eroticism, which is in essence a transgression, springing from the existence of taboos set up to counter liberty in sexual violence: "Shame, real or pretended, is a woman's way of accepting the taboo that makes a human being out of her. The time comes when she must break the taboo, but then she has to signify by being ashamed that the taboo is not forgotten, that the infringement takes place in spite of the taboo, in full consciousness of the taboo" (Bataille 1986, 134). When a Chinese man sees a pair of lotus feet, he feels a tremendous pity for the fragile beauty that has gone through so much pain and suffering; he is in awe of the wonder that comes out of violence. To make it even more enticing, this wonder and beauty form the taboo of the strictest kind. It is not available to his eyes and hands, unless he is the husband or is present during festivals such as weddings and foot competitions. It is the mixed feelings of awe and pity, and the tension of transgression, that bring out his erotic desire, be it love or lust. After destroying parts of their bodies, women become mediators through whom men are able to experience the terrible abyss of violence on a safe ground, without the risk of abandoning themselves entirely to their own violence. The terribly deformed feet, dressed in the most exquisite adornment, permit men to remove themselves from all the pain, blood, decay, and ultimately, death, keeping them at a safe distance, under tight control.

The character *ai* (love) could also be used in ancient Chinese to mean "treasure," "adultery," or something "hidden" or "appearing to be hidden." *Guo ce: qi ce san* (National policies: Policies of the Qi), from the Spring and Autumn Period, records that Meng Chang Jun's wife commits adultery *(ai)* with her husband's consultants. *The Book of Songs,* the first anthology of poetry also from the Spring and Autumn Period more than two thousand years ago, contains the famous love poem describing the anxiousness and eagerness of a young man waiting for his lover who hides herself somewhere: "Ai er bu jian / sao shou chi chu" ([my lover] hidden and invisible / [I] scratch my head in hesitation). What is most interesting is *ai*'s synonyms: *teng* for hurt, treasure, love; and *lian* for pity, sympathy, spoil, and treasure. As a matter of fact, the combinations of these words—*teng ai* (hurt and love), and *lian ai* or *ai lian* (pity and love or love and pity)—are used to describe parental (often maternal) love for children, or a man's love for women. It is also worth noting that in the Chinese language, love rarely appears alone; instead, it is constantly conditioned by other factors. Thus we have *lian ai* (pity and love), *en ai* (gratitude and love), *jing ai* (respect and love), *qing ai* (emotion and love), *lian ai* (attachment/addiction and love). The most revealing combination is perhaps *teng ai,* a love imbedded in preverbal knowledge, accompanied by

unspeakable pain, and shared only through the empathy between the two bodies (mother and daughter) alike.

So much pain and violence inflicted on the body—all for the aim (and in the name) of a beautiful, shining surface that is not to be revealed. What does all the wrapping, binding, and embroidery of the lotus foot try to cover? And what is underneath the flat, shining surface of high civilization? Wrapped by the extravagant and exquisite embroidery, the bound foot seems to have conquered decay and death and finally achieved an eternal beauty. A beautiful face may wrinkle, and a slender body may become fat and saggy, whereas a pair of lotus feet keep their charm as long as the woman lives. *Records of Gathering Fragrance* records stories in which men marry women old enough to be their mothers for their perfectly bound feet. Datong of Shanxi Province was known for its annual foot contest on the sixth day of the sixth lunar month, which was believed to have started during the Zhengde period of the Ming dynasty (1506–1521). Women of all ages and classes, ugly or beautiful, were equal competitors. Their feet, the most hidden objects, were now on display. Anyone who came to the contest could touch and judge the tiny feet. There were three prizes. The first became *wang* (king), the second *ba* (lord), and the third *hou* (queen) (*Cai fei lu* 1936c, 203). Such contests were popular in other areas, too, like Taiyuan and Yuncheng (Shanxi Province), Xuanhua (Hebei), Lanzhou (Gansu), and Fengzhen (Inner Mongolia). Foot contests helped spread the name of the local women's feet, and because of their visibility, women from these places became more diligent in binding their feet to live up to such a name (*Cai fei lu di si bian* 38). Often, after two years of the initial binding, the intense pain subsided and the feet became practically "dead and painless" (Fielding 1956, 28). In fact, the tiny feet became the symbol of death itself, as Lin Qin'nan laments in his "Tiny-Foot Lady":

> How inconceivable, that in reducing the foot,
> Her flesh and bones are so distressed
> That she loses her appetite for food.
> So much of her fragrant youth
> Spent weeping by the fallen flowers;
> She hears the chirping of the birds,
> But her bowed foot is like a tiny grave.
>
> (Quoted in Levy 1992, 83)

From the two tiny graves rose eternal youth and beauty.

As ancient Egyptians were promised their immortality if they bound their bodies tightly, Chinese girls and women were promised an eternal

beauty if they bound their feet. By binding and wrapping, they hope to cover up the decadence, decay, violence, and finally, the death of the flesh and of civilization. After all the struggle and suffering, all that matters is the surface, and all that is left is the surface, the surface of a mask. No wonder Fang Xun warns the Masters of the Golden Rooms (men with beautiful women as wives and concubines) that they must not remove the bindings to look at her bare foot, but must remain satisfied with its external appearance and enjoy the outward impression. For if one removes the shoes and binding, the aesthetic feeling will be destroyed forever. Indeed, Chinese pornographic prints and paintings freely presented men's and women's naked bodies and genitals, yet they never crossed the boundary of baring a woman's lotus feet. Once the shoe (mask) is on, it has to be kept forever. The removal of the shoe/surface/mask is the end of eroticism.

Yet death seeps through the bandages, strong and odorous, no matter how much perfumed powder a woman sprinkles on her feet. The lotus foot is known for its peculiar odor. It is a smell of the living flesh being discontinued by a deadly bondage, a smell of life and death, of dirt and purity fermenting and brewing in exuberance within a tightly compressed space. Men are either totally repulsed by or addicted to this odor, but no one can ignore it. The interplay between the illusion of immortal beauty on the surface and the constant reminder of violence—decay, pain, and deformity of the naked feet—from underneath brings eroticism into its final sense, that is, death. If eroticism is what Georges Bataille describes as "assenting to life up to the point of death" (1986, 11), footbinding is then its best manifestation, in language and writing. Here, desire and violence cling to each other, each striving desperately to incarnate its irresistible force in the other, each fighting to have the last word. But violence always triumphs. Death devours everything, just as the mutilation of footbinding erases all distinguishing characteristics, all salient features of each individual until differences end in similarity, and the body (foot) embraces the boundaries of sex and class.

Pan Jinlian is the most deadly and licentious female character in the erotic novel *The Golden Lotus (Jin ping mei)*. She got her name Jinlian, Golden Lotus, from her pair of perfectly bound feet. And she certainly lives up to that name and image—as the symbol of eroticism and object of desire. In the story, Jinlian was sold as a child and raised to be someone's concubine. Almost every character in the book, male or female, who is involved in her sexual intrigues and competitions meets a deadly end, including her first lover, her first husband, Wu Da, her maid, and her second husband, Ximen Qing.

Of the six women that the rich playboy Ximen Qing marries, only Jinlian brings him no amount of money, goods, or property as dowry; she also has no social or economic function in the household. While the other five wives bring wealth, children, or domestic skills, Jinlian has no money, working skill, or a powerful family to back her up. Her assets are her body/feet, her skills to enchant (singing, pouting, and her bedchamber art), and her power to destroy. Yet it is to her that Ximen Qing constantly

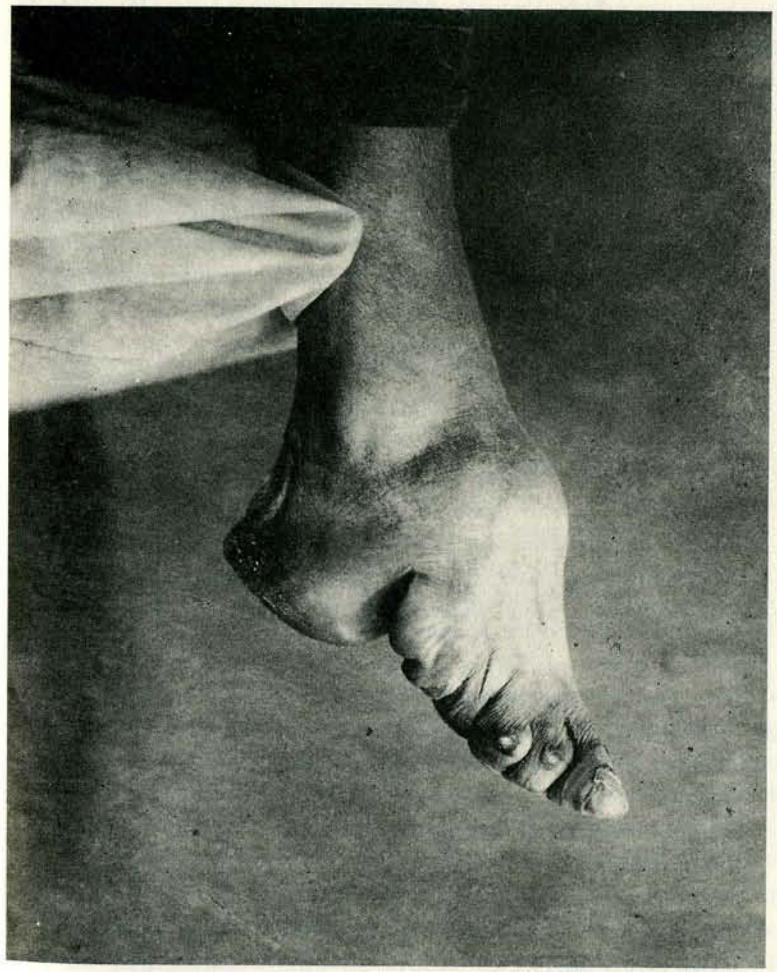

Figure 7. Chinese woman's small foot. Courtesy Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts.

returns, no matter how far he may stray in his search for erotic experiences. Even when he discovers her affair with a servant—the worst crime a woman could commit in a patriarchal system—he only gives her a halfhearted whipping, then immediately engages in sex with her. Together they invent endless sexual games. She understands his erotic needs and is willing to satisfy them. As for her own needs, nothing can stop her from fulfilling them. When she cannot get Ximen Qing, she finds substitutes, servants, a son-in-law as well as a brother-in-law. Her sex drive leaves her totally devoid of conscience or guilt for her crime, be it for murder, incest, or infanticide. In this sense, she is an equal to Ximen Qing, who believes he can get away with raping the Goddess of the Moon or the Goddess of the West because he is rich and powerful as well as destined from his previous life to enjoy all these women. Toward the end of his life, after plunging himself into a sexual frenzy, he staggers back to Jinlian to die in her bed (and body). The following is the scene involving his last sexual encounter with her. Driven wild by her own sexuality, Jinlian, the sex symbol and object of erotic desire manifested through her tiny feet, suddenly turns into a killing machine. She overdoses Ximen Qing with pills and literally "sexes" him to death:

> Golden Lotus had come back from the inner court, but she had not gone to bed. She was lying upon her bed, dressed, waiting for Hsi-men Ch'ing [Ximen Qing]. When he came, she got up at once. She took his clothes and saw that he was drunk, but she asked no questions. Hsi-men put his hands on her shoulders and drew her towards him.
>
> "You little strumpet!" he murmured, "your darling is drunk. Get the bed ready: I want to go to sleep."
>
> She helped him to bed, and as soon as he was on it, he began to snore like thunder. She could do nothing to wake him, so she took off her clothes and went to bed too. She played delicately with his weapon, but it was as limp as cotton-wood and had not the slightest spirit. She tossed about on the bed, consumed with passionate desire, almost beside herself. [She squatted below him and sucked him in many different manners]; it was in vain. This made her wild beyond description. She shook him for a long time and at last he awoke. She asked him where his medicine was. Hsi-men, still very drunk, cursed her.
>
> "You little strumpet!" he cried, "what do you want that for? You would like me to play with you, I suppose, but to-day your darling is far too tired for anything of that sort. The medicine is in the little gold box in my sleeve. Give it to me. You'll be in luck if you are clever enough to make my prick stand up."

> Golden Lotus looked for the little gold box and, when she found it, opened it. There were only three or four pills left. She took a wine-pot and poured out two cups of wine. She took one pill herself, leaving three. Then she made the terrible mistake of giving him all three. She was afraid anything less would have no effect. Hsi-men Ch'ing shut his eyes and swallowed them. Before he could have drunk a cup of tea, the medicine began to take effect. Golden Lotus tied the silken ribbon for him and his staff stood up. He was still asleep. She mounted upon his body. [She anointed some medicine on the tip of his penis, then inserted it inside her vagina. As she rubbed herself around it, the penis reached the heart of her flower.] Her body seemed to melt away with delight. Then, with her two hands grasping his legs, she moved up and down about two hundred times. [At first, it was a bit dry; soon her juice came out and it became very slippery.] Hsi-men Ch'ing let her do everything she wished, but himself was perfectly inert. She could bear it no longer. She put her tongue into his mouth. She held his neck and shook it. [She rubbed and kneaded his body with her own. His penis was completely inside her vagina, except for his balls. She rubbed them and felt delightful. Her juice kept running out so fast that soon she had changed five handkerchiefs to wipe herself. She came twice, yet Ximen Qing did not. His penis looked swollen and purple, all the veins exposed, as if it had been burnt by fire. Golden Lotus untied the ribbon, but the penis still looked as swollen as before. She sucked it, lying on top of him, her tongue licked the tip back and forth for the time of a meal. Suddenly, the semen shot out like quicksilver leaking from a glass tube. She rushed to take it with her mouth. It ran out so fast she couldn't swallow it all. In the beginning it was semen, but soon the blood came out.] Hsi-men Ch'ing had fainted and his limbs were stiff outstretched. (*The Golden Lotus* 1955, 84–85)[8]

Sexuality on the loose is like a raging fire that feeds on the very objects intended to smother its flames, absorbing and destroying everything along its path. Jinlian's overflowing sex drive finally brings death—the ultimate form of violence and the most violent consumption—to herself. After Ximen Qing's death, she initiates an incestuous affair with her son-in-law, Chen Jingji, then drowns the infant she has with him. The infanticide leads to the discovery of their secret and Jinlian's expulsion from Ximen Qing's house. When she is put back on the market for sale, Wu Song, the mute brother of Jinlian's first husband whom she murdered, offers to buy her. Jinlian happily follows him home, thinking that he wants her to be his wife. She realizes her mistake when Wu Song pulls out the knife, but it is

too late. The door is locked and she is tied up like a chicken. Wu Song tears out her heart and liver and offers them as a sacrifice on her ex-husband's altar.

Wu Song thus completes his revenge for his brother's murder. But it is also his final sexual union with Jinlian, his sister-in-law. As a man who doesn't read or write but takes the value of integrity and tradition with extreme seriousness, he knows not how to transgress the incest taboo, physically or linguistically. (I will further discuss this issue in chapter 3.) The only outlet (or orgasm) for him is through violent rupture—cutting open the body and tearing out the insides of his sexual object. With her body torn from inside out, Jinlian completes her game of sex and desire, completes her reunion with Ximen Qing, who also died of eruption.

Such is the explosive force of expenditure, causing those playing the game of mutilation and self-mutilation, fetishism and eroticism to lose control. Its violence breaks through the surface, revealing the vertigo of the interior. This violence "belongs to humanity as a whole and is speechless" (Bataille 1986, 186).

2 *A Brief History of Footbinding*

Anointed with fragrance, she takes lotus steps;
Though often sad, she walks with swift lightness.
She dances like the wind,
leaving no physical trace.
Another stealthily tries on this palace style,
but feels such distress when she tries to stand;
So wondrously small they defy description,
Unless placed in the palm.
—Su Shi (1036–1101) (quoted in Levy 1992)

THIS SONG LYRIC ON BOUND FEET in Chinese literature was written by the popular poet Su Shi in the Song dynasty, when footbinding had just started to spread all over the country. Apart from various sayings and a few records scattered here and there in travelogues, no one knows exactly who started the practice of binding, and no one seriously researched its origin until the beginning of the twentieth century, when it was publicly ridiculed, legally forbidden, and about to disappear. In this chapter I summarize the speculations that have been made about the origin of footbinding and examine how this practice spread around the thirteenth century.

According to Yao Lingxi's *Records of Gathering Fragrance*—the first collection totally devoted to footbinding, its history, methods of binding, and the frenzied doting of fanatics on lotus feet—footbinding can be traced back as early as the twenty-first century B.C. Da Yu, the founder of the Xia dynasty (twenty-first to sixteenth centuries B.C.), married a woman who was a fox fairy with tiny feet (*Cai fei lu* 1:28). The last ruler of the Shang dynasty (sixteenth to eleventh centuries B.C.), the king of Zhou, had a concubine