lotus blossoms to give the effect of blooming lotuses with each step (*Nan shi* 5:21a).

legend

This invention seemed to have been inspired by an Indian tale of a deer lady (perhaps a mere coincidence) recorded by the Buddhist pilgrim Xuan Zang (596–664). A Rishi was once bathing in a stream when a deer came and gave birth to a girl. She was extremely beautiful, but she had the feet of a deer. The Rishi took her home and brought her up as his own child. When she walked, she left the impressions of lotus flowers on the ground. It was predicted that she would bear a thousand sons, each seated on one petal of a thousand-petaled lotus blossom. And she did (Beal 1906, 2:71–72). What makes the myth extremely interesting is that it underlines all the idealizations of footbinding: the elimination of distinction between creatures, and the assimilation of different things. The girl is the result of the copulation between a man and a deer, a mixture of half-human, half-animal and half-god, half-monster. This monstrous duality, however, makes her a symbol of beauty and fecundity, just as the dual nature of bound feet turn tiny-footed women into the ideal of femininity, the symbol of morality, and the object of desire.

Four centuries later, the fecundity and animal allure of the deer girl tale that had inspired the emperor of the northern Qi and his court were believed to have inspired the imagination of another emperor, Li Yu, reigning in southern China. Not only did he inherit the idea of the golden lotus as a dancing apparatus, but he also invented the binding of the dancer's feet to exhort the allure of the deer-footed beauty. Chinese folklore and mythology tend to represent such a hoof-footed female figure as fox-footed femme fatales. These foxes, such as Da Ji of the Shang dynasty, were often sent by gods to bring down a corrupt dynasty. They could transform themselves into beauties beyond human measure except for their feet, which refused to be metamorphosed. Just as the humans have completely erected themselves from the earth except for the feet that stubbornly remain horizontal, the feet of foxes alone fail to assume a human shape. Yet it is exactly this stubborn animality that gives off the strongest, most irresistible sexual allure, and it is this base animality that has brought down many kingdoms, many civilizations.

How well Chinese women know this secret weapon! When they call one another *xiao tizi*—"little hooves"—whether as a curse or endearment, they are fully aware of the power of this animality, in the disguise of high civilization, morality, and divinity. When the girl from P'ing-hsi tells us that her feet, after the binding, no longer "belong to a human being," the tone is, of course, filled with remorse, but at the same time it is tinged with

a sense of great achievement through sheer will and endurance. A tiny-footed beauty appears to be restricted (as well as restricting: the feet, once bound, become taboo for the male gaze and touch) and celestial, away from the muddy, decaying, and excremental quality of sexuality. Yet she provokes more erotic desires by promising a mysterious animal aspect and turning her body into prohibition, taboo. In other words, the lotus foot exasperates and exalts desire for flesh by diminishing and covering the flesh. The tension of such a flux from the animal to the celestial, and from the celestial to the animal, is the key to the erotic attraction of bound feet in the eye of a lotus lover.

The Chinese were not alone in knowing, worshiping, and fearing this power. Pan, the pastoral god of fertility, was originally an Arcadian deity, later associated with the Greek Dionysus and the Roman Faunus, both fertility gods. He is depicted as a merry, ugly man with the horns, ears, legs, and hooves of a goat. All the myths about him deal with his amorous affairs. He invented the panpipe, a musical instrument made of reeds, for the beautiful nymph he loved. The nymph fled, leaving him nothing but a lonely sighing of the wind. The mysterious fear that comes from no known cause is called a *panic* fear. And fear is one of the indispensable ingredients in the working of eroticism: the fear of chaos and violence, of blood and rotting, of death, and the fear of female sexual power yet at the same time the longing for it.

And the sphinx, the fearful monster, is a veritable conglomerate of differences, with its woman's head, lion's body, serpent's tail, and eagle's wings. Perched high outside the city of Thebes, it threatens to destroy the city with a puzzle. No one can answer it except for Oedipus, who passes by the place and solves the riddle. This is the man who, by killing his father, has just transgressed the most fearful taboo and is about to commit an even worse crime—marrying his mother and having children with her, the taboo of incest that ultimately separates man from animals. In other words, Oedipus is himself a mixture of human and beast, and the physical evidence is his clubfeet, the deformed or half-evolved feet that betray his link to the animal world and its power.

Finally, there is the mermaid, the classical half-fish, half-human figure of women's seduction, of fatal voices and the lure of sexuality, immortalized by Homer, then by Hans Christian Andersen. In "The Little Mermaid," she is willing to give up her most precious gift (also her most enchanting attractor)—her voice; she is willing to endure the pain of treading on knives in order to have human legs. In the tale, her metamorphosis is successful, although she fails to win the prince's love after all the sacrifice and

suffering. But it is her original form, not her transformed human figure, that prevails, as the statue at the port of Copenhagen, as the icon image in movies, toys, picture books, and art. Again, animality prevails.

A lotus foot has the semblance of a penis; such simulated genitals are devices animals often use to attract the opposite sex. For example, male gelada baboons have patterns on their chests that resemble female genitals (Hersey 1996, 12). The deep crease in the middle part of a lotus foot, caused by squeezing the front and heel together, also suggests the female sex organ.[3] So does a lotus shoe, which looks like a lily petal. *Flower* and *flower heart* are common euphemisms for the vagina in Chinese literature and pornography, sometimes even from the mouth of a country woman (see figure 5).

Records of Gathering Fragrance tells several stories of men stealing lotus shoes for masturbation or to humiliate women.[4] Thus, bound feet not only mingle human with animal and celestial, but also mix the male and female features together. Nothing can be more ironic than this. Footbinding began as a measure to stop the blurring and crossing of gender and social hierarchies, and to mark differences, but only ended in producing an even greater combination of all things. Just as the sphinx combines human and animal features in one body, footbinding gathers all the opposites and differences upon the tiny feet: ugly and beautiful, grotesque and erotic, human and beastly, earthly and celestial, male and female.

Bound feet become mappings of human reproductive systems for both sexes, or what George Hersey calls "vectors"—ornamental indicators that point to or frame the primary or secondary sex organs (1996, 12). By reducing, hurting, hiding, and creating a strict taboo, footbinding actually dramatizes the primary reproductive apparatus.[5] By the same token, earrings, bracelets, necklaces, corsets, and tightly laced boots function as sexual vectors through symbolic binding, penetrating, and self-imprisoning. Such devices for sexual display are no less extravagant than the device men use in the competition for sexual selection—the accumulation and squandering of wealth; the brains of an intellectual; the talents of a literati or artist; the muscles of a warrior.

Of all the male devices of "genitalia extravagance," nothing is more direct than the penis enlargement, which is comically and vividly presented in the erotic novel *The Carnal Prayer Mat* by Li Yu. The main character, Weiyang Sheng, has everything a Chinese male needs to attract women: he is intelligent and good-looking, and he knows how to please women. Although the Chinese have fixed attractors for male and female, such as *lang cai nu mao* or *caizi jiaren* (man's talent and woman's look or talent and

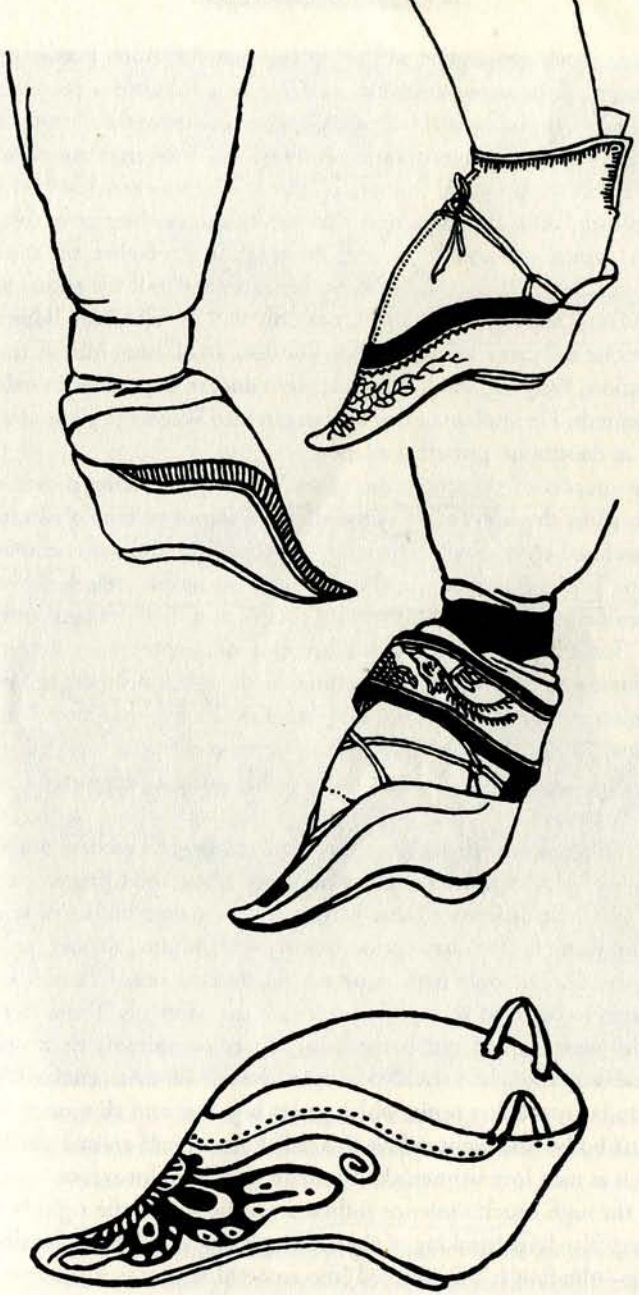

Figure 5. Lotus shoes that resemble lily petals. Drawings from *Cai fei lu.*

beauty), a man's appearance, at least in romance literature, is as important as his talent. If he is not described as being as handsome as the legendary male beauty Pan An, he is at least a *baimian shusheng*—a fair-skinned scholar (fair skin is a most important sign of beauty). Weiyang's ambition is to sleep with all the beautiful women in China. When he asks his thief friend to help him fulfill this dream, his friend examines the size of Weiyang Sheng's "capital"—his penis. Seeing Weiyang's tiny member, the thief ridicules him, then tells him to go home and forget about his sexual adventures. With a sex organ that small, not only will he fail to fulfill his ambition, but he will cause himself endless disasters. In his deep humiliation and desperation, Weiyang Sheng comes across a doctor, a specialist in enlarging male genitals. He implants a dog's sex organ into Weiyang's penis and turns it into an enormous, powerful weapon.

The success of the operation gives Weiyang the same power that a woman gains through footbinding: the appearance of high civilization—a fair-skinned scholar with a primary reproductive apparatus empowered by a dog penis. The first sexual attractor is powerful enough if Weiyang were satisfied with sex within bounds, that is, with his wife and concubine maids. But if he wants to fulfill his ambition of sleeping with all the beautiful women in China—in other words, to transgress his marriage vows—he needs a sex organ that is not only large in size but that also assimilates the shape and power of a beast. Thus Weiyang turns himself into something quite monstrous—a half-human, half-animal creature, a scholar with a dog penis.

Such obsession with sex organs reflects the general anxiety among the literati over gender and hierarchy confusion. Ming and Qing erotic prints show how little difference there is between the naked bodies of scholarly men and women. Both have smooth skin and feminine, slender body lines (see figure 6). The only male figures with muscles, beards, and body hair who seem to be filled with virile power are the Mongols. These horsemen warriors were considered barbarians, closer to animals than civilized Chinese were thought to be. No wonder the fair-skinned scholar Weiyang needs to borrow a dog penis, which grows big, hot, and alive once inside a woman's body. And women love this half-human, half-animal phallus just as much as men love women's half-human, half-hoof lotus foot.

So through much violence inflicted on the foot—the tight binding, bending, bleeding, breaking of the bones, rotting of the flesh, beating, and cursing—the foot is transformed into something that is suggestive of the genitals of both sexes, the hoof of an animal. It has a shimmering, gleaming surface; the shoe and bandage cover the low, degrading nature of the

Figure 6. *South Village,* print from *Erotic Art of China.* In most of the erotic paintings of late imperial China, the only obvious bodily feature that marks the difference between naked men and women is their feet.

human foot, the only organ that keeps humans stuck in the mud, whereas the rest of the body, the head especially, is elevated to the sun, the sky, and other heavenly things. Not only is it considered the filthiest part of the body; the foot is also "psychologically analogous to the brutal fall of a

man—in other words, to death" (Bataille 1991, 22). A folk song from Henan Province mocks how a woman's clumsy, grossly big feet threaten the order of the cosmic, her unrestrained/undisciplined body (her big strides and urine) suggesting ruin, pollution, and death, which are brought about by natural disasters such as earthquakes and floods (Liu Xiang 1988, 205–7). Such a body must be tamed, purified, and mediated through human effort—through footbinding. Like the mummy that seals death beneath layers of cloth, the lotus foot, once formed, seals all the degrading qualities associated with the foot inside the bandages. It shields off human follies, their defenselessness against aging, decaying, and dying, and their threat to cosmic harmony.

Mianzi (reputation or prestige) comes directly from the word *mian* (face, surface, outside, outer part). It plays a crucial role in every part of Chinese culture. No Chinese can escape the fear of losing face or the urgent need to keep or save face. *Diu mianzi* (the literal translation is to lose surface or an outer part as well as face) is such a shameful thing that it often leads to violent death. Thus to avoid losing face, women of respectable upbringing were taught to guard their shoes as if guarding their lives. If their feet or shoes were touched, played with, or stolen by men, it was as serious as losing their virginity or chastity. *Records of Gathering Fragrance* contains numerous accounts of women whose feet were played with or whose shoes were stolen by vulgar or rustic men at village theaters. The mortification caused by shame often led to suicide (*Cai fei lu* 1:271–72). While concealment of the foot becomes a canon of proper behavior and moral training for women, it further mystifies the tiny foot and increases the craving of lotus lovers.[6]

When mothers bind feet for their daughters, one thing they do to make their children endure the pain is to threaten that they may lose face on their wedding day, when every visitor is licensed to touch and play with the bride's feet. This is the custom of *nao fang*—disrupting the wedding chamber—that has been popular in almost every part of China for thousands of years. *Yue nao yue fa* means the more jesting, the more prosperity.[7] Hence, relatives, friends, and neighbors gathered in the bridal chamber on the wedding night, taunting the bride (the bridegroom is left alone) with all sorts of vicious dirty jokes and games. All taboos were lifted: "For three days there's no hierarchy" (Huang Huajie 1991, 163). The bride's body (sometimes several bridesmaids were hired as a replacement) was laid defenselessly open to public ridicule and pranks. Even the feet, the most prohibited part of the body, were not exempt from the ritual. Visitors lifted the bride's skirt, measuring her foot size with the rulers they had brought

along, pinching and kneading her feet while commenting on the shape and the embroidery, and inventing games to torture the bride, such as making her cross a bridge of upside-down wine glasses. In a story from the northern part of Shandong Province, even the bride's mother-in-law became a target: "The crowd surrounded the hostess, took off her shoes and unwrapped her bandages, and paraded her on a cow's back around the village" (Huang Huajie 1991, 164). The bride's lifelong reputation (face) in her new home, as well as that of her old and new families, was formed at this moment. Whether she was perceived as beautiful, persevering, disciplined, and hard-working depended on whether she had a pair of well-made lotus feet. Badly shaped, oversized feet (more than three to four inches long) meant that the bride had no endurance, no patience, and worst of all, was lazy; therefore she couldn't be a good daughter-in-law or a good wife.

Since the feet became the face and the face closed the bride's fate—her lifelong happiness or misery—mothers dared not loosen the bandages a little bit despite their daughters' tears. They would tell their daughters that if a mother truly loved *(teng)* her child, she would not let herself feel empathy *(teng)* for the foot *(teng nu bu teng zu)*. Thus the character *teng*, with its first denotation (pain) and its second (treasure, care, love—from adults, usually female to children, not vice versa), spells out the muted message of footbinding: a truly loving mother must teach her daughters how to endure pain physically, emotionally, and mentally. Such love mixed and reinforced with unspeakable pain and violence is, as I mentioned earlier, the secret language/knowledge transmitted from mother to daughter during the months and years of the initial process of footbinding, a knowledge that teaches the daughter about the mapping and discipline of the female body in a patriarchal environment, and that prepares her for her sexuality, marriage, reproduction, motherhood. The knowledge, muted or blunted by the intense pain of footbinding, is shared between mothers and daughters as unforgettable memories imprinted on the flesh. It excludes men and writing. When unable to explain why they have to inflict such pain on their daughters' bodies, mothers often tell them that they will understand better when they grow up. And they often do, even expressing their gratitude for what their mothers have done for them. We learn this from the interviews and the oral accounts of bound-footed women recorded in *Records of Gathering Fragrance* as well as from novels.

Poet Adrienne Rich, from an American cultural experience and perspective, reached a similar conclusion: "Mothers and daughters have always exchanged with each other—beyond the verbally transmitted lore of female survival—a knowledge that is subliminal, subversive, preverbal: The

knowledge flowing between two alike bodies, one of which has spent nine months inside the other" (1976, 220). So powerful is this unwritten, unspeakable knowledge/language/memory that "verbal instructions and didactic manuals on how to behave, how to succeed in the real world, simply paled" (Blake 1994, 708). And little girls, once they understood the importance of footbinding, endured the pain like heroic warriors. The following account, told by Jin Suxin, is one of the stories collected in *Records of Gathering Fragrance:*

> When I was a child, I lived in Mentou Village, eighty li away from Pingxi County. At that time, women competed to have the smallest feet. At age six, my mother bound my feet. . . . I was told not to walk on my heels; otherwise my heels would be deformed and villagers would laugh at me. But when I forced myself to walk on the bent toes, I felt the pain intolerable. Walking became a torture. At night, my feet felt feverish as if on fire. I begged my mother to loosen my bandages, but only got scolded severely. . . . When I was nine, I began to bind myself. Every time I made new shoes, the size became a little bit smaller. At eleven, my feet were thin, small, and arched, about four and a half inches long. One day, I went with my mother to my maternal grandma's birthday party. Among the visitors were two girls of my age from the Weiyang family. Their feet were so tiny, smaller than hands, all wrapped in scarlet embroidered shoes. Everybody admired them. My uncle turned to me, laughing, "Look at their feet, so small and straight. How respectful! Look at yours, so big and fat. Who will be willing to be your matchmaker?" All the visitors turned to look at my feet and laughed. I stood there, frozen, as if a pail of icy water had been poured over my head, as if I had been struck by a thunderbolt. I was so ashamed I began to weep. I wished I could cut my feet into a smaller size on the spot. At that moment, I was determined to bind my feet much more tightly no matter how painful it was.
>
> That night, after I unbound my bandages, I tore my handkerchief into strips and sewed them to the bandages to make them longer. I pressed the four small toes as far as possible to the plantar, wrapped them once, then arched my foot by tightening the bandage over the heel and back. After wrapping my foot like this four times, I inserted the end of the bandage into the plantar and put on my shoes. As I laid down in bed, I felt my feet swelling, burning, and hurting me like hell. I tossed about in agony, but I was determined not to loosen the bandages, even if I died of pain. Sometimes it was too much to bear, and I wept. When I finally drifted into sleep, I dreamed about three-inch feet. The next day I had to hold onto the wall to walk. . . . Ten days later, my shoes became loose. I knew that my were getting smaller. That night I made myself a pair of new shoes. I n sured them. Three inches and eight! I had lost almost one inch.
>
> Such an achievement within half a month! More than I had expected. I got a longer pair of bandages and made bed slippers. After binding, I put them on so that the binding would remain tight. Five days later, I suddenly felt a sharp pain in my feet. I unbound the wrapping and saw that the fifth toes were broken and infected. I cleaned and cushioned them with cotton balls. The binding was so unbearably painful that my body trembled all over. I told myself that if I was afraid of pain, all the effort and suffering for the past half a month would be thrown away. My courage came back, and I bound my feet more tightly. It was so painful that after a while, my feet grew numb. Gradually, all my small toes were pushed into the sole, flat and tiny like lima beans. The fifth toes almost touched the heels. The crease in the instep also deepened, almost an inch deep. The front was more pointed, the heel straightened, and the back arched nicely. After thirty days of binding, my feet were reduced to two inches and nine. I wobbled a lot while walking because my feet were so small. One day my uncle saw me and said, "I'll cut off your feet so that you don't have to bind your feet anymore." I think he said that because he was worried I would overbind my feet. When I returned home from my grandma's place, people noticed my small feet and thought I was wearing fake performing shoes. When they looked closer and realized they were real, they admired me, in awe. After that, I was able to make new socks and shoes for my newly formed feet, which had become the number-one beauty in the surrounding villages. (*Cai fei lu* 1:259–60 [my translation])

When she started binding, she was still unable to grasp the meaning of pain/love; hence she cried and begged her mother to loosen the binding. And of course, the mother, out of her love, refused. When she got older, and when she saw her cousins at her same age as a mirror for the mapping of her social and sexual body, she finally got the message of footbinding. Her uncle's cruel comment and mocking triggered her sense of shame; in Chinese terms, the humiliation and fear of losing face prompted the nine-year-old girl to endure the inhuman pain of reshaping her feet.

On the one hand, her superhuman will to endure pain prepares her to find a secure foothold in the capricious environment of male discourse (her uncle mocks her in public when her feet are bigger than the three-inch model, then scolds her severely when he sees her obsession in reducing the size of her feet). On the other hand, her shame is what gives birth to