The Three-Inch Golden Lotus
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Feng Jicai’s 1986 *Sancun Jinlian* may now be read in English thanks to a translation by David Wakefield. To my knowledge, *The Three-Inch Golden Lotus* is the first extended piece of realistic fiction that places the vexatious topic of foot-binding at the center of dramatic action. The narrative is incisive and ironic, as we see from Feng’s opening remarks: “Some people say that a portion of Chinese history lies concealed in the bound feet of Chinese women. That’s preposterous! These stunted human feet, three inches long, a bit longer than a cigarette, eternally suffocated in bindings—what could be hidden there except for the smell?”

The story follows the life of Fragrant Lotus from her first ordeal with foot-binding to her last hurrah. The scene is Tianjin in the decades before and after the turn of the twentieth century. Coming from a poor family and having lost her parents at an early age, Fragrant Lotus is fortunate to have a grandmother intent on maximizing her chances in the marriage market by teaching her the discipline of foot-binding. Her finely bound feet are noticed one day by her employer, Tong Ren-an, a wealthy merchant of counterfeit antiques. Tong Ren-an determines to marry Fragrant Lotus to the oldest of his four sons, who, as Fragrant Lotus learns in her marriage bed, is a half-wit and incapable of appreciating the intimacy of her tiny feet. But where her husband is crude and insensitive, her father-in-law provides a gentle hand as one infelicity follows another.

Fragrant Lotus soon learns that her position in the Tong pecking order is based on the fineness of her small feet, which she is called upon to exhibit periodically in staged contests with the other daughters-in-law and housemaids. The female contestants are judged by Tong Ren-an and his business associates, who also contest each other’s ability to articulate the cryptic lore of the golden lotus. The competition among the women for the most delectable feet and among the men for the most scintillating tongue is often fierce and marked by guile and cunning. In the male presidng leading to the first contest, for instance, Tong Ren-an goads an unsuspecting guest into showing off his expertise on bound feet only to be challenged at each point by Tong’s superior insight. The guest is made to look increasingly foolish until Tong decides to spare him further loss of face. The female contestants are less chary: when the second son’s wife wins the first contest, she gloats over her victory and goes out of her way to increase the sting of Fragrant Lotus’ defeat: “Having found somewhere a pair of giant, eight-inch shoes—snidely called big lotus boats—she laid them in front of Fragrant Lotus’ door as a...
further insult. Fragrant Lotus was so angry she cried, but she dared not remove the shoes. Others in the house dared not touch them either” (p. 74).

Toward the end of the book, the modern movement to unbind feet and promote natural feet comes to Tianjin. All the men of the Tong family have died or absconded. Only a house full of women—Fragrant Lotus, her sisters-in-law, daughters, and maids—are left to face the angry mobs who assemble daily at the Tong compound intent on liberating the women of their bindings. Whatever the author intended by creating this unusual circumstance, in which a large household of foot-bound women is left without a male presence or influence, one effect is to accentuate the notion that foot-bound women became agents of their own victimhood and then were victimized a second time in the name of “liberation.” Coerced to bind their feet, then forced to unbind their feet, Fragrant Lotus and her cohorts appear to be victims of both masters, Decadence and Progress. On the other hand, Fragrant Lotus and her cohorts do not resign themselves to the passivity of abject victimhood. On the contrary, they resist and actively contest the new order. The unusual circumstance in which they have been left without male support only underscores their spirit of self-reliance as they defy the mobs that daily rage against them. If foot-binding taught these women anything, it was that their fate is in their own hands and feet. Fragrant Lotus, who has finally become the dowager of the Tong family, becomes the head of the lotus-preservation society. But in her last hurrah Fragrant Lotus is confronted by the youthful president of the Natural Foot Society, who proudly displays her natural feet in a pair of red high heels! The finale is a tragic twist of irony that is as stunning as the story of foot-binding is perplexing.

By casting the cultural details and folklore of foot-binding against the local horizons of his native Tianjin, Feng Jicai enables us to glimpse something of what the ordeal entailed for its female practitioners and its male wordsmiths. For women it was plainly an ordeal of pain that began in the relationship between mother and daughter. The conundrum of a mother’s loving care causing a daughter’s pain and suffering is somewhat easier to comprehend when we realize that the Chinese word teng becomes the English “pain” or “loving care,” depending on the context of feeling in which persons experience each other’s intentions. For instance, after Fragrant Lotus’ mother and father have died, “the only person on earth who loved and cared (teng) for her was Granny.” So it was her grandmother who initiated her into the ordeal of binding: “In her pain (teng) and fright Fragrant Lotus shrieked like a pig being butchered.”

The ordeal of the golden lotus prepared a young girl for the arduous consequences of marriage, one of which was her competition with female in-laws for male favors. As this encounter required continuous vigilance, so foot-binding required constant discipline punctuated by periods of increased effort and pain. Thus when Fragrant Lotus loses the first contest, she is devastated and is saved
from suicide by an elderly housemaid, "Aunt Pan," to whom the despondent Lotus kowtows and turns with the plea, "show me how to find myself again." The English "find myself again," a perfectly adequate translation of the Chinese fanguo shenlai, nevertheless misses an essential meaning in the Chinese that is pertinent to our ability to understand foot-binding. The word shen (translated as "self") refers to an incarnate "body" that is inherently mindful of its interpersonal relationships. Thus a woman's shen is her embodiment of relationships that identifies her standing in the family. The word fan ("to overturn") provides the semantic context in which Fragrant Lotus seeks to reassert her claim on dominance by taking the pains to make her shen appear ever tinier and more agile. The Chinese "self" is identical with the incarnate body in its mindful relationship (and contention) with significant others.

But if foot-binding was the accomplishment of women, its ultimate motive lay in the speech acts of men. We sense this in Tong Ren-an's small-foot contests, where women present their feminine attributes by exhibiting the agility of their tiny bound feet and the male spectators signify the bound feet in acts of verbal ingenuity. Beyond this repartee lay the authorial role of literary knowledge that was in the keeping of men. Feng dramatizes this when Tong Ren-an leads Fragrant Lotus into his study to show her three books, which if she can read will help her transcend the vulgar desire for "shape" with the more divine desire for the "true spirit": "Fragrant Lotus felt she had managed at last to kick open the door to the Tong family. [T]hese books let her see deeply into the core, it was as if her granny had given her a whole, plump peach; Aunt Pan had opened the peach and exposed the seed; Tong Ren-an had then cracked the seed, revealed the kernel, and showed her one hundred and eight ways to enjoy the kernel" (pp. 91–92). But did her attempt to perfect the golden lotus lead to the spiritual essence, or did it lead in the end to nothing at all? In the aftermath of the second foot contest, one inebriated gentleman exclaims: "There is just one word for the perfect golden lotus: 'nothingness!'" His colleagues begin to ridicule his waggery when Fragrant Lotus, basking in the wake of her most stunning performance, interjects: "I like the word nothingness!" which leaves everyone dumbfounded: "Even Tong Ren-an was lost. It was like some abstruse meaning was concealed here, and because nobody could make it out, nobody dared speak."

The translation by David Wakefield is noteworthy. While he follows Feng's text very closely, the effect in English is remarkable. Wakefield leaves little room for quibbling over the translation as he strikes the necessary balance between readability and precision. As such, The Three-Inch Golden Lotus will be understood and enjoyed by a broad spectrum of educated readers.

In a postscript, David Wakefield augments our appreciation with a sketch of Feng Jicai's literary career, a brief historical outline of foot-binding, and a provocative discussion of the larger, allegorical significance of Feng's work. According
to Wakefield, Feng's novel reflects the way modern revolutionary mobs have victimized ordinary people. The mobs that Feng experienced in the Cultural Revolution closely resemble the antifoot-binding mobs that he describes in the closing chapters of his novel. In both cases the personal cost to the victims was high, a point that confounds our inclination to sympathize with the campaign against foot-binding but not with the one against capitalist-roaders.

But in a larger sense, I believe *The Three-Inch Golden Lotus* is a bold comment on Chinese civilization itself. Whether, as in Feng's opening remarks, the bound foot embodies a certain truth about Chinese history or merely the odor of unwashed feet, perhaps we find something of each in the other. Perhaps the odor that permeates the Tong family is the vicious undercurrent of subterfuge and chicanery in which the artificial foot and the fake antiquities become the objects of desire and the measure of value, and what is petite and beautiful merely disguises what is shrunken and lurid, and both the disguise and the reality are the proud twins of intense, protracted, and recurrent pain. The parallel between *The Three-Inch Golden Lotus* and the recent film *Farewell My Concubine* is palpable—both are cogent and vivid reflections on the way a civilization insinuates its sense of aesthetics and authenticity in human bodies. Even *Fragrant Lotus* began to perceive a certain "emptiness" in the obsession to perfect appearances that contradict to the point of perverting reality, whether it be in faking the antiquities by which a people appreciate their glorious past or in shrinking the pieces of living flesh by which they experience life itself.

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