household marks the beginning of his meteoric success in public office, which is followed by his political demise. After Li's death, even the servants remember this aspect of their relationship: "She had not only

¹³¹ Ibid., 278.

money, but gold, pearls, jade, embroideries and valuable ornaments of all sorts. They were the attraction. It wasn't the lady, but her money that our master wanted."¹³²

Throughout the book, degradation of the body leads to material gain for women whose bodies Hsi-men exploits. P'an in particular is eager to secure his favor and affection by allowing Hsi-men to perform invasive and painful acts on her body. During an act of fellatio, P'an encourages him to urinate in her mouth rather than risking a chill from a visit to the privy. Hsi-men is delighted at such proof of her love for him.¹³³ Subsequently, Hsi-men boasts to Chang Ju-i, his son's nursemaid with whom he has an affair, of P'an's devotion. Chang eagerly repeats the act of swallowing his urine to prove herself equally devoted to him: in return for this act, she gets half a roll of red silk.¹³⁴ In another encounter, P'an submits to his rather insistent desire for anal intercourse even though it causes her pain. She pleads with him to be gentle, but in response, he offers her a new dress for submitting to him: "Never mind . . . to-morrow you shall have a dress of fine embroidery." P'an negotiates with him, demanding "a lined skirt of gold and silver with jade-coloured ribbons and fur" in return for this act.¹³⁵ Wang Liu-erh also eagerly serves up her body for Hsi-men's enjoyment for which she obtains clothing, jewelry, food, and money. She encourages him to burn incense upon her body which is supposed to

¹³²Egerton, *The Golden Lotus*, 3:165.

¹³³*Ibid.*, 3:312.

¹³⁴*Ibid.*, 3:358-359.

¹³⁵*Ibid.*, 2:348-349.

to increase his passion: "My darling, if you would like to burn your naughty sweetheart, do so. Burn me whenever and wherever you like My body is all yours, and whatever you like to do with it, you may do."¹³⁶

Ultimately, the strongest evidence of how the author of the *Chin P'ing Mei* blends the three realms of sex, economy, and politics lies in the novel's language and narrative. The author's choice of words bespeak the link between sex and currency by equating silver with semen. During a sexual encounter with P'an, Hsi-men's physical pleasure is described as such: "the mouth of the 'divine turtle' disgorges its 'silvery stream.'" Lines later in the narrative, Hsi-men departs, leaving behind "a few pieces of loose silver to take care of her expenses." In a subsequent episode, Hsi-men offers P'an a tael of silver in return for fellatio. According to Roy's meticulous translation and scholarship on the subject, the word translated as "silvery stream" is a pun for "copper cash" or "filthy lucre." This, Roy proposes, is just one of many intimations that the author makes with regard to the "symbolic interchangeability between money and semen."¹³⁷

The way in which the narrative traces Hsi-men's activities also testifies to this overlapping of realms. Hsi-men is popular and busy because of his ability to consume sexually, gastronomically, and economically. While he is occupied in one activity, someone inevitably searches for him to engage him into another. Yun-ko looks for Hsi-men to sell him pears. Auntie Hsueh looks for him to sell him a concubine. His

¹³⁶ Ibid., 3:103.

¹³⁷ Roy, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, 124, 491n.26, and 491n.27; Egerton, *The Golden Lotus*, 2:336.

store manager looks for him to manage the buying and selling of pharmaceutical products. In fact, there are many instances in which Hsi-men abdicates his economic duties as a business owner and engages in amorous activities or vice versa. For example, early in the novel, Hsi-men is perusing the accounts with his store manager when Auntie Hsüeh, the procuress, appears. "On seeing that it was Auntie Hsüeh, Hsi-men Ch'ing immediately abandoned his manager and came out to meet her, the two of them walking to a secluded spot where they could talk in private."¹³⁸ This shows Hsi-men's priorities: negotiating over a potential bed mate seems more pressing than taking care of his business. It is this conversation which brings about Meng Yü-lou's entry into his household. Later, while Hsi-men is frolicking with Li P'ing-erh, his servant interrupts them at an inopportune moment to tell him that three merchants are waiting for him to settle accounts and to sell him some "excellent stock." Hsi-men grumbles for a while, showing his disinclination to go, but Li, showing a superior sense of priorities, advises him to see to business first.¹³⁹

Conclusion

Through an analysis of the role of the body in the *Chin P'ing Mei*, one can see how it becomes a tool for someone like P'an Chin-lien, who uses it to obtain male attention, material gain, an improved life, and to reinforce her status in a polygamous situation. The fact that P'an is adept at using her body to seduce is not a revelation.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 126.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 321-322.

Dissatisfied with her husband Wu the Elder, she displays her adorned body to attract sexual attention. Her attempt to seduce Wu Sung shows her practically bombarding him with overt physical hints of her desire. Hsi-men is completely enraptured by her from their first meeting. P'an's body gains her more than a lover, she eventually becomes one of Hsi-men's wives, allowing her to leave her squalid existence to enjoy a luxurious lifestyle in the Hsi-men home. P'an is the only one of Hsi-men's six wives who brings nothing to his household and makes no contribution to the domestic chores. The third and sixth ladies were both wealthy widows, the second lady manages household finances, and the fourth lady works in the kitchen. In his home, P'an uses her body to obtain wealth in incremental amounts. Many sexual encounters with Hsi-men are immediately preceded by or followed by an exchange of clothing, jewelry, or other valuable items. Beyond material gain, P'an encourages Hsi-men to perform many degrading acts upon her body to secure her influence over him. All of these factors elucidate the amount of power she exerts through dexterous use of her body. Ultimately, Hsi-men dies as a direct result of her insatiable bodily appetites.

Beyond wielding her body as a sexual weapon however, P'an also exhibits her mastery when it comes to using the bodies of other people to gain power within the harem. She allows Hsi-men to seduce her maid Ch'un-mei, but stipulates certain conditions which will reinforce her authority over his activities. She dictates the time and place for this tryst to take place. In this way, she trades her maid's body for Hsi-men's favor. After this transaction occurs, P'an's kinder treatment of her maid helps her form a strategic alliance with someone who might otherwise have become a sexual rival.

Procuresses also avail themselves of women's bodies to make a living. Typically, a procuress is widowed, middle-aged, and rather enterprising. Women like Dame Wang and Madame Hsüeh are about the only women in the novel who have a relatively free and independent existence. In contrast to married women who lead cloistered lives, the procuress can go about in public as a marriage broker. The money she makes running errands, arranging matches, and buying and selling maidservants for someone like Hsi-men provides a livelihood. Unlike the prostitutes and singing-girls, they do not rely on youth and beauty to make money. They are women who do not need husbands to support them. Wealthy widows such as Meng and Li were anxious to remarry even though they could have been financially independent. Furthermore, their willingness to become one of many wives in Hsi-men's household illustrates the strong need for a husband as a protector, someone who can make them a respectable wife. Li in particular was driven to marry the doctor Chiang because she could no longer bear the life of a widow.

The activities of the procuresses bespeak the commercial nature of male-female relationships, particularly between a wealthy man like Hsi-men and his many bed mates. The world of economic consumption, sexual consumption, and gastronomical consumption merge within the narrative. Through the literary descriptions of female beauty evoking food items like peaches, cherries, water chestnuts, scallions, and pastries, women become "edible" objects of consumption. The infamous scene between Hsi-men and P'an in the garden is just one of many such anecdotes in the novel. The author also links sexual and economic activities by equating semen with silver. Hsi-men leaves

silver everywhere he seduces a woman, and while his bed mates drain his sexual energies, his friends deplete his wealth by devouring his food and wine. Hsi-men's inability to keep one realm separate from another and his increasingly frantic juggling of all his exploits leads to his inevitable end. Ostensibly, he dies from sexual exertion, but it is clear that his economic and political activities have contributed to his downfall as well.

Violations of the physical body also appear in the portrayal of Hsi-men as a *hun chün*. The way in which P'an manipulates him to vent petty grudges and reinforce her own jurisdiction over him reinforces the similarities between her and the archetypal evil minister who exploits the muddle-headed ruler. The various transgressions he inflicts upon the bodies of his bed mates and his servants highlight his power over them. Yet such abuses of his authority seem to accrue and lead to his own demise, at which time the agent of physical objectification becomes the object and dies as a result. In this way, the author of the *Chin P'ing Mei* correlates an individual's activities in the private realm to the public realms of society and government.

CHAPTER THREE

BODY ADORNMENT IN THE *CHIN P'ING MEI*

If the body is a cosmological entity, then adornment of the body is the essential connection between an individual and the greater world in which he or she lives. Attire was of profound consequence in imperial China: it set apart male and female, educated and illiterate, ruler and subject, cultivated and savage, loyalist and traitor, Chinese and non-Chinese. Through such a lens, this chapter examines the *Chin P'ing Mei* for complex meanings embodied by clothing, shoes, coiffure, and accessories, as well as the entire demeanor of a person which consists of all these ingredients.¹⁴⁰ Body adornment is a prevalent theme throughout the *Chin P'ing Mei*. The novel teems with sartorial details, to such an extent that it may seem tiresome and repetitive. The premise of this discussion however, is the belief that even minute details such as a hat or a lock of hair support historical notions of Chinese dress and embody the author's literary intentions, be it condemning human nature or satirizing the state of Ming society.

Apparel serves as an indicator of social status in many cultures including the Chinese. Furthermore, in the Chinese mind, clothing also embodied civility and ethnicity. In other words, what a Chinese person wore symbolized an ancient cultural

¹⁴⁰ While the arguments made in this chapter about the importance of body adornment apply in a general way to bound feet and shoes, the following chapter engages in a more detailed discussion about the foot and shoe in the *Chin P'ing Mei*.

legacy, a sign of ethnic identity and superiority. The following statement in the *Analects* of Confucius, about the legacy of a man who helped China deter a foreign incursion, conveys a sense of this:

Through having Kuan Chung as his minister, Duke Huan became leader of the feudal princes, uniting and reducing to good order all that is under Heaven; so that even today the people are benefiting by what he then did for them. Were it not for Kuan Chung we might now be wearing our hair loose and folding our clothes to the left! ¹⁴¹

Duke Huan, with the help of Kuan Chung, staved off an invasion of the Ti peoples.

These “barbarians” apparently folded their clothing to the left, and wore their hair in a loose fashion perceived by Chinese to be a symbol of wildness. From this excerpt, we can glean the notion that wearing proper clothing and hair was an important sign of civility, something that marked the boundaries between Chinese and non-Chinese.

Hair and hairstyle were of great import with regards to Chinese decorum. A generation after Confucius, Mencius proposed that the natural, human penchant of helping those in distress was proof that man’s nature was essentially good. Yet, Mencius argued that if one’s hair or clothing was disordered, he should stay indoors instead of venturing outdoors to help someone. This is strong evidence of the significance of propriety in sartorial appearance, and how such decorum fit into the conservative Chinese world view of order and chaos. Indeed, it seems that unbound hair was a sign of

¹⁴¹This passage is from Book XIV, 18 of the *Analects*. Arthur Waley, trans. and annotated, *The Analects of Confucius* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 185.

barbarism, and was usually associated with shamans who loosened their clothing and hair in order to enter a trance, or with someone non-Chinese and therefore uncivilized.¹⁴²

The emperor's dragon robes personified cosmological and political beliefs through its symbols. Draconic images on the imperial robe signified his divine and inherent ability to order the chaotic world. From as early as the Sung dynasty, dragons, phoenixes, and other such "explicit badges of rank and distinction" became part of the "vocabulary of imperial regalia." An embroidered border featuring Mount Kunlun on the edge of the dragon robe and the inclusion of the twelve sacred symbols (sun, moon, seven stars, dragon, pheasant, sacrificial cup, water weed, grains of millet, flames, sacrificial axe, and *fu* symbol) bespeak the cosmological nature of imperial authority.¹⁴³

The dragon robes were not only significant in terms of symbolic power, they were also an intricate part of Confucian rituals. The emperor had an imperial duty to dress appropriately at all times. His ritual dress and deportment were important for maintaining the proper cycles of the sun and moon, and the climate and seasons in cadence with natural rhythms of the universe. As an example, the third century B.C.E. calendar and treatise on seasonal rituals, the *Huai nan tzu*, dictates that the Son of Heaven must wear a certain shade of yellow robe during the final month of summer, along with yellow jade pendants, and must ride a carriage pulled by black-maned yellow horses. His procession

¹⁴² Valerie Steele and John S. Major, *China Chic: East meets West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 17.

¹⁴³ Ibid. 13-14.

was to sport a yellow banner and his imperial ladies must wear yellow clothes with yellow trim.¹⁴⁴

The luxurious silk textiles from which dragon robes were tailored were also of utmost importance. Considered works of art for their intricate design and handiwork, these fabrics were also a way of “binding traditional Chinese societies together by reinforcing social and sacred hierarchies at the imperial court, within the home, and in a wide variety of ritual settings.” Silk and other forms of elegant cloth served as symbols of status and wealth, and could be used as currency as well. Since the time of the Han dynasty’s (206 B.C.-A.D. 220) state-controlled silk industry, this fabric served as the equivalent of cash. Silk was received by government officials as wages, or paid to the government as taxes.¹⁴⁵

In the late imperial age issues, such as prohibitions against footbinding, mandated shaving of heads and cutting of queues, induced angst in the minds of the Chinese intelligentsia because they represented the threat of foreign domination, the blurring of gender boundaries, and the possible loss of Chinese heritage. During the transition between the Ming and Ch’ing dynasties, proscriptions against Chinese dress, hairstyles, and footbinding show how the Manchu conquerors conceived of body adornment as a

¹⁴⁴John S. Major, *Heaven and Earth in Early Han Thought: Chapters Three, Four and Five of the Huainanzi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 238-239, as cited in *ibid.*, 15; John E. Vollmer, *Clothed to Rule the Universe: Ming and Qing Dynasty Textiles at The Art Institute of Chicago* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago and University of Washington Press, 2000), 13.

¹⁴⁵Vollmer, *Clothed to Rule*, 13.

way to unify the newly-acquired kingdom. They recognized the degree to which attire embodied race and nationhood. During this time, the bound foot took on further significance in addition to notions of Chinese femininity; it became a part of rhetorical wars on Han Chinese loyalty and masculinity. In 1636, the victorious Manchu prince regent Dorgon issued a directive meant to promote the preservation of Manchurian culture and prevent sinification of his people. He mandated that Han men and women were to wear Manchu style clothing, and women were not allowed to bind their feet nor wear their hair in a traditional Chinese hairstyle. Two years later, Dorgon repeated this prohibition with a threat: "all those who imitate the other country [Ming China] in clothes, headgear, hair-bundling, and footbinding are to be severely punished."¹⁴⁶ While the success rate of these edicts is not known, the reiteration of these bans implies that they were not obeyed and testifies to the resilient link between Chinese practices of body adornment such as footbinding and the "civility of Han Chinese civilization."¹⁴⁷

Mandates regarding the shaving of Chinese men's hair, along with the proclamations against footbinding, ushered in a "new period of sexual politics."¹⁴⁸ The customary Manchu hairstyle for men involved shaving off all the hair at the front of their heads, leaving a long queue in the back. When the Manchurian army conquered Nanking in June of 1645, the authorities issued a decree by which all captured Chinese soldiers in

¹⁴⁶ Dorothy Ko, "The Body as Attire: The Shifting Meanings of Footbinding in Seventeenth-Century China," *Journal of Women's History* 8, no. 4 (Winter, 1997), 16.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 19.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

Nanking were to adopt the Manchurian hairstyle. The notion of inflicting this sort of tonsure on their heads was anathema to Chinese men, particularly to Confucian officials. Ming men wore their long and abundant hair proudly, often in fancy styles and with caps significant of their status. Holding sacred the Mencian commandment of preserving the body out of respect for one's parents, to shave one's head was "a degradation of one's dignity as a *ru* (Confucian scholar)." News that this custom would soon be forced upon all Chinese men, soldiers and civilians alike, elicited great disquiet among the populace. Chinese men saw it as "a betrayal of Han masculinity," described by Frederic Wakeman as a form of "tonsorial castration." The shaving of their heads was "almost a symbolic mutilation of one's integrity, far more damaging in some ways than physical death." Dorgon repealed the edict a month later amidst mass hysteria.¹⁴⁹

The Chinese man's hairstyle as a sign of male honor parallels the identification of footbinding with female virtue. Ch'ing dynasty (1644-1912) political activity surrounding these two institutions support Dorothy Ko's body-as-attire position: the body and body adornment could display one's loyalty or resistance to the new regime. Ko further argues that footbinding is conceptually linked to the shaving of men's heads. Sun Chih-hsieh, an official who voluntarily shaved himself and unbound the feet of his women, was seen as having emasculated himself in the eyes of his contemporaries. The other officials plotted against him, involving him in a corruption affair, after which he lost his title and was

¹⁴⁹ Frederic Wakeman, Jr., *The Great Enterprise: The Manchu Reconstruction of Imperial Order in Seventeenth-Century China*, vol. 1, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 647-650.

reduced to a civilian. Along with his entire family, he died in disgrace and ignominy at the hands of rebels. “first attempting suicide and then killed when cursing the bandits.” Ko points out an element of irony in Sun’s biography: “It is curious that suicide and cursing were normally the course of action that a threatened female was supposed to take to preserve her chastity.”¹⁵⁰

Manchurian court women, forbidden from experiencing the erotic aura of the bound foot, found ways to both emulate and subvert its appeal. They adopted a type of platform shoe which fit their naturally-sized feet but gave their gait the suggestion of fragility so appealing to enthusiasts of the golden lotus. These shoes conveyed the appearance of a small foot without the discomfort and pain that came with footbinding. Like the shoes made for bound feet, these Manchurian platform shoes had elaborate embroidery with designs of flowers, birds, and fruits. Since poorer Manchurian women wore flat-soled silk or satin shoes, these platform shoes also exhibited the lofty social status of the wearer.¹⁵¹ Thus, Manchurian women’s attempts to imitate the sexy, swaying walk of Chinese women with bound feet testifies to the Manchu acceptance of Chinese notions of femininity.

In addition, intricate coiffures sported by Manchurian women may have served to take erotic attention away from the feet and to accentuate the distinction between Manchurian and Chinese fashion. One example of a distinctly Manchurian hairstyle, the

¹⁵⁰ Ko, “Body as Attire,” 21.

¹⁵¹ Valery M. Garrett, *Chinese Clothing: An Illustrated Guide* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1994), 61.

liang pa t'ou erh or “two handle head dress,” involved wrapping the woman’s hair, false hair, and black satin around a wire frame atop the head, creating two wing-like structures which resembled the spread wings of the bat. The structure would then be decorated with real or artificial flowers, tassels, jewels, and other ornaments. Such headgear grew in size and intricacy throughout the Ch’ing dynasty. By the early Republican years, they had become twice as large as they had been during the early nineteenth century.¹⁵² Beyond its role as a marker of ethnic boundaries, such hairstyles were a way for Manchurian women to redefine notions of fashion and femininity. This mode of body adornment may also have served to take attention away from the feet so central to Chinese concepts of beauty.

Body adornment in the *Chin P’ing Mei*

The construct of body adornment in the *Chin P’ing Mei* is complex and multifarious. While the *Chin P’ing Mei* is verbose in its descriptions of clothing, it never describes the holistic physical body, just aspects of the body, bodily function, or the covered body. Moreover, the adorned body always appears before the physical or social one. From descriptions of characters in the *Chin P’ing Mei*, it seems that each persona is presented to us as an onion, one layer appearing after another. Clothing and accessories form the most immediate surface, after which the character’s bodily features become apparent, after which information about family background or vocation emerges. In this

¹⁵² Adolphe Clarence Scott, *Chinese Costume in Transition* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1960), 30-31; Garrett, *Chinese Clothing*, 60; and Verity Wilson, *Chinese Dress* (New York: Weatherhill and the Victoria and Albert Museum, 1996), 67.

fashion, we meet characters first through their adorned body and then later get a glimpse of physical or personal characteristics.

Beyond the roles of clothing as social and cultural symbols, body adornment was of immense concern in many other ways. First, clothes and accessories were of great ritual importance. In the *Chin P'ing Mei*, gifts of clothing and accessories are indispensable during weddings and birthdays. The gifts are often lavish and provide ways for women to exhibit their handiwork and embroidery skills. Second, the absence of appropriate attire is elaborately linked to humiliation and punishment, resonating with Chinese ideas formed by the link between unclothed (or inappropriately clothed) bodies and savagery. The previous chapter shows how Hsi-men's poor management of his household leads to abuses of the physical body; in this chapter, an analysis of bodily embellishment again evokes the view of him as a tyrannical ruler. Next, a character's dress can be read as a signifier of his or her state of mind. Apparel denotes a wide scope of emotions and intents, ranging from distress, anger, indifference, hypocrisy, a rejection of sexual overtures, or a lack of respect for Confucian rituals, just to name a few. Through its connection to unspoken sentiments, one's sartorial state often serves as a tool to seduce, to manipulate, or to take revenge on one's enemies. Finally, clothing and accessories of the body represent intimacy, playing an integral role in liaisons and alliances. Relationships between Hsi-men and potential political allies, Hsi-men and his bed mates, P'an and her lovers, or among women seeking to fortify their positions in Hsi-men's harem, all involve sartorial items.

The first layer: the adorned body

Throughout the *Chin P'ing Mei*, descriptions of clothing precede descriptions of a person's background, character, or position. This precedence of the adorned body over any other aspects of a character occurs throughout the novel. When Hsi-men meets Meng Yü-lou, she is announced by the "tinkling of girdle pendants." His first gaze at her is not of her face or any part of her body, nor does he form an impression of her physique or disposition. Rather, he sees her "kingfisher blue surcoat of figured silk, emblazoned with a mandarin square that featured an embroidered *ch'i-lin*, over a wide-cut gown of figured scarlet silk." In her hair she wears "Pearls and trinkets . . . a phoenix hairpin half askew."¹⁵³ Only after this rich array of details about the adorned body does Hsi-men notice her "tall and slender" figure or her "tiny golden lotuses." The same occurs when Hsi-men meets Li P'ing-erh, the wife of his neighbor who ends up as his sixth wife. She appears holding part of a shoe she is making, wearing:

A chignon enclosed in a fret of silver filigree,
Pendant amethyst earrings in gold settings,
A blouse of pale lavender silk, opening down the middle,
and a white silk skirt with drawnwork borders,
Beneath which there peeked out a pair of tiny shoes,
The points of which bore the beaks of red phoenixes.

Only after viewing her garb does he notice her ivory skin, small stature, melon-seed face, and arching eyebrows, all archetypal descriptions of a beautiful woman in Chinese literature.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³Roy, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, 133.

¹⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 254.

For male characters, these initial descriptions of their raiment convey social status.

This is how Hsi-men, the central male figure of the novel, makes his introductory appearance in the novel:

On his head he wore a tasseled hat,
Gold openwork hairpins, and
A pair of jade rings inlaid with gold;
On his torso, a green silk jacket;
On his feet, fine-soled Ch'en-ch'iao shoes, and
Pure cotton stockings;
On his trouser legs, jet drawnwork kneepads.
In his hand he sports a gold-flecked Szechwan fan¹⁵⁵

From such details, we know right away that he is wealthy and privileged, and perhaps a little ostentatious and decadent. From the flamboyance of his attire, we might infer that he is one of the mercantile elite rather than the intelligentsia. This is almost the very first information the reader receives about Hsi-men. It is only later in the narrative that readers find out who he is and what he does.

While descriptions of male characters focus on clothing to convey social status and perhaps as a statement of their decadent lifestyles, descriptions of female characters seem to equate elaborate body adornment with beauty. This reinforces women's roles as objects of beauty. In fact, the women seem to be a form of "adornment" for the men who "wear" or "own" them. Hsi-men's possession of many beautiful women is similar in many ways to his ownership of other beautiful inanimate objects which demonstrate his exalted position and his pecuniary powers. In one scene depicting the leisure and luxury of his existence, Hsi-men chances upon two of his concubines in the garden: "They were

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 50.

wearing their everyday chignons enclosed in frets of silver filigree, from which two tufts of hair were allowed to escape at either temple, pendant onyx earrings, blouses of white silk, pink vests, drawnwork skirts, and two pairs of tiny shoes, the up-turned points of which were adorned with red mandarin ducks."¹⁵⁶ The richness of such a delineation illustrates the role of women as articles of beauty. Such intricate details in the portrayal of the embellished body parallel the descriptions of food as well. Hsi-men's bevy of extravagantly-dressed women, like his fine clothes and the exquisite food in which he indulges, all contribute to the aura of prestige which surrounds him. These particulars all convey the vain and extravagant lifestyle which he lives.

P'an however, takes body adornment to an extreme. Wu Yüeh-niang, Hsi-men's first wife, comments on P'an's "childish" impulse to constantly reapply make-up to her face. As these words are spoken, P'an appears in a "saffron-colored jacket of Lu-chou silk . . . decorated with a motif of wild geese . . . a stiff-standing white satin collar with purpled edging and gilt buttons . . . a drawnwork skirt . . . shoes of scarlet silk with high white satin heels, and figured ankle leggings. She also sported pendant onyx earrings and a pearl headband." Wu, in contrast, is dressed rather modestly.¹⁵⁷ P'an's excruciatingly careful adornment of her body and face parallels her sedulous sexual efforts to maintain Hsi-men's favor, and thus, her power over him.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 207.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 291.

Such excessive attention to adornment casts a negative light on P'an, Hsi-men, and their activities. On the eve of the lantern festival, Hsi-men's women watched the festivities from a lantern-viewing belvedere. P'an in particular behaves inappropriately, leaning over the windowsill, tucking up her long sleeves to reveal her hands and the many gold rings on them. Lecherous bystanders from below speculated on the women's background. One spectator suggested " 'They must be whores from the licensed quarter that some big spender has engaged to entertain him while he enjoys the lanterns.' " ¹⁵⁸ In this way, the author makes a jab at Hsi-men's harem. This speculation based on their splashy attire and indecorous behavior evokes the question of whether attire in this case can make a distinction between respectable wives and the painted women of the brothels.

Ritual importance of adornment

In the first part of the novel, much of the narrative in the *Chin P'ing Mei* surrounds the presentation of birthday gifts to the Imperial Tutor and the subsequent appointment of Hsi-men to an official position. Apparel plays an important part of this subplot. After meticulous preparation, Hsi-men puts together an array of valuable gifts including embroidered dragon cloaks, robes made of crimson Hang-chou silk, rolls of a special type of black ceremonial fabric, and red silk edged with gold and embroidered with five-colored dragons. Upon receipt of these gifts, the Imperial Tutor confers the post of Deputy-Captain upon Hsi-men. Even Hsi-men's servant Lai Pao and his business

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 304.

manager Wu Tien-en who delivered the gifts receive official positions.¹⁵⁹ On hearing this news, the first thing Hsi-men does is to have a hat of ceremony made for himself. On assuming office, Hsi-men begins to deport himself in a way befitting a government official:

Hsi-men rode out every day upon a big white horse. He wore a black ceremonial hat and a robe of office with long-maned lions embroidered in five colours upon it. A girdle, four fingers broad, encircled his waist, and his feet were shod in white-soled boots. An escort of soldiers accompanied him and a large black fan was borne behind him. Men went before him, shouting to clear the way; others followed close upon his horse's heels. No less than ten were in attendance upon him. Up and down the streets he went.¹⁶⁰

From this description, we can see how Hsi-men's attire plays a significant part of his new, august demeanor. His garments are no less important than the size of his retinue. At the same time, the author has made clear his thoughts on how the country was made corrupt by this type of nepotism, and is undoubtedly mocking Hsi-men for luxuriating in this sort of display.

Throughout the *Chin P'ing Mei*, presents of clothing and jewelry are customary on birthdays and weddings. For Li P'ing-erh's birthday, Hsi-men sends a rich array of delicacies, as well as "a set of heavy silk brocade clothing."¹⁶¹ To Meng Yü-lou, Hsi-men presents "two embroidered handkerchiefs, a pair of jeweled hairpins, and six gold rings"

¹⁵⁹ Egerton, *The Golden Lotus*, 1:376, 2:32-33, 2:42.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 2:46.

¹⁶¹ Roy, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, 298.

as betrothal presents.¹⁶² On his own birthday, he receives from P'an "a pair of jet satin shoes; a pair of scent bags . . . a pair of russet satin kneepads, the borders of which were decorated with a motif of pines, bamboos, and plum blossoms, the 'three cold-weather friends'; a sand-green waistband of Lu-chou pongee, decorated with the motifs of auspicious clouds and the symbolic representations of the 'eight treasures,' lined with watered-silk, fastened with purple cords, and enclosing a pocket filled with aromatic *lysimachia* and rose petals; and a hairpin in the shape of a double-headed lotus blossom" engraved with a love poem.¹⁶³ He was immensely moved by these gifts, more so because of the handiwork and care that had gone into them rather than the luxuriant nature of the presents.

After losing a loved one, wearing appropriate attire was an important aspect of the mourning rituals. Thus, the state of a one's dress reflects upon a woman's proper or improper behavior. Three of Hsi-men's wives were widows before entering his household. In particular, Meng Yü-lou and P'an Chin-lien did not fulfill their obligatory period of mourning before remarrying. Given the importance of clothing in Chinese ideology, it is not surprising that clothing is a critical aspect of the mourning ritual. The women's failure to respect this Confucian tradition is a direct indictment of their virtue. P'an has always paid a lot of attention to her apparel. Her tendency to deck herself out and stand by the door to attract the attention of passersby reflects upon her lack of

¹⁶² Ibid., 136.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 160.

propriety and female reserve. After Wu the Elder's death, she shows no desire to mourn his passing by wearing somber attire. Instead, she "put her husband's spirit tablet in a corner of the upstairs room and covered it with a sheet of white paper, and she neglected to set any offerings of soup or rice before it. Every day she dolled herself up, put on bright-colored clothing, made herself as attractive as possible, and enjoyed herself with Hsi-men Ch'ing."¹⁶⁴ Li P'ing-erh, who heckled her husband Hua to death after starting her affair with Hsi-men, discards the proper behavior and dress for a mourning widow in the fifth of the conventional seven weeks of mourning. In her sedan chair, she shows up at the Hsi-men household to attend birthday festivities, laden with gifts and dressed in "a white satin jacket over a skirt of blue brocade, with a white hempen snood over her chignon, held in place with a pearl headband"¹⁶⁵ While white or hempen material indicate mourning, such symbols of grief are juxtaposed rather inappropriately with festive behavior and the richness of her apparel.

Body adornment as tools

Coiffure and apparel are also tools of seduction, as important as food and wine in creating a bewitching ambiance conducive to seduction. Descriptions of "cloud-like" tresses invoke the euphemism of "clouds and rain" which symbolizes sexual activity. In preparation for her tryst with Hsi-men, Li P'ing-erh "Carelessly coiled her raven locks, and / Adorned herself with demure elegance." On his arrival, she immediately leads him

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 119 and 167.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 287.

to a table laden with wine and delicacies. Soon after, they end up in bed.¹⁶⁶ In this seduction scene, the motifs of hair, food, and wine mingle as precursors to the game of “clouds and rain.”

P'an is a master at manipulating Hsi-men and body adornment plays a large part in her maneuvers. In particular, she is adept at getting valuable items from him or using him to vent her jealousy on other concubines. Her skill in this type of exploitation increases over time and her power over Hsi-men grows from the day she meets him. In a scene between P'an and Hsi-men, we see that the seeds of this relationship are planted even before she has crossed the threshold. P'an receives a visit from Hsi-men after pining away for him for quite some time. Shortly after his entrance, she “snatched the hat off his head, and threw it to the floor.” Through making his clothing disorderly, she expresses her ire. Then, she proceeds to pull a hair pin out of his hair and examine it for clues of female rivalry. Convinced that it was from a prostitute, P'an refused to return the pin and demanded to know the whereabouts of the hairpin she had given him. “‘As for that hairpin of yours,’ said Hsi-men Ch'ing, ‘the other day I got drunk and fell off my horse, so hard that my hat was knocked off and my hair came undone. When I looked for your pin I couldn't find it.’” This exchange shows the significance of such items as hairpins. P'an looks to these accessories for information on Hsi-men and his behavior with other women. Through Hsi-men's ridiculous tale, he portrays himself in a rather undignified position with undone hair and displaced hat. Moreover, this image of him

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 262.

suggests that his sexual profligacy is so extreme he cannot keep track of all his love tokens. Of course, P'an does not believe his story. She notices tooth marks on his ornate, gold-flecked fan which confirm her suspicions that "it had been given to him by some light-of-love" and proceeds to tear it into pieces.¹⁶⁷

P'an also dishevels her own garb and demeanor as a tool against her enemies in the harem. After a vitriolic quarrel with Hsi-men's fourth wife Sun Hsüeh-o, P'an returns to her room, removes her fancy garments, washes away her cosmetics, and tousles her hair, leaving "her flowerly countenance in disarray." Soon, as expected, Hsi-men returns to find her in this disordered state and immediately inquires into the cause of her condition. On learning that Sun had caused P'an such distress, Hsi-men is incensed: "The spirits of his Three Corpses became agitated; / The breaths of his Five Viscera ascended to Heaven." He then proceeds to the kitchen, grabs Sun by the hair and rains blows upon her with a stick, calling her a "lousy, splay-legged whore."¹⁶⁸ This scene not only shows us how P'an accumulates the enmity of others in the household, we also see her skill in using her apparel to take revenge, venting her jealousies through Hsi-men's gullibility and cruelty.

From as early as Li P'ing-erh's first day in the Hsi-men abode, an incident surrounding a gold hair accessory exemplifies P'an's exploitation of Hsi-men as well as the potential rivalry between the two women. After his conjugal night with Li P'ing-erh,

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 159.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 214-215.

Hsi-men rushes out the next morning to run an errand for Li. She sends with him an elaborate gold accessory weighing nine ounces. This piece of jewelry is much finer than any owned by the other ladies, so in order not to outshine them, Li wishes for the jeweler to melt it down and construct two smaller pieces: a nine-phoenix pin and a gold tiara. P'an, with "her hair in disarray and an unwashed face" ambushes Hsi-men on his way out and demands to know the nature of his mission. On learning about Li's gold filigree, P'an's calculating mind is set in motion immediately. She says to Hsi-men:

A nine-phoenix pin . . . would only take three ounces and five or six mace of gold, at the most. And as for that tiara . . . it only comes to one ounce and six mace. Whatever you do, have him use what's left over to make another nine-phoenix pin, just like hers, for me Even if it were made solid and sturdy . . . it wouldn't take more than three ounces. At the very least, barring any monkey business, he ought to be able to squeeze two or three extra ounces of gold out of it, which would be enough to make a pin for me.¹⁶⁹

Hsi-men accedes to her demand after a few words of protest. This exchange contrasts the two women: while Li desires to maintain peace within the household by not flaunting her wealth, P'an's greed is unabashed and blatant. This encounter also forebodes the rivalry between the two women which will plague Li to her death. On other occasions as well, their attitudes toward body adornment highlight their different dispositions. While Li carefully avoids dressing more elegantly than the other ladies so as not to overshadow them, P'an pays excessive attention to her hair, make-up, and clothes so as to monopolize Hsi-men's attention. After Li's death, P'an could hardly wait to get her hands on Li's fur coat. The servants however, remembered Li's benevolent character through the way she

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 408-409.

dressed: "Only Heaven knows what a good heart she has If she has nice clothes, she will not wear them unless the other ladies have dresses like them."¹⁷⁰

Scenes in which Hsi-men becomes a tool for a woman with disheveled hair and garb recur throughout the novel. Li Kuei-chieh, a prostitute with whom Hsi-men has a patronage relationship, uses these same tactics to get back at P'an for snubbing her. Hsi-men finds her with "Raven locks in disarray, and / Pale countenance unadorned." Of course, this get-up leads to a discussion of how P'an has rebuffed her during a visit to the Hsi-men household by ordering the maid to shut the gate in Li's face. Hsi-men pays lip service to Li, curses P'an for being a troublemaker in his household, and boasts of his cruelty towards his concubines and maids. Li coerces him into obtaining a lock of P'an's hair for her. Li then inserts this into the lining of her shoe so that she might "trample her underfoot every day."¹⁷¹

After Hsi-men's death, Ch'un-mei marries well and becomes Lady Chou, the favored wife of a military commander. She purchases Sun Hsüeh-o to work in her kitchen, with the intention of avenging past quarrels with Sun in Hsi-men's household. Immediately upon entering the Chou household, Ch'un-mei orders her servants to undo Sun's coiffure and remove her fine clothes. This act of changing Sun's clothing and removing her hair ornaments cements her subservient status.¹⁷² Later, when punishing

¹⁷⁰ Egerton, *The Golden Lotus*, 3:126, 3:342.

¹⁷¹ Roy, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, 244-247.

¹⁷² Egerton, *The Golden Lotus*, 4:234.

Sun for reminding Ch'un-mei about her past as a maid, Ch'un-mei tore at the woman's hair and then ordered a large number of male servants to strip her and beat her with a stick.¹⁷³ While others pleaded with her to dispense with the removal of clothing in front of so many male servants, Ch'un-mei insisted on this ultimate humiliation of her old enemy.

Body adornment and state of mind

While P'an is a master at using adornment to her advantage, there are many cases in which tousled appearance is a true indicator of one's mental and emotional state. After her husband's death, Li P'ing-erh pines away for Hsi-men during a long period of neglect. She falls into a state of depression which is most clearly conveyed through her rumpled appearance:

Too indolent to paint her moth eyebrows.
Too abashed to retouch her powdered face:
Her bosom swells with unexpressed resentment.
Her jadelike spirit is utterly distraught.

When her doctor visits her, her "Misty locks and cloudy tresses" express her "insurmountable grief."¹⁷⁴

Another character who provides interesting contrast to P'an in this respect is Sung Hui-lien, a servant's wife who receives Hsi-men's sexual favors.¹⁷⁵ She is as beautiful, if

¹⁷³ Ibid., 4:288.

¹⁷⁴ Roy, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, 348-349.

¹⁷⁵ Roy and Egerton use different names for *Chin P'ing Mei* characters in their respective translations: the former mostly uses phonetic transliterations while the latter sometimes translates the meanings of the names in Chinese. For example, Sung Hui-lien

not more so, than P'an, with feet so small she can put on a pair of P'an's shoes over her own. She uses every sexual encounter with Hsi-men to obtain material benefit, asking him for money, tea, jewelry, clothing, and accessories. At first, P'an facilitates the liaison to gain favor with Hsi-men. Subsequently, the news that Hsi-men planned to make Sung his seventh wife motivates P'an to put an end to the affair. Unfortunately for Sung, she is not as clever as P'an when it comes to manipulating Hsi-men. Hsi-men goes back and forth between the two women, who both use their sartorial state to win his sympathy. He first listens to one then changes his mind when he hears the other. In the end however, we see a subtle but important distinction between P'an and Sung Hui-lien. Initially, Sung uses adornment as an instrument for attracting Hsi-men, but after hearing about her husband's arrest, torture, and exile (all resulting from her affair with Hsi-men), remorse sets in and her unkempt state reflects upon true mental anguish and guilt. The lingering humanity in her heart is perhaps an Achilles' heel in her fight with P'an for control over Hsi-men. Sung no longer cares about her appearance and stops making up her face, styling her hair, and dressing herself alluringly. Ultimately, P'an rids herself of her rival by instigating conflict between Sung and Hsi-men's fourth wife Sun Hsüeh-o, which leads Sung to hang herself with her footbinding cloths.¹⁷⁶

in Roy's translation is Wistaria in Egerton's translation. To avoid confusion, I will consistently use the names in Roy's translation. Egerton's versions of the names will appear only in direct quotes from his translation.

¹⁷⁶ Egerton, *The Golden Lotus*, 1:361-372.

Hsi-men also uses adornment to express his ire. Most of the time, Hsi-men's dress is lavish, befitting someone of his great wealth. However, on the day Li P'ing-erh enters Hsi-men's household, he waited her arrival in "an informal gown and everyday hat."¹⁷⁷ His sartorial indifference was a manifestation of his dissatisfaction with Li for having previously married someone else instead of waiting for him.

Body adornment and relationships

Accessories feature prominently as tokens of intimacy throughout the *Chin P'ing Mei*. Women make shoes for each other, solidifying relationships and alliances within the harem. After a tryst, two lovers often exchange jewelry or other accessories as tokens of their intimacy. In the same mode as discussed in chapter one, such transactions taint Hsi-men's relationships with a commercial flavor. At the same time, they portray him as someone whose weaknesses (excessive expenditure in food, sex, and power) are making him a victim of consumption and exploitation. Towards the end of Hsi-men's life, the connection between clothing and currency becomes more explicit. Instead of giving clothing or jewelry which serves as evidence of an affair, he begins to reward his mistresses only with silver so that they can purchase their own items of body adornment.

In particular, the exchange of clothing and jewelry demonstrates the insidious shift in power in Hsi-men's relationship with P'an. After the initiation of their affair, Dame Wang encourages Hsi-men and P'an to exchange mementos of affection. Hsi-men removes a silver hairpin from his hair and places it into the woman's coiffure. She gives

¹⁷⁷ Roy, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, 394.

him a handkerchief in return.¹⁷⁸ On subsequent visits, Hsi-men brings her gifts of clothing, jewelry and hair ornaments.¹⁷⁹ After securing her position within his household, P'an begins to demand these gifts in an unabashed fashion, showing her greed and her growing control over him. When his sexual interest seems to wane, P'an adorns herself differently in order to regain it. Attiring herself in the style typical of a maid, she stirs his amour by presenting herself in a new and novel image. Before they enter the bed curtains however, P'an complains that she only has old dresses and asks him to have some made for her of first-class material.¹⁸⁰ The gradual shift in power between these two central characters occurs in their economic relationship and their sexual relationship as well. In other words, P'an exploits his economic resources and also his sexual energies.

After P'an starts an affair with Hsi-men's page boy Ch'in-tung, she gives him several gold-headed pins for his hair, as well as a brocade scent bag to wear under his clothes.¹⁸¹ Hsi-men later finds the scent bag on the boy, and takes it as confirmation of the affair. He has the boy severely beaten and discharged from the household.

Once Hsi-men begins an affair with a woman, she receives gifts of money, jewelry, and clothing from him. Her improved status as one of his bed mates leads to a change in dress and behavior. When Hsi-men starts an affair with his servant Lai Wang's

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 86.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 119.

¹⁸⁰ Egerton, *The Golden Lotus*, 2:186, 189-190.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 233.

wife, Sung Hui-lien, she receives gifts of fine clothes and jewelry from Hsi-men.

Dressing more like one of the ladies and less like one of the servants, Sung's deportment begins to stray from the expected behavior and dress for one of her status. Instead of working in the kitchen, she spends her time playing games with the ladies of the household. When her husband Lai Wang returns from an extended business trip, he finds evidence of this tryst in her chest full of handsome garments and jewelry.¹⁸²

Women also used clothing to fortify their relationships with each other. In particular, women of lower social status presented gifts of food and clothing to ingratiate themselves with women of higher social status or wealth. Li Kuei-ch'ing and Wu Yin-erh both ask ladies of the Hsi-men household to adopt them. These requests are accompanied by presents of clothing and shoes. In time, they both receive food, clothing, silver, and even political protection from their adopted family.¹⁸³ When Hsi-men begins an affair with his son's nursemaid Chang Ju-i, he not only gives her clothing but asks her to deliver her late mistress's fur coat to P'an. This act expresses Chang's subordination to P'an in the hierarchy of Hsi-men's bed mates. In addition, both Hsi-men and Chang implicitly acknowledge P'an's dominion. Chang pledges her loyalty to P'an: "My mistress is dead . . . and though the Great Lady still keeps me here, you are the one on whom I really depend. If you help me, I shall never dare to be ungracious in return."¹⁸⁴

¹⁸² Egerton, *The Golden Lotus*, 1:346.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 2:204, 2:245.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:345.

Obtaining Li's fur coat is symbolic of P'an taking over Li's place in Hsi-men's heart and encroaching upon his first wife's charge of the household affairs.

Clothing and jewelry appear at the end of the novel as tokens of remembrance. When the first lady Wu decides to sell P'an's primary maid Ch'un-mei, she dictates that Ch'un-mei should not take a stitch of clothing or any accessories with her. Ownership of these items reverted to the first lady. However, P'an makes Ch'un-mei a parting gift of "two of her best dresses and some socks," marking the end of a strong alliance between the two women.¹⁸⁵ Soon after, it is P'an's turn to leave the Hsi-men household. At her departure Meng Yü-lou, who had been like a sister to P'an throughout their time in Hsi-men's household, made her a gift of gold jewelry and silk garments as a memento of their friendship.¹⁸⁶

Body adornment and status

Gifts of clothing and jewelry can represent more than a sexual relationship; they can symbolize one's favored status within the harem. Immediately upon entering the household, P'an sizes up her rivals. She does everything she can to ingratiate herself with Hsi-men's first wife Wu Yüeh-niang, providing her companionship during shoemaking and needle work. Before long, Wu starts to treat her with special regard, giving her gifts

¹⁸⁵Ibid., 4:165-166.

¹⁸⁶Ibid., 4:178.

of clothing and jewelry, and sharing meals with her at the same table. This of course caused jealousy and unease among the other wives.¹⁸⁷

When Li P'ing-erh visits the Hsi-men household, she is served by P'an's maid Ch'un-mei. Knowing that this maid had "enjoyed Hsi-men's sexual favors, she makes her a present of a gold chatelaine with three pendant charms in the shape of three miniature toilet articles." Chun-mei immediately reports this gift to P'an her mistress. On Ch'un-mei's behalf, P'an thanks Li profusely.¹⁸⁸ As discussed in chapter one, Ch'un-mei is privileged because her body has been appropriated by Hsi-men. Thus, her status is no longer that of a mere maid; she is treated more like an equal by the ladies. Through her bodily relationship with Hsi-men, she receives material gain in the form of jewelry. Li P'ing-erh's generosity and sagacity in this situation also helps her form an alliance not only with Ch'un-mei but with her mistress P'an as well, who is also much favored by Hsi-men.

The distribution of clothing to the women in the household is a direct reflection on their status in Hsi-men's harem. On one occasion, Hsi-men hires a tailor to make clothing for the ladies. The first lady receives enough material for six dresses, as befitting her status in the family. The second, third, fifth, and sixth ladies each receive an embroidered satin cloak and two silk dresses. Sun Hsueh-o, the fourth wife who works in

¹⁸⁷Roy, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, 175.

¹⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 295.

the kitchen and gets a visit from Hsi-men but rarely, gets no cloak and only one dress.¹⁸⁹

Such a disbursal of apparel highlights the unequal status of women in the harem.

Accordingly, P'an's constant efforts to replenish her wardrobe by asking Hsi-men for gifts of clothing and jewelry reflects her desire to elevate her status.

Clothing also plays a part in all of Hsi-men's relationships with women outside of his household. For example, Hsi-men begins an affair with Wang Liu-erh, the wife of his servant Han Tao-kuo. Han is fully cognizant of this relationship and encourages his wife to sleep with Hsi-men since this is the easiest way for them to make money. As expected, she receives much from him in the way of money and clothing. However, her relationship with him is ambiguous to others. On the one hand, she dresses more like a lady than a maid or a prostitute. On the other hand, she is not one of Hsi-men's legitimate wives. When asked to accompany Hsi-men and his friends on a festive occasion, Wang is ambivalent because she feels unclear about her role in this context. Persuaded by her husband to dress herself and attend, she does not know how to present herself to the two singing-girls hired from the brothels to help entertain the guests. The two girls scrutinized her from head to toe, taking in her "purple silk dress, a long black cloak, and a white ribboned skirt" which led them to the conclusion that she was a middle-class lady. When asked who she was, Hsi-men's page boy did not know how to respond and finally made up a story about how she was related to Hsi-men through his

¹⁸⁹ Egerton, *The Golden Lotus*, 2:190-191.

sister-in-law.¹⁹⁰ Wang, the wife of a servant who is having an illicit affair with her boss, also passes for a respectable woman of a middle-class family. This scene provides yet another criticism of Hsi-men's sexual exploits which raises ambiguity about Wang's rightful place in the Confucian hierarchy, and which blurs the boundaries between women of different social strata.

Body adornment as intent

Throughout the narrative, the arrangement of clothing and hair are significant of decorum and righteousness. In particular, we can see one's intent to seduce or to reject sexual overtures. We can glean much about body adornment from the subtle details in the interaction between Wu Sung and his sister-in-law, P'an Chin-lien near the beginning of the novel. Wu Sung, an ultra masculine figure, is a man of few words. Instead of learning of his thoughts and feelings through dialogue, the reader sees his resolve through his deeds and attire. In other words, Wu Sung's clothes speak for him.

When Wu Sung first arrives at his brother Wu the Elder's home, P'an is stirred by his masculine physique and decides to seduce him. Together with her husband Wu the Elder, P'an convinces Wu Sung to move in with them. In a subsequent scene, she creates an opportunity to be alone with him and offers him the required accouterments of seduction: food and wine. With "Her creamy breasts slightly exposed, and / Her cloudy locks half askew," she invites him to warm himself by the fire. Wu Sung proceeds to remove his boots and socks, put on a pair of warm slippers, and sits himself next to the

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 2:205-208.

brazier. P'an has effectively conjured an environment with an unmistakable hint of sensuality and domesticity. P'an begins to make comments full of sexual innuendo, hinting at her intent. She offers him more wine: "Have another cup. It takes two to make a couple." When he ignores her advances, she takes the fire-tongs out of his hands, saying "Brother-in-law, you don't know how to stir up a flame. Let me show you how. It's got to be red-hot or it won't do any good." Infuriated, Wu Sung wordlessly "took off his slippers and pulled his waxed boots back onto his feet. Then he put on his jacket and his wide-brimmed felt hat, fastened his belt, and strode out the front door."¹⁹¹ Soon afterwards, he moves out, but refuses to explain to his brother his reasons for leaving. With this act of putting his clothes and shoes back on, he makes a break with the couple.

In a subsequent scene, Wu Sung's resolve appears through his clothing once again. After P'an murders Wu the Elder and marries Hsi-men, Wu Sung returns to his brother's home and hears from the neighbour/procuress Dame Wang that his brother died of heart trouble and that his sister-in-law has remarried. Silently, he absorbs this information and walks out of Dame Wang's home without a parting word. He then returns to his lodgings, "changed into a set of plain white garments . . . a pair of cotton shoes, and a mourning cap" so as to perform the proper mourning rituals for his dead brother.¹⁹² Even though he has not spoken, the reader can perceive in these acts of dress

¹⁹¹ Roy, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, 38-41.

¹⁹² Ibid., 178.

Wu Sung's anguish, his suspicion, and perhaps his determination to investigate his brother's death and to rectify the situation.

Nudity in punishment in the *Chin P'ing Mei*

The removal of one's clothing is a form of humiliation that almost always precedes some form of physical punishment. Being stripped of one's clothing is equivalent to a complete loss of dignity, a reduction from human to animal. Echoing the analysis of bodily punishment in the previous chapter, the role of nudity also illustrates aspects of the *hun chün* in Hsi-men and those around him who are affected by his behavior.

P'an forces her stepdaughter Ying-erh and her hapless maid Ch'iu-chü to disrobe before whipping them. Hsi-men orders P'an to strip and whips her while interrogating her about the affair with Ch'in-tung. After Li Kuei-chieh, a prostitute favored by Hsi-men, complains about P'an's behavior towards her, Hsi-men orders P'an to strip and kneel before him. This removal of body covering is sufficient to bring P'an into a state of great distress. Hsi-men orders P'an's personal maid Ch'un-mei to bring the riding crop, but Ch'un-mei refuses to do his bidding and leaves the room. At a loss, Hsi-men relents. Laughing loudly, he says "I won't beat you then. You can get up."¹⁹³ He then lies to P'an to obtain a lock of her hair which he uses to appease Li Kuei-chieh. From this scene, we can tell how much he is already in the power of these two women. This tuft of hair becomes a trophy with which Hsi-men can maintain an appearance of power over his

¹⁹³ Ibid., 245.

women. While he brags of being a fearful husband who beats his wives frequently to ensure their obedience, he has actually become a coward and a liar whose main occupation is to mollify one woman after another, and who has to proffer valuable gifts and favors in order maintain his multiple sexual relationships and harmony in his home.

Hsi-men once again reveals his impotence as a husband in his interrogation of Li P'ing-erh, a few nights after she enters his household. Li had previously married a doctor Chiang Chu-shan after a fairly long period of neglect by Hsi-men, but unfortunately, Chiang did not live up to her expectations. Subsequently a couple of ruffians hired by Hsi-men gets the man into trouble with the local court. Finally, Li P'ing-erh and Hsi-men are reunited, but Hsi-men is still irate at her for having married someone else. Hsi-men, with riding crop in hand, orders her to strip and kneel before him. He interrogates her about her last husband, wanting to know how he compares to Chiang. Finally, Li P'ing-erh pacifies Hsi-men by telling him how he is far superior to Chiang because he is a better lover, more wealthy, and wears finer clothes.¹⁹⁴ On hearing these words, Hsi-men's anger evaporates and he forgives the woman. This view of Hsi-men reveals how much importance he places on his sexual prowess as well as the social status others attribute to him, which is intricately linked to his attire and his entourage.

Yet, Hsi-men's skills in bed are fatally linked to his inadequacy as a husband in the Confucian sense. Overwhelmed by having to protect himself from the consequences of corrupt business and political activities, he neglects to complete the necessary rites to

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 397-399.

make Li P'ing-erh his concubine. Instead, he leaves her with no knowledge of his whereabouts or plans. When she gives up on him and marries someone else, he resorts to underhanded, bullying tactics to punish both Chiang Chu-shan and Li P'ing-erh.

When Wu Sung kills P'an to avenge his dead brother, a complete removal of her dignity precedes the ultimate violation of her body. Wu Sung strips P'an of her clothing and makes her kneel naked in front of Wu the Elder's altar to admit to her crimes. Scared out of her wits, P'an no longer denies her guilt. After hearing her confession, Wu Sung throws her upon the ground, disordering her hair and causing her earrings to fall out. Then, he cuts open her chest, drags out her heart and entrails, and places them before his dead brother's spirit tablet to complete his vengeance.¹⁹⁵

Conclusion

For men as well as for women in late imperial China, clothing was of immense ritual importance. While the focus of this work requires a greater scrutiny of female adornment than male adornment, the link between correct Confucian behavior and proper clothing is of paramount concern to both men and women. Most of the important characters in the novel are presented first through their adorned bodies. It is only after a rich and descriptive representation of their sartorial state that we find out more about the character's background, status, vocation, or personality.

Clothing was important because it indicated status and favor. At the top of Hsi-men's harem hierarchy, Wu Yüeh-niang gets the finest and largest allotment as

¹⁹⁵ Egerton, *The Golden Lotus*, 4:193-194.

befitting her status as the first wife. Sun Hsüeh-o is one of Hsi-men's wives, but because of her lowly background and his lack of interest in her, her share of clothing is much smaller than any of the other wives. Women such as P'an use clothing as a tool to fortify their wealth and position within the household. While P'an adopts an unadorned face and disheveled hair to obtain Hsi-men's sympathy, there are other women for whom lack of ornamentation is a true reflection upon their distress and anguish. In a similar way, acts of adornment indicate Wu Sung's righteous determination in a wordless manner.

Hsi-men's behavior is also indicted through the novel's treatment of body adornment and punishment. He has so many bed mates that he cannot keep track of the love tokens he wears. At the same time, the exchange of jewelry and clothing in his illicit meetings gives a commercial flavor to many of his relationships. His relationships with women such as Wang Liu-erh or Sung Hui-lien, both of the lower classes, creates a new level in the hierarchy of his women. A woman of lowly background who has enjoyed Hsi-men's sexual attention begins to dress more like a lady, placing herself somewhere above the maidservant and below a legitimate wife. According to Chinese notions of dress, an improperly dressed person with unkempt hair was closer to animal than human. Physical punishment preceded by removal of clothing was equivalent to reducing a civilized person to an animal or savage. Thus, the removal of clothing before physical punishment throughout the *Chin P'ing Mei* resonates with this idea.

CHAPTER FOUR

BOUND FOOT AND SHOE IN THE *CHIN P'ING MEI*

While many of the arguments made in the previous chapter of this work apply to the foot and shoe as a form of attire, this chapter further examines the bound foot and shoe in the context of the *Chin P'ing Mei* for traces of the woman's experience. The bound foot and its erotic aura seem to be omnipresent throughout the *Chin P'ing Mei*. After all, one of the primary figures throughout the novel is P'an Chin-lien, named after the *san-tsun chin-lien* or the three-inch golden lotus, a euphemism for the ideal bound foot. By examining the occurrences of the foot and shoe in the *Chin P'ing Mei*, this chapter aims to shed some light on the dearth of information about the woman's perspective with regards to this practice. This relative silence resonates with the import of concealment and mystery in the bound foot's appeal. It is only with the passing of footbinding's venerated status that explicit connoisseurship literature about the bound foot appeared. Such writing was unequivocal about the sensual delight scholarly men found in the golden lotus. Yet, this material cannot attest to the woman's feelings about her feet, sexual or otherwise. In fact, the very explicitness of such writing signifies the "unequivocal demise" of the elevated status of the bound foot as a symbol of virtue and civility.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁶ Ko, "The Body as Attire," 9.

Although the previous two chapters of this work have discussed the body and its adornment separately, an analysis of the bound foot cannot be conducted separately of its dressing, that of the shoe. The bound foot's appeal lay in its coverings, in exquisite, embroidered shoes designed and tailored by the wearers' hands. Very few direct references to the naked bound foot can be found in erotic fiction; two examples cited here are connected to sadistic tendencies and only imply the bareness rather than describing it explicitly. In the mid-Qing novel *Lin Lan Hsiang* one wife punishes another by stripping her naked, "not leaving her even the footbindings."¹⁹⁷ In the *Chin P'ing Mei*, another hint of the naked foot occurs in the notorious scene between Hsi-men and P'an, in which Hsi-men uses P'an's footbindings in bondage.¹⁹⁸

Beyond the roles of the bound foot and shoe as a form of body adornment, this study proposes that more can be gleaned from a juxtaposition of recent scholarship on the bound foot and the text of the *Chin P'ing Mei*. As part of an exclusively female realm, footbinding involved private rites and beliefs which, Dorothy Ko argues, contributed to the longevity of the custom. A woman's life was marked by rituals surrounding this practice; once initiated into this world, shoemaking and the exchange of shoes was a predominant force in a woman's relationship with her mother and her interaction with other women. The bound foot itself was a product of womanly labor. Bound feet and

¹⁹⁷Keith McMahon, *Misers, Shrews, and Polygamists: Sexuality and Male-Female Relations in Eighteenth-Century Chinese Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 127-28, 133.

¹⁹⁸Egerton, *The Golden Lotus*, 1:384-386.

shoes represented female handiwork and creativity, not just through the making of beautiful shoes but also through the woman's act of binding her feet as a way to "improve" her beauty. Samples of Ming dynasty women's poetry contain expressions of the sensory pleasures and pride they found in their own feet. This concept of the bound foot is the polar opposite of modern perceptions of the practice. In this case, the bound foot was "a willful act that proclaimed the triumph of culture--a result of human efforts--over her natural body." As such, footbinding allowed women to "speak" in a world in which women's voices were for the most part, silent. In this way, perhaps we can see the bound foot as analogous to male writing, a form of inscription on the body that was the female equivalent of *wen*, which embodied the written word as well as the cultural prestige of the literati.¹⁹⁹

Ideas in the *Chin P'ing Mei*, in particular those surrounding the delineation of P'an Chin-lien and her activities, resonate with many historical views of the bound foot. The *Chin P'ing Mei* embraces the notion of the bound foot as a manifestation of an exclusively-female sphere. P'an Chin-lien is particularly proud of her feet. She exhibits them without shame, and competes with other women in shoemaking and adornment. Of course, shoemaking recurs as an important womanly activity throughout the novel. For P'an however, the activity of making shoes is tied both to her ability to adorn herself as

¹⁹⁹ Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Woman and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 150, 169-170; Dorothy Ko, "The Written Word and the Bound Foot: A History of the Courtesan's Aura," in *Writing Women in Late Imperial China*, eds. Ellen Widmer and Kang-i Sun Chang (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 96.

well as to an underlying rivalry among women in the harem. The visibility of her feet speaks for itself, for it goes against the grain of the refined, mysterious, reticent image of the bound foot as a symbol of virtue. The foot appears over and over again as a tool of seduction, even as a sign of P'an's promiscuity. The appearance of a doppelgänger-type figure in Sung Hui-lien, a woman with feet even smaller than P'an's, highlights her insecure monopoly over Hsi-men's affections, and elicits murderous jealousy on her part.

Significance of shoes

The bound foot served as a symbol of feminine beauty and morality, partly because the exalted art of embroidery was considered so synonymous with female virtue. Women spent much effort on designing and constructing the tiny shoes which they wore on their bound feet. The making and exchange of shoes among women was of utmost importance in friendships between aristocratic women. There was even an enthusiastic rivalry among women to make the most beautiful shoes. One woman interviewed by Levy said she inherited from her mother the desire to have beautifully-bound feet, and reminisced fondly about the enjoyment she received from making the shoes. She often competed with her sisters to see who made "the most elegantly embroidered shoes."²⁰⁰

Shoes and foot bindings were also essential items of a woman's dowry.

According to women interviewed by Levy, shoes and foot bindings were usually supplied

²⁰⁰ Levy, *The Lotus Lovers*, 239. This comes from an extensive chapter containing results of interviews with bound-footed women conducted in Taiwan between 1960 and 1961. Despite the fact that this is a twentieth-century quote, it does reflect upon ideas of shoemaking found in the *Chin P'ing Mei*.

by the bride's family. The shoes were customarily made by the bride herself. One woman stated that most women had six pairs of shoes in their dowry, and that wealthier women had twelve pairs or as many as sixteen. After marrying into a new household, it was customary for the bride to present her husband's sisters, mother, and grandmother with a new pair of handmade shoes, to exhibit her shoemaking skills.²⁰¹

The erotic aura of the bound foot

Much of the information available about the bound foot testifies to its erotic aspects. In his history of Chinese sexual life, Van Gulik points out that the foot acquired a special role in Chinese sexual life after the practice of footbinding began. After the Sung dynasty, a small, well-bound foot was an essential condition for a woman to be considered beautiful.²⁰² Levy believes that the practice of footbinding would not have survived for a thousand years had it not been for "its profound appeal to the Chinese male." This connection between the bound foot and sexual attraction was so widely acknowledged that footbinding abolitionists condemned the tiny foot as "lewd and lascivious," something that would "lead men astray and prevented him from fulfilling his social responsibilities."²⁰³

Levy's work is full of references to the erotic appeal of the bound foot, one example of which is a golden lotus enthusiast's description of various sexual positions

²⁰¹ Ibid., 272.

²⁰² Van Gulik, *Sexual Life in Ancient China*, 216-18.

²⁰³ Levy, *The Lotus Lovers*, 31.

involving the bound feet. Each posture has a euphonious and suggestive title like *Wild Duck Alighting on Both Shoulders*, a reference to a woman placing her embroidered shoes on her husband's shoulders, causing him to "become mentally intoxicated and spiritually lost." Others such as *Grasping Twin Bowed Shoes Behind His Back*, *Twin Peaks Fixed at the Waist*, or *Bright Flower, Concealed Willow* are accompanied by descriptions equally, if not more, explicit.²⁰⁴

The intimate way in which lotus lovers treated the bound foot behind the bed curtains may explain why women were so particular about decorating and perfuming their shoes and stockings. Bound foot enthusiast Fang Hsun wrote extensively about how women should wash and perfume their feet and shoes. According to Fang, the feet had to be anointed with an appropriate fragrance for each occasion. For example, he suggested the use of a sandalwood fragrance when binding, adding a fragrance to the water when washing, placing shoes and socks over a fragrant fire, and using an orchid fragrance when putting shoes and socks away.²⁰⁵

Foreign observers of this tradition also noted the sexual aspects of footbinding. German scholar H. Laderland wrote in 1928 that "the fundamental meaning of this injurious practice was the arousing of male lust." French doctor J. J. Matignon, who lived in China around 1895, saw many pornographic paintings in which the man was shown caressing the bound feet of his partner, leading him to believe that a bound foot in

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 159.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 116.

the hands of a Chinese man was the erotic equivalent of a European man caressing the breasts of a woman. He questioned Chinese men who exclaimed that Europeans had no idea how “exquisite, agreeable, and exciting” the bound foot was. Matignon even mentioned that he had heard of Chinese Christians admitting to having thought “evilily about a woman’s foot” during confession.²⁰⁶

The bound foot’s appeal was so strong that it contributed to the notion of a Chinese woman as a *femme fatale*, someone who could topple empires with her sex appeal. A Chinese scholar states his belief that the attraction of the bound foot can appease the cruel and barbaric natures of China’s northern invaders:

The reason these barbarians are able to leave their own territory easily and swiftly and come to invade us from a great distance is that there are no beautiful women in their northern regions. If we want to control these northern barbarians, we should bring it about so that they have many beauties and cause their men to be ensnared and deluded by feminine charm. We should teach them footbinding and persuade them to imitate us in dress. They will prize women with a willow waist and a lotus gait and a weak and alluring attitude. Barbarians who have been deluded by such women will then lose their cruel and harsh natures.²⁰⁷

The bound feet, being the most intimate center of a woman’s sexuality, became a necessary preliminary to sexual intimacy. Erotic novels from the Ming dynasty and beyond typically describe a man making sexual advances by first making verbal overtures, then by touching her feet under the guise of picking up a chopstick or a

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 130-131.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 32.

handkerchief from the floor. If this does not anger her, then, his target is willing and he can then proceed to make other forms of physical advances.²⁰⁸

These erotic accounts focus on several aspects of the bound feet: their size, their covering, their overall shape and appearance, and sometimes, their aroma. The smallness of women's feet was particularly stimulating. Several accounts describe the woman's feet fitting comfortably into the palms of her male lover or resting lightly on his shoulders. One lotus enthusiast argued that a "foot-long Lotus Boat" on the other hand, could not be held in the palm of one's hand, would be an unbearable "pair of ducks" on one's shoulders, and would lead directly to a loss of sexual interest and "could not conceivably cause one to lose his soul."²⁰⁹ Focusing on the shape, color, and other aesthetic qualities of the adorned foot, these accounts compared it to a half moon, a bow, a chestnut, a lotus, a bamboo shoot, or some other plant part.

The tiny, exquisitely-decorated shoes worn by women with bound feet became part of the sensual appeal of the small foot. Since the feet were washed and bound in the strictest privacy, the woman's foot and her shoes became symbols of a highly personal female activity which excluded the male gaze. Poetic references to these tiny shoes suggest a strong association with love and intimacy. It seems that red shoes made for wear in bed were particularly arousing to the male. Special sleeping shoes were usually made of red silk or satin, perfumed and lovingly embroidered. The shoes were treated as

²⁰⁸ Van Gulik, *Sexual Life*, 218.

²⁰⁹ Levy, *The Lotus Lovers*, 167. Throughout his anecdotes, this author uses the term "losing one's soul" to refer to orgasm.

tokens of love. Some women gave them to men as signs of their affection. The red of the shoes was meant to contrast with the whiteness of the women's bare legs, and their texture and aroma were meant to invoke ardor. According to the *Tsai-fei lu*, some shoes even had erotic images embroidered on them. Fang Hsun also talks about how a large foot would be inappropriate in red shoes, the popular color for boudoir shoes worn by women with bound feet. This poem conveys the sensual aspects of the tiny red shoe:

May this red satin shoe, my love,
Worn only once,
Resolve your lonely melancholy.
Place it under your bedcovers.
Caress it to your heart's desire.
Enjoy it in my absence.
When will it rejoin its mate?
When we are as one.²¹⁰

Furthermore, drinking games using tiny shoes featured prominently in literature dedicated to the bound foot. According to Levy, many drinking games during the late imperial age involved drinking from tiny shoes. In the Sung dynasty, instead of drinking directly from the shoe, a cup would be placed in it. This cup was termed the "Cup of the Golden Lotus." Levy describes a Yüan dynasty official who enjoyed drinking directly out of tiny shoes so much so that he earned the title "patron saint of tiny-shoe inebriation." Levy also recorded a Yüan dynasty drinking game termed "The Raft" which men played in the company of prostitutes. The prostitute with the smallest feet would remove her shoes. One shoe would hold a wine cup while the participants tried to toss small fruits

²¹⁰ Levy, *The Lotus Lovers*, 121-122, 141, 153, 265, 117; Jackson, *Splendid Slippers*, 50-51, 104.

and seeds into her other shoe. Participants with the least number of successful throws would be punished by having to drink from the shoe-cup.²¹¹

Part of the erotic aura of the bound foot was the link between footbinding and supposed positive effects on a woman's body and sexual nature. Among the connoisseurship literature, there is much writing that argues for the positive physiological effects footbinding may have had on the woman's sexual anatomy and sexual enjoyment. Levy and Van Gulik both cite evidence of this belief. The gait of a woman with bound feet, for example, brought about "a special development of the *mons veneris* and vaginal reflexes."²¹² A Taiwanese doctor was said to believe that footbinding created tension in the lower extremities of the female body, which caused the skin and flesh of her legs and her vagina to become tighter, while making her buttocks bigger and more alluring to the male eye. The German sinologist H. Laderland also noted that footbinding stunted the growth of a woman's legs, which resulted in her walking weight being placed on her thighs and hips. Laderland believed that as a woman with bound feet walked, the outer folds of the vagina rubbed against one another, and thus she developed the ability to press her hips together more forcefully during sexual intercourse, and also had greater sexual desire than women without bound feet. Late imperial footbinding apologist Ku Hung-ming was quoted in a Shanghai newspaper as saying that "the smaller the woman's foot, the more wondrous become the folds of the vagina" as a result of which sex would

²¹¹ Ibid., 121.

²¹² Van Gulik, *Sexual Life in Ancient China*, 219.

result in a “supernatural exaltation.” This he used to argue against the notion that footbinding oppressed women, since it enhanced their sexual enjoyment.²¹³

Much has also been written about a woman’s sexual feelings with regard to her own bound feet. Levy’s tome is full of quotes arguing that women found sexual enjoyment when their partners lavished attention upon their feet.²¹⁴ The problem with these accounts of course is the male-centric basis of the bound foot’s sexual appeal. Most of these writings were authored by men who may have believed or perpetuated these beliefs in order to justify the painful custom, and thus cannot really bespeak the sexual feelings experienced by women. None of these writings can testify to the woman’s experience with regard to her bound feet, although it seems that the writers certainly tried to project male admiration for the bound feet onto women.

While there is no scientific basis for these arguments, they are intriguing because they denote how, once again, the bound foot became a political symbol during an age of social and political turmoil. In the twentieth century, when Chinese identity was again threatened by foreign invaders, the bound foot symbolized the infirmities of the ruling order. Foot emancipators argued that it was a benighted practice that highlighted the chasm between China’s backwardness and the modernity of the West. Perhaps the pseudoscientific arguments in favor of the bound foot attempted to link the practice with modern notions of female liberation by focusing on female sexual pleasure. Female

²¹³ Levy, *The Lotus Lovers*, 34, 130, 141.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 135–136, 143–149, 151, 188.

sexual enjoyment for its own sake had never been a priority in Chinese medical texts. For the most part, Taoist sexual alchemy dealt with female orgasm as a tool for the man to maintain the correct and natural sexual hierarchy in which men maintained physical control while benefiting from multiple female partners. From a Confucian perspective, the sexual practices espoused by Taoist sexual texts may have served a pragmatic purpose in polygamous households, in which female sexual satisfaction was perhaps vital for maintaining domestic harmony. Ultimately, it seems that during the demise of the Ming dynasty as well as that of the Qing dynasty, the bound foot took on new political and sexual meanings.

Political associations aside, it is certain that the fetishization of women's feet and shoes transcends time and space. Many literary sources other than the *Chin P'ing Mei* serve to show that the erotic appeal of women's feet transcended boundaries of space and time. A Ming dynasty work of erotica *Jou p'u t'uan* (*The Carnal Prayer Mat*) describes the adventures of a licentious young man and often refers to a woman's gait and a woman's foot in sexual ways. Centuries later across the Sea of Japan, Tanizaki Junichiro (1886-1965), extolled as one of Japan's finest modern writers, addresses the erotic nature of the foot in his novels *Diary of a Mad Old Man* and *The Key*.²¹⁵ Ha Jin, a contemporary novelist who writes about twentieth-century China, uses the bound foot as a metaphor for traditional Chinese life. In his novel *Waiting*, an army official is torn between his wife

²¹⁵ See Tanizaki Junichiro, *Diary of a Mad Old Man*, trans. Howard Hibbett (New York: Vintage International, 1991), 40, 66-68, 83, 153-155; Tanizaki Junichiro, *The Key*, trans. Howard Hibbett (New York: Vintage International, 1991), 31; Li Yu, *The Carnal Prayer Mat*, trans. Patrick Hanan (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1990), 47-48.

from an arranged marriage and a modern, educated young woman with whom he works. His colleagues find his wife's bound feet a source of great amusement. They offer her money to take off her shoes, but she protects her feet from their gaze with determined reserve. Only her husband, she says, is allowed to see them. Removing the shoes and socks, she says, is akin to "open[ing] your pants."²¹⁶

Certainly, the modern association of sex appeal with the high-heeled shoe resonates with late imperial concepts of the bound foot and shoe. Contemporary shoe designer Manolo Blahnik's provocative stilettos seem to evoke many of the same sentiments associated with footbinding. Blahnik is credited with having a profound understanding of the sexual power of the high heel: how a pair of shoes can change a woman's posture and gait by emphasizing the length of the leg, curving the foot and making it seem smaller, pushing a woman's chest forward and rear out, all before she takes a single rickety step. Women who gladly pay hundreds of dollars for his handmade shoes, described as "highly-refined torture chambers" for the feet, hold a rather flippant attitude towards the orthopedic damage Blahnik's creations inflict upon them. One Blahnik fan said: "What do you really need your feet for anyway?" The designer himself waxes poetic about the ideal dimensions and shapes for the feet of women, saying for example that higher arches are more beautiful and that the "proper alignment" of a woman's toes should be such that the second toe is slightly longer than the big toe.²¹⁷

²¹⁶ Ha Jin, *Waiting* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), 205-206.

²¹⁷ Michael Specter, "High-heel heaven: A visit to the madcap world of Manolo Blahnik," *The New Yorker Magazine* (20 March 2000), 102-111.

Perhaps, one can see the transformation of the stiletto from the province of the prostitute to that of “respectable” women as parallel to the spread of the bound foot from the realms of imperial concubines and professional courtesans to the dwellings of the intelligentsia. Blahnik fans, like those who espoused the appeal of footbinding, seem to disdain physical pain and harm to the body as a small and inevitable price to pay for beauty. Through the designer’s own words, one can also see the arbitrary and artificially-constructed preferences with regard to the ideal shape and size of a woman’s feet, whether they be a Ming dynasty Chinese woman’s three-inch golden lotuses or those of a twentieth-century Western woman sporting Blahnik’s stilettos.

The veiled erotic: bound feet and concealment

French symbolist poet Stephane Mallarme’s notion of the “veiled erotic” explains how a partially or completely concealed body part can become a sexually-charged, fetishistic symbol, more stirring than the unclad body part. This concept seems to apply aptly to the bound foot as well as the various foci of desire in other cultures: the breast in the Western world, the nape of the neck in Japan, and the *derrière* in Africa and the Carribean.²¹⁸

The concealment of the bound foot was an integral aspect of the foot’s erotic nature. Women’s feet were considered the most intimate part of her anatomy. Since a woman’s bound feet were concealed and mysterious, they eventually became the “exclusive possession” of her husband, and the touching of a woman’s bound foot

²¹⁸ Marilyn Yalom, *A History of the Breast* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 3.

symbolized the highest form of intimacy between a man and woman. If anyone other than her husband touched a woman's feet, she would feel deep embarrassment and shame.²¹⁹ It was common for erotic art from Sung and later dynasties to depict naked women and their genitalia in stark detail, but such paintings stopped at depicting the bare, bound foot.²²⁰ In fact, erotic paintings involving the bound foot were sometimes demure and subtle. For example, one erotic painting simply shows a single, brightly-colored lotus slipper peeking out from behind dark, drawn bed curtains, its elevated position suggesting that the woman's feet are resting on her lover's shoulders.²²¹ The third volume of the *Ts'ai-fei lu* reproduces an erotic picture by Ming artist Ch'iu Ying. This painting portrays a bedroom scene in which a man playfully withholds the shoes of the woman, who is sitting on the bed trying to secure the bindings of her feet. While both are fully clothed and are not engaged in any sexual act, the erotic nature of this painting dwells in the evocative setting.²²²

The exposure of the bound foot signified the demise of its appeal. Thus, Dorothy Ko argues that the connoisseurship literature focusing upon the erotic appeal of the golden lotus is historiographically suspect. "For such explicit disclosure of vulgar details is possible only in an era when the cultural aura of footbinding had weakened and the

²¹⁹ Levy, *The Lotus Lovers*, 127.

²²⁰ Van Gulik, *Sexual Life in Ancient China*, 218.

²²¹ Jackson, *Splendid Slippers*, 102.

²²² Van Gulik, *Sexual Life in Ancient China*, 218n.1.

social status of its practitioners had declined.”²²³ Indeed, the bound foot in the *Chin P'ing Mei* is not always associated with gentility or virtue. Often it seems to exhibit vulgarity through imprudent display, or lasciviousness through sexual dissipation.

Beyond the sensual aspects however, the visibility of the bound foot seems to parallel the increasing visibility of women in the late imperial age, a source of great anxiety to the intelligentsia. Growing mobility of women eroded the tenet of separate spheres so fundamental to Sung dynasty Neo-Confucian ideas regarding male and female roles. As Patricia Ebrey has argued, footbinding’s rise in popularity during the Sung ameliorated the “scholar-gentry’s insecurity with blurred boundaries--between the two sexes and between the Han Chinese and peoples from the steppes.” A desire for women with small feet, who were by definition less active, less robust, and less mobile, maintained gender boundaries in a world where the male ideal became more “subdued and refined.”²²⁴

The foot and shoe in the *Chin P'ing Mei*

The delineation of bound feet and shoes in the *Chin P'ing Mei* is multifaceted rather than monolithic, much like the construct of the bound foot in historical scholarship. Beyond the multiple meanings embodied by the practice of footbinding, this study further examines the *Chin P'ing Mei* for information about the role of the bound foot within a

²²³ Ko, “The Body as Attire,” 9.

²²⁴ Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, 148; Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 40-41.

polygamous household. An analysis of the foot and shoe in the *Chin P'ing Mei* supports many historical notions gleaned from the primary sources and the secondary scholarship on this topic. First, the author of the *Chin P'ing Mei* employs the literary convention in which formulaic descriptions of a beautiful woman always refer to her well-shaped, beautifully-shod feet.

Second, the foot's erotic nature is unequivocally supported by the *Chin P'ing Mei*. This delineation is in accord with Ming dynasty literary erotica such as the *Jou p'u t'uan* or erotic paintings from that period. For instance, the *Chin P'ing Mei* quotes from other literary sources to denote the foot and sexual pleasure: "Silk stockings in the air. / Two new moons rise above his shoulders" ²²⁵ Hsi-men insists upon P'an making red shoes to wear in bed, and any other color seems to dampen his ardor. ²²⁶ The first lady refuses to allow the burial of the sixth lady in her scarlet shoes, perhaps because of their erotic connotations. ²²⁷ The *Chin P'ing Mei* also uses the foot when describing the seduction process, as can be seen from scenes in which Hsi-men first seduces P'an or when Hsi-men's son-in-law Ch'en Ching-chi makes overtures to P'an by fondling her feet. ²²⁸ The use of tiny shoes in drinking games also features in the *Chin P'ing Mei*. Hsi-men

²²⁵ Roy, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, 85. The term "new moons" was one of the poetic euphemisms for the crescent-shaped bound feet.

²²⁶ Egerton, *The Golden Lotus*, 2:10.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 3:143.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:332; Roy, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, 83, 85.

playfully places a little cup of wine in one of P'an's shoes and drank a "shoe cup," leading her to say "My feet aren't as small as all that . . . Don't make fun of me, sir."²²⁹

It seems that the foot and shoe were often associated with matters of love and passion. When P'an is waiting forlornly for Hsi-men to come visit her, she uses her shoes to cast a love hexagram to divine the future. In another scene, P'an invites a fortune-telling astrologer to cast a spell binding Hsi-men's heart to her forever. The man makes male and female effigies representing the couple and binds their wooden feet together with glue. This act is supposed to attach Hsi-men so securely to P'an that it would be "impossible for him to go out and sow any more wild oats." When Li P'ing-erh attempts suicide after Hsi-men neglects her, she uses her foot bindings to hang herself from the rafters.²³⁰

The golden lotus embodied both eroticism and female virtue, two seemingly contradictory ideas. Because of these associations, the delineation of the bound foot and shoe throughout the *Chin P'ing Mei* seems to manifest both these notions: that the small foot and shoe represented female handiwork and female virtue, as well as the concept that the bound foot was an invitation to lasciviousness and a requisite instrument of the femme fatale. There is also historical evidence of this belief, that a woman's bound feet and beauty could appease the warlike nature of Northern invaders by making them enthusiasts of the golden lotus.

²²⁹ Roy, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, 123.

²³⁰ Ibid., 148, 251, 395.

Descriptions of feminine beauty also parallel the diametric readings from the portrayal of the bound foot. In Chinese literary tradition, a description of a woman's outer beauty was often a reflection upon her inner cultivation. This form of cultivation was based upon Confucian standards, so an archetypal Chinese beauty was often chaste, pious, and virtuous. The *Chin P'ing Mei* however, adopts an impish yet admonitory tone of voice when describing feminine beauty. It seems that the narrative uses feminine allure to signify the negative and dangerous aspects of women rather than their virtues. For example, P'an is described with these words: "... a two-edged sword lurks between her thighs, whereby destruction comes to foolish men."²³¹

Keeping in mind this dichotomy, we can see that the relative visibility of the bound foot throughout the narrative is pregnant with meaning. In descriptions of the archetypal beautiful woman, the pointed tips of her lotus shoes always peeked out from beneath her skirt. Her feet were always adorned, and one never saw more than a hint of them. This accords with Ko's proposal that the bound foot's allure lay in mystery and relative secrecy. However, in the *Chin P'ing Mei*, the feet of P'an, the central female character, are not only omnipresent but highly visible.

Female handiwork and intimacy

Shoemaking was part of a woman's work, regardless of social status. While Hsi-men's wives lived in luxury and had servants to take care of all kinds of duties, it seems that they chose to perform the chore of shoemaking in their leisure. This

²³¹ Egerton, *The Golden Lotus*, 1:1.

demonstrates the vital role of shoemaking in a woman's domestic life. While it was sometimes a chore that could be delegated to the maidservants, women also took pride in making shoes for themselves, which gave them occasion to express their creative abilities and embroidery skills. When Hsi-men's first wife has a birthday, Li P'ing-erh sends a dazzling array of gifts including food, cloth, and a pair of shoes "made for her with her own hands."²³² Such a gift was not only a considerate act, it seems also to have been a way for Li to exhibit her feminine craft. For the maidservants, shoemaking was probably a preferred task since it was a lighter form of labor than cooking or doing laundry. Mother Feng, an older woman who works for Li P'ing-erh, would come to the Hsi-men household to do laundry and help the maids in shoemaking.²³³ To get out of cooking a pig's head in the kitchen, Sung Hui-lien says that she is too busy making shoes for her mistress.²³⁴

When Li P'ing-erh begins her affair with Hsi-men, she detects right away that the two women most powerful in his harem are the first and fifth ladies, the first because of her status as the principal wife, the fifth because of Hsi-men's partiality towards her. Li asks their ages and expresses a desire to acknowledge P'an as her sworn sister. Li then offers to make shoes for them "as a token of my feelings."²³⁵ She did not ask after any of

²³² Roy, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, 393.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 290.

²³⁴ Egerton, *The Golden Lotus*, 1:319.

²³⁵ Roy, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, 267.

Hsi-men's three other wives, nor does she offer to make shoes for them or express an interest in becoming sworn sisters with them. For the most part, while Li appears to be guileless and gracious, she is also a very discerning character when it comes to harem politics. This act is perhaps a premeditated one meant to ameliorate any bruised feelings should news of the affair eventually get out. Most importantly, through her offer to make shoes for the two women, she has acknowledged the legitimate authority of the first lady as well as the implicit power of the fifth lady. Li's intent is clear to Chin-lien, who on finding out about the affair, says "I don't need that whore to acknowledge me as any older brother or older sister She steals other people's husbands and then comes around offering to do them little favors as a means of cementing the relationship."²³⁶

Important female activities also took place in the course of shoemaking. After Li Ping-erh comes into the household, she becomes friends with P'an and they work together on their shoes, comparing embroidery, fabrics, and shoe patterns. This scene conveys an idealized domestic scene in which wives of one husband enjoy a sisterly relationship over shared labor:

Tower of Jade told her maid to make some tea and bring it out to them. Holding hands, with shoes in their sleeves, the two women went to the garden Golden Lotus told . . . [the Moon Lady] that the Lady of the Vase had sent her for Tower of Jade and that they were going to design some shoes. They went on to the garden. There they all sat down together, and looked at each other's work.²³⁷

²³⁶ Ibid., 269.

²³⁷ Egerton, *The Golden Lotus*, 2:13. The Moon Lady is the first wife Wu Yüeh-niang, Tower of Jade is Meng Yü-lou, Lady of the Vase is Li P'ing-erh, and Golden Lotus is P'an Chin-lien.

In the course of this activity, the women talk about happenings in the household. A year or so later, P'an's relationship with Li changes when the latter gives birth to Hsi-men's first male child. Out of jealousy, P'an excludes Li from the shoemaking circle. She invites Meng Yü-lou with her to visit Ta-chieh, Hsi-men's daughter, who is making shoes. The conversation begins on the shoe patterns and the colors of the fabric, but soon moves on to the issue of Li and her newly elevated status in the household. Thus, the activity of shoemaking provides a backdrop for the women to share information and to discuss recent events in the household, as well as for P'an to express her feelings of bitterness towards Li.²³⁸

Ritual importance

In the same way that body adornment played a part in public and private rituals, the presentation of shoes was an important aspect for domestic relationships. For a woman who did not have her own wealth and property, her handiwork may have been her only form of collateral. Hsi-men marries Meng shortly after beginning an affair with P'an. Busy with bringing this new wife into his household and with his own daughter's wedding, Hsi-men neglects P'an for about a month. Desperate for his attention, she begs Tai-an, Hsi-men's page boy, to get Hsi-men to visit her again. Being a widow with little money, she has nothing to extend to him except for a pair of handmade shoes.²³⁹ Ironically, Li repeats this offer to Tai-an several chapters later, when she needs Tai-an to

²³⁸ Ibid., 3:65-66.

²³⁹ Roy, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, 153.

lie to the first lady about Hsi-men's whereabouts. Giving him some money, she also offers him a pair of handmade shoes: "If you bring me the outlines of your feet sometime soon, I'll make a nice pair of shoes for you."²⁴⁰

While it was customary for women entering a household to present a pair of shoes to the mistress of the inner quarters, be it mother-in-law or first wife, it seemed that making a gift of shoes was also a way to establish cordial relationships, maybe even alliances, between women. When P'an enters Hsi-men's household, she fulfills this formality by presenting Hsi-men's first wife Wu Yüeh-niang with a pair of hand made shoes.²⁴¹ Subsequently, P'an panders to the First Lady by accompanying her in the activity of shoemaking. The prostitute Li Kui-chieh, patronized by Hsi-men, makes shoes for Wu Yueh-niang when offering herself as an adopted daughter.²⁴² This act flattered Wu, who was then happy to acknowledge the young singing-girl as an adopted daughter, inviting her to all festivities in the Hsi-men home and bestowing upon her gifts of silver, food, and clothing.

Visibility

The relative visibility of the bound feet is linked to a lack of female virtue or propriety. It even seems to signify a woman's role as a sexual predator. The prime example of the sexual predator is P'an Chin-lien, who flaunts her feet to get male

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 319.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 173.

²⁴² Egerton, *The Golden Lotus*, 2:60.

attention. When the novel first introduces her as Wu the Elder's wife, we see how she invites the gaze of passersby by standing at the window, "cracking melon seeds with her teeth, and revealing her tiny golden lotuses for all to see." Such behavior was effective in inviting amorous notice from the men in the neighborhood: "young gentlemen . . . gathered on her doorstep day after day . . . giving voice to every indecent suggestion their fertile imaginations could invent."²⁴³ When she meets Hsi-men, the description of her adorned body is incomplete without a lengthy description of her adorned feet:

Her ankle leggings, concealed above,
 extend below.
The upturned points of her tiny golden lotuses
 are just visible:
With a pattern of mountain peaks embroidered
 on the tips of their toes.
Her raven-hued shoes, with high white satin heels,
 are made to order for tripping the fragrant dust:
Her red silk ankle leggings are figured with
 orioles among the flowers;
Whether walking or sitting, the breeze parts her
 skirts and reveals what lies below.²⁴⁴

Directly viewing a woman's feet or footbindings was highly inappropriate. When Meng Yü-lou marries Hsi-men, a dispute breaks out between two relatives of her late husband who both have an interest in her wealth. Chang the Fourth, the maternal uncle of Meng's late husband, demands to go through her belongings so as to ensure that nothing belonging to her late husband's estate should go with her to Hsi-men's household. Meng

²⁴³ Roy, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, 29.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 51. The indentation in this passage follows Roy's structure in his translation, which takes into account the multiple layers of the narrative in the original.

protests the brazen nature of this request: "No doubt you want to have a look at my shoes and footbindings too!"²⁴⁵ Her suggestion, which would violate a rule of propriety surrounding a woman's bound feet, highlights the intrusive nature of Chang's demand. One who looked directly at women's feet was considered lecherous and indecorous. Hsi-men tells Chin-lien a tall tale meant to deride Chiang Chu-shan, the doctor who had deprived him of marrying Li P'ing-erh: "He's got you fooled . . . You say he lowers his gaze when he sees you. That's only the better to ogle your feet." Chin-lien professes to be scandalized by this: "I don't believe a cultivated man like that would do any such thing."²⁴⁶

Throughout the novel, the procuresses, archetypal women who benefit from the sexual appeal of younger women and the lasciviousness of rich men, display a deep awareness of the sexual appeal of the bound foot. When meeting Meng Yü-lou, Hsi-men gets a glimpse of a pair of "well-formed and attractive" feet under her skirt, along with her other features. At this point, we already know Hsi-men is very happy with what he sees: "Hsi-men Ch'ing no sooner saw her than his heart was filled with delight." However, Auntie Hsüeh the procuress does not seem to be satisfied with regard to Hsi-men's approval of the woman. Perhaps she is eager to cement the match so as to ensure her part of the profit. Without warning, Auntie Hsüeh suddenly approaches the woman and lifts her skirt to reveal:

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 142.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 384-385.

The upturned points of her tiny golden lotuses,
Barely three inches long,
But half a span in length,
Peeking out beneath her skirt.

The narrative continues to describe Meng's scarlet shoes and the "tips decorated with cloud patterns of gold brocade and high white satin heels." Once again, Hsi-men's "heart was filled with delight."²⁴⁷ Both Hsi-men and the procuress Auntie Hsüeh have monetary interests in Meng Yü-lou, for both would profit from this marriage. Such an improper exhibition of Meng's feet to secure the transaction reinforces the strong mercantile flavor of this match.

The only instance in which P'an's unshod feet are completely exposed occurs in the episode considered by C. T. Hsia as the "most obscene in Chinese literature," as described in chapter one of this work.²⁴⁸ P'an loses a shoe after this encounter, and the circulation of this item from one hand to another is something she finds extremely embarrassing and infuriating. After having lost her shoe in the garden, she is furious to find out that a servant boy Little Iron Rod had picked it up and given it to Ch'en, Hsi-men's son-in-law. She complains to Hsi-men about the boy: "that little slave--he deserves to be cut into a thousand pieces--got my shoe. He has taken it outside and by this time everybody must have seen it." Hsi-men, enraged, gave the boy such a severe kicking that he bled from his nose and passed out for some time. The boy's mother was

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 134.

²⁴⁸ Hsia, *The Classic Chinese Novel*, 191.

indignant that this abuse should have been visited upon the body of her ten-year old son.

She curses P'an vociferously: "What does he know about your queynt?"²⁴⁹

Since the shoe was such an intimate part of a woman's apparel, it is no wonder that P'an should be so irked by this incident. Moreover, the narrative implies that the little boy had actually witnessed the sexual encounter between P'an and Hsi-men in the garden. Thus, her desire for Hsi-men to punish him reflects her embarrassment on two levels: first, for having her shoe handled by so many strange hands, and second, for having been observed with Hsi-men in a sexual engagement. When she complains to Hsi-men about the boy, her anger is more closely tied to the gaze of many on her shoe rather than the theft of it. The boy's mother's statement also equates P'an's lost shoe with her genitalia. Finally, the shoe comes back to her through Ch'en, with whom P'an has a clandestine flirtation. He refuses to return it until she gives him a handkerchief in return, also a very personal item symbolizing intimacy. While the shoe finally returns to its rightful owner through a circuitous route, its journey seems to represent P'an's promiscuity. The first lady Meng speaks of this impropriety: "Now, all for the sake of a paltry shoe, she sets both heaven and earth in a turmoil. If she had been wearing the shoe in a proper and decent manner, it would not have been there for the boy to pick up. I suppose she was playing some dirty game in the garden with that man of hers, and

²⁴⁹ Egerton, *The Golden Lotus*, 2:9-10. Egerton's translation uses the word "queynt" to refer to female genitalia.

drinking, and dropped her shoe. Now in order to keep the shameful business dark, she throws all the blame on the boy."²⁵⁰

Foot, shoe, and feminine rivalry

Episodes concerning Sung Hui-lien and her swift ascension and demise in Hsi-men's household provides interesting points of contrast with P'an, as well as some important observations on the significance of feet and shoes. When the novel first introduces Sung, readers learn that she has the same given name Chin-lien as the book's central female character, P'an Chin-lien. On entering Hsi-men's household, her name is changed to Hui-lien to avoid confusion. We also learn that her feet are even smaller than P'an's, and that while she initially dresses as a servant in plain clothes, she soon begins to imitate P'an in body adornment, thus attracting Hsi-men's amorous attention.

Like P'an, Sung is a master at using her feminine wiles to her advantage. After receiving Hsi-men's sexual favors, her status in the household changes rather dramatically. She works in the kitchen less frequently and fraternizes with the ladies and the favored maids. On one occasion, Sung puts on a pair of P'an's shoes over her own to keep from dirtying them. While frolicking with Hsi-men, she notices his attentiveness to her feet, and uses it for material gain:

You do nothing but look at my feet though you know them perfectly well already. I have no new shoes. Will you buy some tops for me, and let me show you what beautiful shoes I can make?

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 2:14.

Hsi-men agrees immediately, marveling at how her feet were even smaller than P'an's.

"There is no comparison between hers and mine I tried on her shoes yesterday and found I could get into them with my own shoes on my feet." Eavesdropping on this conversation, P'an thinks to herself, "If I allow this strumpet to carry on like this . . . she will be the end of me." and resolves to defend her control over Hsi-men.²⁵¹ Of course, Sung is no match for P'an. Not knowing that her words from the night before were overheard, Sung attends to P'an the next day, but P'an says:

Please do not concern yourself about my maids, but go away I will have my own maids to attend to me. Besides, my dirty place will soil your shoes. Hadn't you better go and wait upon his Lordship? He likes to have women of your sort about him. He and I are the dew-and-water kind of husband and wife, and I am a twice-married woman. You, Sister, are of a very different kind: you came in a sedan-chair. You are the real wife.

P'an's acrimonious words remind Sung of her place in the domicile. On her knees, Sung avers her loyalty and gratitude to P'an, and gets away with this warning:

I do not like to have dust thrown in my eyes . . . if my husband wants you I shall not interfere, but I will not have you playing tricks and putting me in an invidious position. You must think twice before you decide to come between us.²⁵²

This incident elucidates the role bound feet may have played in harem rivalry. It is obvious that Sung's small feet are a focus for Hsi-men's sexual fascination. Well aware of the advantage her feet have bestowed upon her, Sung uses them not only to get new shoes but also to boost herself in the eyes of Hsi-men and to compare herself favorably to P'an. Perhaps this is also an indirect way for Sung to subvert P'an's hold

²⁵¹ Egerton, *The Golden Lotus*. 1:311, 1:335, 1:325

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 1:327-328.

over Hsi-men, which is certainly P'an's interpretation of the situation. From P'an's perspective, being placed in an "invidious" position arises simply from a negative comparison of the size of her feet to Sung's.

Even after P'an has emerged from this power struggle victorious, Sung's feet and shoes continue to haunt her. Chapters after Sung's suicide, the infamous sex scene analyzed in the first chapter of this work occurs, in which Hsi-men removes P'an's shoes, unravels her footbindings, and ties her ankles to a trellis. The following day, P'an discovers that one of her red shoes is missing and orders a search. This quest turns up a shoe almost identical to P'an's shoe, but which fits a little tightly. She realizes that this shoe had belonged to Sung Hui-lien, and that Hsi-men had been keeping this souvenir of their amour carefully hidden away from the eyes of his other wives. P'an is infuriated and takes out her jealousy on her maid Ch'iu-chü. Even though Sung is dead, P'an's lingering resentment is apparent when she interrogates Hsi-men about the shoe:

"Wistaria's stinking hoof, kept in your summer-house, among your visiting-cards, as if it were some precious jewel, wrapped up in paper and incense! Pray, what makes it so precious?" She is not appeased until she has called for a knife, announcing her intent to "cut that whore's shoe into little pieces and throw it in the privy. That will banish the thievish strumpet for ever beyond the hills of Hades, so that never again can she come to life."²⁵³ Once again, the feet of the two women merge in the narrative in a rather contentious way. It seems that Sung's feet have come back from the grave to remind P'an

²⁵³ Ibid., 2:10-11. In Egerton's translation. Wistaria is Sung Hui-lien.

that her control over Hsi-men is rather tenuous at best and that one woman may do for him just as well as another.

The Chin P'ing Mei as harbinger of demise

The *Chin P'ing Mei* depicts the deterioration of various elements of Chinese society that occur during the Ming dynasty: the elite status of the bound foot, the prestige of the courtesan, and the literati monopoly over politics, culture, and society. Dorothy Ko presents an argument linking the bound foot, the written word, and the courtesan to *wen*, a word which embodies literature, civility, and culture. According to Ko, the decline of these elements of elite Chinese society is intricately linked to the disintegration of Chinese imperial rule, which rested heavily on *wen*.²⁵⁴ As such, the *Chin P'ing Mei* can be read as a portent of demise, not only of the Ming dynasty, but of Chinese imperial rule as well.

The bound foot, once a marker of female chastity, virtue, and good breeding, reached its height of popularity during the Ming dynasty. However, once mothers from the lower classes began binding the feet of their daughters in order to emulate women of the gentility, the practice became so widespread that its luster began to erode, losing its status as a sign of civility, culture, and social status.²⁵⁵

The disintegration of traditional values associated with the bound foot parallels the decline of the courtesan and her clientele during the late imperial age. During the

²⁵⁴ Ko, "The Written Word," 77.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 76-77.

Ming dynasty, the patronage of erudite and prominent men lent courtesans an air of social and cultural distinction. The courtesan embodied not only female beauty but female literacy as well. Her quarters resembled a scholar's private retreat while it resided in a public establishment of pleasure. This dichotomy reflects the two defining characteristics of the courtesan during the height of her distinction: male literacy embodied in the written word and female sensuality in the form of her bound feet. This tension, Ko argues, "constituted the aura of courtesan culture at its height."²⁵⁶ After the Ch'ing conquest of China, the new government did away with the maintenance of official prostitutes in pleasure centers, bringing about a "vulgarization of courtesan culture." While the trade persisted in the private realm, vulgarization of the courtesan trade is "evident in both the goods purveyed and their buyers." Late eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century courtesans were no longer literate like their Ming dynasty predecessors, and their patrons no longer consisted of scholar-officials and promising examination candidates. "Merchants and semiliterate vendors had replaced aspirant and high-ranking scholar officials as the financiers and chroniclers of pleasure." The focus of the courtesan trade had changed as well. Profit and instant pleasure, rather than the "deferment and concealment of desires," became central to the courtesan's relationship with her patron.²⁵⁷

The demise of the bound foot and courtesan culture is intricately linked to the decay of the written word, which had once provided for the intellectual elite a "gateway

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 76.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 75.

to political power and cultural authority.”²⁵⁸ The founder of the Ming dynasty, Chu Yüan-chang (1328-1398), a man of common rank, advanced elementary education for the masses more than any previous Chinese emperor.²⁵⁹ The Ming dynasty spread of literacy and popular literature molded the written word into a “tool of inclusion rather than exclusion.” Scholars no longer held a monopoly over literacy and the authority it engendered. Once the written word could be claimed by larger numbers of people, the literati’s monopoly languished, and the “written word was vulgarized.”²⁶⁰

While Hsi-men is perhaps the best example of the mercantile encroachment on the exclusive territory of the traditional intelligentsia, P’an exemplifies the demise of the bound foot’s links to culture and civility. A rich merchant who becomes a government official after proffering large bribes to the right people, Hsi-men epitomizes corruption and decay within the ranks of elite Chinese society. The women he visits in the pleasure quarters do not compose poetry or accompany him in literary pursuits as the educated courtesan would have done with her scholarly patrons.²⁶¹ P’an’s feet, her most salient feature, serve as an enticement to sensual immoderation and a source of female jealousy. She bears no trace of the noble feminine aura associated with the golden lotus. While she is beautiful, P’an is not of good family background and can hardly be described as chaste.

²⁵⁸Ibid., 76.

²⁵⁹Hucker, *China’s Imperial Past*, 289.

²⁶⁰Ko, “The Written Word,” 76.

²⁶¹Ibid., 75-76.

Her shoemaking activities point to her assiduous efforts in maintaining her sexual appeal to Hsi-men rather than her dedication to a traditional female craft. Thus, the *Chin P'ing Mei* uses body adornment, in particular that of the bound foot, to make an important statement about the demise of Ming society. It points to the irrevocable loss and vulgarization of exalted traditions through the decline of the ruling literati, the educated courtesan, and the association of the bound foot with female virtue.

Conclusion

Like the “gorgeous sepulchres” which veiled the unsightly flesh of the bare, bound foot, the conception of the golden lotus as an ideal of feminine beauty and virtue was perhaps an enchanting veneer for female rivalry in the polygamous household as well as the economic and sexual dissipation of late imperial aristocratic life.²⁶² In the *Chin P'ing Mei*, we see a recurrence of shoemaking as a form of feminine craft, the association of beauty, femininity, and social status to the bound foot, as well as the eroticism connected to the bound foot and shoe. Furthermore, beyond these ideas of footbinding that already exist in established scholarship, an analysis of the *Chin P'ing Mei* provides some additional insight into the bound foot and what it may have signified to women in late imperial China.

Through its portrayal of the bound foot and shoe, the *Chin P'ing Mei* juxtaposes two contrasting forces: female intimacy attained through shared labor and the underlying

²⁶² Adele M. Fielde, *Pagoda Shadows: Studies from Life in China* (Boston: W. G. Corthell, 1890), 42. Fielde uses the term “gorgeous sepulchres” to describe the shoes worn by women with bound feet.

rivalry among women vying for the attention of one husband. The novel's central female character, P'an Chin-lien, personifies these varied images of the bound foot. On the one hand, her feet are clearly part of her beauty and her dedication to making beautiful shoes resonates with historical ideas about female handiwork and virtue. Both these aspects of P'an appear in Hsi-men's initial encounters with her. Beneath this facade however, P'an's feet reappear throughout the narrative to signify female immorality as well as a strong competitive spirit associated with monopolizing Hsi-men's sexual attention.

The visibility of P'an's feet defies the mystery and concealment so essential to the appeal of the bound foot. Blatant appearances of her feet throughout the narrative indict her as an immoral woman. It is clear that she uses her feet as tools of seduction, displaying them to attract male attention. Furthermore, she uses her feet and shoemaking skills as part of her arsenal to manipulate Hsi-men's favor and fortify her status within the domicile. In particular, the appearance of Sung Hui-lien is a threat to P'an's position in Hsi-men's harem. Here is another woman endowed with almost the same set of skills that P'an uses so adroitly to engage Hsi-men's affection. Through the motifs of their feet and shoes, the two women clash in an animalistic battle for influence over Hsi-men.

The deliberate association of the novel's main female character with the erotic bound foot resonates with her role as a sexual object throughout the novel. The excessive indulgence and sexual attention which Hsi-men lavishes upon her leads to a disordering of Confucian relationships: between husband and wife, first wife and concubine, master and servant. The progression of the novel chronicles an insidious reversal of the power relationship between P'an and Hsi-men. In the inevitable denouement of their

relationship, P'an inverts their respective roles by reducing him to a sexual object for her own pleasure.

The *Chin P'ing Mei* also warns of coming social change brought about by increasing commercialization and a nouveau riche mercantile class which corrupts the values of the traditional literati elite. The novel's portrayal of body adornment, and especially that of the bound foot, is imbued with a sense of anxiety associated with the disintegration of boundaries between the intelligentsia and the merchant classes, and between respectable, virtuous Confucian wives and women who could be purchased as concubines. Resonating with Dorothy Ko's analysis of the demise of *wen* through the vulgarization of the courtesan, the written word, and the bound foot, the *Chin P'ing Mei* suggests growing ambivalence towards the bound foot and its traditional association with female virtue and gentility. Thus, it is possible to read the *Chin P'ing Mei* as an omen of the political corruption, vulgarization, and social decline that came about in the late Ming dynasty. One might even argue that this decline foreshadows the demise of Chinese imperial rule in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

CONCLUSION

The work of contemporary scholars including Joseph Needham, John Hay, and Charlotte Furth support the notions of correlative cosmology in Chinese beliefs regarding the body. The individual body served as a microcosmic representation of the greater society and universe in which the body resided. As such, what happened to an individual's body did not stop at the physical boundaries of the skin. Rather, the activities of the body served as metaphors for family, society, and government. In particular, the interaction of *yin* and *yang* forces in the natural universe formed the basis of Taoist prescriptions with regard to sexual behavior. Taoist sexual alchemy warned against dissipating the male essence, and furthermore, it proposed ways for a man to maintain physical control over himself while benefiting from the *yin* energies of his female partners. In a polygamous household, such methods may have served to maintain domestic harmony: a man with many concubines could preserve his energy while fulfilling the sexual needs of multiple wives.

The *Chin P'ing Mei* draws heavily upon these correlative ideas of the body and body adornment. Violations of the physical body support the portrayal of Hsi-men as a *hun chün*, a muddle-headed ruler. Typical of a *hun chün*, Hsi-men seeks to satisfy his sexual needs before fulfilling his Confucian duties as the head of a household. His favoritism towards P'an allows her to manipulate him, in much the same way an evil minister may have manipulated a foolish emperor. P'an turns his household upside

down, she incites Hsi-men to abusive behavior towards his wives and servants, and brings about a complete disordering of Confucian relationships throughout his sphere of influence.

P'an, the ultimate sexual predator, is most adroit at using her body as a political tool. Having no wealth of her own, she brings nothing material to Hsi-men's household, nor does she perform any household chores like some of his other wives. Her body is her only tangible asset, one which she uses constantly to obtain clothing and jewelry, so much so that her sexual encounters with Hsi-men become more and more like commercial transactions. To secure his affection, she sedulously encourages him to perform painful and degrading acts upon her body. Furthermore, knowing that she cannot monopolize him sexually, she uses her maidservant Ch'un-mei's body to keep Hsi-men under her dominion. In this way, P'an allies herself with a potential rival, and maintains some amount of control over Hsi-men's sexual activities.

Correlative ideology is also apparent in the way the narrative melds sexual, economic, and gastronomical consumption. The comparison of female features to edible items reinforces the idea that women are consumable entities. The commercial nature of sexual relationships is evident in the activities of the procuresses, women who profit by finding bedmates for wealthy and influential men like Hsi-men. The explicit encounter between Hsi-men and P'an in the garden is just one of many anecdotes which blurs the boundaries between sexual and digestive functions. This is further supported by the interchangeability of semen and silver, which recurs throughout the *Chin P'ing Mei*. As

Hsi-men's bedmates drain his essence (a finite and precious physical resource), his so-called friends deplete his wealth by consuming food and wine at his expense.

While the portrayal of Hsi-men's sexual exploits serves as a condemnation of sensual overindulgence, the author draws a clear analogy between his sexual activities and his social and political ones. Hsi-men's demise through sexual exertion is meaningful and appropriate in many ways. The various transgressions he inflicts upon the bodies of his bed mates and his servants highlights his power over them. Yet, such abuses of his authority seem to accrue and lead to his own demise, at which time the agent of physical objectification becomes the object and dies as a result. The disordering of Confucian relationships within his domain resonates with the reversal of sexual roles in his final scene with P'an. Once a desirable item served up in gastronomical terms, P'an now uses Hsi-men to sate her bodily appetites, bringing about his death from sexual overexertion. While the direct cause of Hsi-men death is physical in nature, it is apparent that his demise is paralleled by the deterioration of his social, economic, and political status.

Adornment played an essential role in cosmological beliefs of the body. Not only was clothing of great import in Confucian rituals, it served as an essential marker of civility, race, and gender. The lack of appropriate clothing, hairstyle, or shoes symbolized barbarism, for such a person was closer to animal than human. For this reason, the removal of clothing, equal to a loss of human dignity, was always the first step in bodily punishments throughout the *Chin P'ing Mei*. Scholarly anxiety over Manchurian edicts concerning the hair of Han Chinese men and the feet of Han Chinese

women shows the racial and sexual undertones embodied by body adornment.

Furthermore, one's dress was a symbol of status and favor. The particular attention paid to sartorial details throughout the *Chin P'ing Mei* testifies to these notions. When introducing a character, the narrative always presents the ornamented body before describing the person's character or background. All the characters spend much time and energy adorning themselves appropriately for various events. Also, the distribution of clothing and jewelry to Hsi-men's various wives reflected upon their status in the domestic hierarchy. Resonating with the conception of women's bodies as commodities, body adornment also serves to add a commercial tinge to Hsi-men's relationships throughout the novel. The exchange of valuable jewelry and clothing plays an intricate role in all of his liaisons.

The adorned body and its embellishments serve as tools in the cutthroat environment of Hsi-men's domicile. Again, P'an is the most dexterous of the characters when it comes to such devices. She removes her make-up, disorders her hair, and changes into plain clothing to extract Hsi-men's sympathy. For some other female characters however, such a condition is a true reflection of their despondency. Unfortunately, Hsi-men is unable to tell the difference and is easily swayed by women in such a state of disheveled dress.

The term "gorgeous sepulchres," used by a late nineteenth-century missionary to describe the exquisite shoes which veiled the ugly flesh of the bound foot, may well serve as a symbol of the multiple and layered ideas personified by the golden lotus. The small foot as a sign of female virtue and handiwork veiled the fiercely competitive environment

among women in Hsi-men's household. Certainly, the *Chin P'ing Mei* reinforces notions of footbinding that exist in established scholarship on the subject. The *Chin P'ing Mei* supports the connection between footbinding and woman's work, beauty, virtue, and a privileged social status. The novel also testifies to the erotic nature of the bound foot and the tiny shoes that adorned them. Beyond these ideas, an analysis of the body and body adornment within the *Chin P'ing Mei* illustrates the hidden rivalry among the various women competing for Hsi-men's attentions.

P'an Chin-lien herself embodies these dualistic ideas. She practices the feminine craft of shoemaking and enjoys sisterhood through shared labor with Hsi-men's other wives. It is also clear how P'an, through masterful use of her adorned body, ardently defends her dominion over Hsi-men and eliminates her enemies and rivals. This is most apparent in her interaction with Sung Hui-lien, a woman with feet even smaller than P'an's. P'an decides to take action when she overhears Sung comparing her feet favorably with P'an's. Even after P'an has indirectly brought about Sung's suicide, one of Sung's shoes resurfaces and irks her, perhaps because it reminds her that her monopoly over Hsi-men's sexual interest is rather insecure.

The connection between the *Chin P'ing Mei*'s central female character and the bound foot is purposeful. P'an Chin-lien, the character, is inseparable from the fetishistic three-inch golden lotus (*san ts'ün chin lien*). Her feet never exude the allure of the "veiled erotic," but rather, the visibility of her golden lotuses flouts the essence of concealment and mystery so important to the conception of the bound foot. In the end, she completes a role reversal with Hsi-men: she assumes the female-superior position.

she uses him to satiate her sexual needs without regard to his well-being, and becomes the agent of his destruction. Since her power exists only through his sexual interest in her, this act has indirectly brought about her own undoing as well.

Finally, the *Chin P'ing Mei* serves as a portent of late imperial disintegration of social and literary traditions which formed the foundation of *wen*, Chinese civility, literature, and culture. The decline of *wen* subsumes the deterioration of the written word, the courtesan's status as the ultimate female companion, and the practice of footbinding as the highest embodiment of Chinese femininity. The novel provides a view of an upstart merchant insinuating himself into the realms of the traditional intelligentsia: the courtesan's quarters as well as public office. At the same time, women of all social classes began to bind their feet in an effort to emulate wives and daughters of the scholarly elite. Thus, the motif of the golden lotus within the *Chin P'ing Mei* alludes to an irrevocable loss of the bound foot's cultural status. At the same time, perhaps it also serves as a microcosmic representation of the loss of *wen*, and the larger ills in society and government associated with this demise.

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