

## 纏足與性的繆思

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### 摘要

認識歷史中的性與性的歷史是中國婦女史一大難題。本文旨在說明研究性的歷史在概念、史料、及方法上的難處，進而用纏足與性為引子，探討如何能嚴謹的將性、慾望、情色及身體寫進婦女史。

在概念上，中國男女的性與情慾並不能涵括在個人主義的認識範疇下。今天，從事婦女史的學者對「性別」已有共識，即意識到男女之別是社會文化的產物，隨歷史時空轉移而變化。同樣地，我們必須開始對「性」的歷史性及建構性作同樣的反思。而對「性」的反思則必須從身體觀開始。

在史料及方法上，研究性史必須在傳統的思想史、政治史、社會史及文化史之外另闢途徑。在各種的論述當中「性」往往被披上神祕的面紗。我們在解讀這些史料的時候若能借助文學研究的文類、文體及文本分析，當能避免望文生義所帶來的偏差。

本文試圖解讀三段描述纏足與性的文本，從而探討「性」的文化屬性、性與身體的互構關係，及認識婦女意識、慾念的曖昧性。歸根結底，對身體與「性」的反思，最終帶來的是我們對歷史的個體及主體認識的動搖。如果歷史的主體既不是「個人」亦非「性別群體」或其他社團，而是不斷

呈現中的自我，及與之互動的人、我關係，這一部婦女史又會以什麼樣的面貌出現？

# **Rethinking Sex, Female Agency, and Footbinding**

**Dorothy Ko**

## **Abstract**

Western feminism is built on the ideology of the autonomous individual, which goes hand in hand with a view of the body as a container for the inner self. The premise of this essay is that these are paradoxical feminist aspirations because the idealized individual who enjoys these rights is originally presumed to be a property-owning man. As such, these ideals are by no means universally applicable. The goal of this essay is to build a China-centered feminist agenda that is based on alternative views of sexuality, freedom, and agency.

The bulk of the essay is an analysis of three interpretations of footbinding by writers from disparate locations: a 1970s radical U.S. feminist, a thirteenth-century Confucian male scholar, and an eighteenth-century Chinese footbound woman. Whereas the first imagined a new cosmology in which good sex is homoerotic and liberatory, the Chinese male and female shared the view that individual pleasure is but one of the goals of sex, and that good sex will lead to conception of fetus. These divergent notions of the uses of sex bespeak

fundamental cultural differences on the cosmological location of individual bodies and their social significance.

In conclusion, this essay argues that beyond the dualities of self and other, domination and resistance, or body and mind lies a new way of seeing and knowing. This realm of freedom is not predicated on the isolated and fragmentary self that ensued from individualism, but on a dynamic view of the self-as-process, a self that is always in the making.

# Rethinking Sex, Female Agency, and Footbinding

Dorothy Ko\*

Female sexuality and desires comprise one of the most difficult subjects in the history of women and gender. The difficulty stems in part from the fact that sex belongs to the realm of the hidden psyche, at least to our modern minds. It thus defies empirical investigation, the usual method of social historians. The study of premodern sex and sexuality poses an additional challenge: how do we reconstruct perceptions of sex held by people whose concepts of the body, self, and freedom are radically different from our modern assumptions? In this essay, I use the case of footbinding to illustrate both the pitfalls and possibilities of studying female sexuality, a frontier area in Chinese women's history.

## Background: The "Good Sex" Project and Global Feminism

My thinkings on the subject were refined and challenged by my recent

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participation in an international feminist project entitled, "Good Sex: Women's Religious Wisdom on Sexuality." Organized by the Religious Consultation on Population, Reproductive Health and Ethics, a Milwaukee-based NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) of the United Nations, the project seeks to recover "the moral significance of women's experience for a variety of issues in sexual ethics and to bring that data into debates about public policy matters."<sup>1</sup> A dozen feminist scholars and activists participated in two workshops in Philadelphia and Amsterdam in 1997 and 1998. The group hailed from eight countries--Brazil, China, India, Nigeria, Thailand, Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States--and from a range of faith traditions--Buddhism, Christianity (both Protestant and Catholic), Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and capitalism. The academic disciplines represented are just as diverse: philosophy, theology, economics, history, psychoanalysis, and social anthropology.

In spite of such disciplinary, cultural, and religious differences, we have found that we have in fact much in common, beginning with our shared proficiency in English. Through candid and productive conversations, I have come to realize that the major dividing line that destabilizes global feminism is not that between the West and the East, nor that between advanced industrial countries and the developing world. Instead, it is conflicting perceptions of sexuality, body, and freedom. The predominant feminist view holds that: (i) patriarchy subjugates woman by restricting her sexuality to procreation or reproduction, as a result the woman's sexual pleasure is denied or denigrated; (ii) the freedom to enjoy sex is integral to a woman's well being, hence should be a basic human right; (iii) a woman who has control over her bodily integrity and sexuality will participate in the world with more dignity, fostering social justice

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1 "Project Reports," *Religious Consultation Report 2*, no. 1 (May 1998): 4. The twelve papers that resulted will be published in a scholarly volume entitled *Women's Religious Wisdom on Sexuality*, ed. Radhika Balakrishnan, Mary E. Hunt & Patricia Beattie Jung.

in the process. This feminism is built on the foundation of individualism.

My previous work on the history of premodern Chinese women has led me to espouse a different kind of feminism. First, I see motherhood as an institution that can be empowering to women, hence we should not consider procreation only in a negative light, nor should we assume that it is always incompatible with female pleasure. Second, bodily integrity or sexual freedom are paradoxical feminist aspirations since the idealized individual who enjoys these rights is originally presumed to be a property-owning man. The political theory of liberalism that champions the rights and freedom of the individual, in other words, is male-centered.<sup>2</sup> Our notion of "agency," or an individual's ability to act, derives from this male-centered ideology. We thus need to question its universal applicability, especially in a premodern, non-Western setting. This essay represents my efforts to build a feminist agenda that is based on alternative views of sexuality, freedom, and agency. There is no better place to start than with the subject of footbinding.

## Footbinding as a Subject of Knowledge

In China today, the occasional tiny-footed granny brushing by a curious tourist is a relic. By the 1920s the practice went out of fashion in the coastal cities, albeit in such remote interior areas as Yunnan young girls did not cease to bind until the 1950s. In spite of, or perhaps because of, the death of footbinding as a social practice, its symbolic meaning hardens and grows in relevance with the passing of time. It is no exaggeration to say that footbinding is synonymous to patriarchal subjection, bodily mutilation as well

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2 The paradox for feminists: how do women aspire to be more like men while maintaining their separate identity as "woman"? Joan Scott has examined this paradox in terms of the French feminists' struggle for both "equality" and "difference." See her *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1996).

as the loss of autonomy and movement. The universal appeal of this symbolic identification, I would argue, derives from the power of an ideology of the autonomous individual, which goes hand in hand with a view of the body as a container for the inner self. My main argument is that this idealized autonomous self is that of the modern Enlightenment man, and that it is imperative to think beyond it if we are to write an alternative history of Chinese women that is true to their worldviews.

In so doing, our primary concern is not footbinding as a social practice but its representation. Only by examining footbinding as a subject of knowledge can we begin to see that there is no innocent reader, just as it is impossible to obtain objective knowledge about other women's bodies. This will be made clear when we consider how different is the knowledge produced by three writers from disparate locations: a 1970s radical U.S. feminist, a thirteenth-century Confucian male scholar, and an eighteenth-century Chinese footbound woman. Whereas the first imagined a new cosmology in which good sex is homoerotic and liberatory, the Chinese male and female shared the prevalent view of their culture that individual pleasure is but one of the goals of sex, and that good sex will lead to conception of fetus. These divergent notions of the uses of sex bespeak fundamental cultural differences on the cosmological location of individual bodies and their social significance.

### The Cultural Contingency of Sex

The assumption that sex is a means to individual happiness or personal intimacy, often in opposition to or detached from procreation, is alien to many peoples outside of the modern European tradition. Historian Charlotte Furth has warned that modern readers of traditional Chinese medical discourses would be surprised to "confront an unfamiliar, holistic view of the human body which integrates primary vitalities at work in sexual acts with the overall



organic processes of birth, growth, and decay." Furthermore, the reader has to take account of "a social construction that does not privilege erotic pleasure alone over all other possible aspects of the 'sexual.'" The alienness of traditional Chinese concepts of body, power, and cosmology challenges the modern reader to expand her boundary of the sexual.<sup>3</sup>

The importance of culture to this redefinition is stressed by cultural critic Rey Chow: "The term 'sexual' should be interpreted to mean not merely physiology or genital sex," wrote Chow, "but those areas of psychic life that are excluded from the conscious mind as a result of the pressures of *culture* and that are available to us only in 'irrational,' apparently disconnected forms."<sup>4</sup> The culture that represses the sexual by dismembering the self is not only "traditional Chinese" but is also "American" or "capitalist." It is important to critique the latter as with the former, so that we do not end up condemning the barbarism of "Chinese culture" using the yardstick of bourgeois individualism disguised as the universal good. In taking cultural differences seriously, our quest for the sex of footbinding has to be anchored in specific historical time-spaces; only thus would the sexual becomes knowable.

In expanding the rubric of the sexual beyond genital sex and personal

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- 3 Charlotte Furth, "Rethinking Van Gulik: Sexuality and Reproduction in Traditional Chinese Medicine," in *Engendering China*, ed. Christina Gilmartin et al. (Harvard University Press, 1994), 126. Furth argued that Dutch sinologist Van Gulik's classic, *Sexual Life in Ancient China*, is a product of his Victorian attitudes toward sex. She also cautioned against a common misconception among modern readers, that Daoism is more woman-friendly than the "misogynist" Confucianism. "The classic bedchamber manuals teaching Daoist secrets of longevity portray an aristocratic and lavishly polygamous society where very young women were exploited as sexual hadmaidens--the stereotype of a royal harem" (pp.145-46).
  - 4 Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity* (University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p.123. Emphasis mine. Chow disagrees with Chinese and Western critics who argue that psychoanalytic theories are foreign in origin, hence do not apply to the study of modern Chinese literature. Denying the applicability of psychoanalysis is to deny that the Chinese have psychic lives. I am pushing Chow's arguments further by suggesting that pre-modern Chinese psychic lives should also be subjected to feminist analysis.

pleasure, both Furth and Chow are clearing the grounds for an alternative feminist reading strategy as the basis for new forms of knowledge and activism. This reading strategy has two components. First, the identification of the sexual with the repressed means that sex is always mystified in discourse. Demystification begins with a recognition of the power of language to make and re-order worlds. Second, the identification of the sexual with the irrational and fragmentation means that de-mystification takes the form of a re-stitching, or reconstituting the whole from its parts, with a holistic feminist logic. To view footbinding as dismemberment in fact perpetuates the mystification of sex, making it all the more difficult to envision the Chinese female body as a whole. We need to restitch the disembodied foot to the social fabric and to a holistic embodied self, which is what this essay attempts to do.

It is useful here to articulate the differences between sex and sexuality. The sex of footbinding, in terms of bodily sensations, postures of intercourse, and the catharsis of pain, are empirically not knowable.<sup>5</sup> But what we can know, as this essay attempts to show, is the conflicting claims on female bodies and labor, the conflation of male sexual and social powers, as well as the fragility of female bodies and pleasures: in short the *sexuality* of footbinding. To the extent that sexuality is rooted in cultural conceptions of the body and political constellations of power, it is never simply a personal matter. Hence "culture" and "body" are categories we have to interrogate first if we are to understand sex and sexuality as cultural constructs.

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5 Anthropologists have conducted interviews with footbound women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and many spoke of the pain of binding or the lack thereof. These voices cannot be used, however, to reconstruct the bodily experiences of footbound women before the modern era. The latter, I maintain, is forever lost to us. For a sample of these interviews, see Howard Levy, *Chinese Footbinding* (Taipei: Southern Materials Center, 1984), pp.203-285.

## Mary Daly's Journey Into the Other's Homeland

U.S. feminist theologian Mary Daly's passionate attack on footbinding merits attention for what it says about the complex relations between sex, body, and culture. Over twenty years after its first publication in 1978, Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* remains a powerful statement of a radical feminist agenda that no facile accusation of racism can dismiss.<sup>6</sup> Its power--and limitations, as we will see--lies in its understanding of sex by way of body and language but bypassing culture. Daly's heros--called Hags, Amazons, Spinsters, Crones, Furies, Harpies, Lesbians, and Goddesses--are the self-professed Other who dare to name the Enemy: Patriarchy or phallocracy. The "prevailing religion of the entire planet," patriarchy's love is necrophilia (pp.39, 61) and its ritual, Goddess-murder by Sado-Ritual. The logic of Fatherland is "doublethink/doublefeel/doubledream" (p.368), which mystifies its misogyny and tricks women into complicity. To cut through the doublethink, Daly admonishes all women to slash with a Double Axe. "As A-mazing Amazons with our Labryses we cut them down and move deeper and deeper into the Otherworld, which--since we *are* Other--is our Homeland" (xvii).

The journey to Homeland is an intergalactic voyage comprised of three passages. In the first, the Hag sees through the Enemy's myth of Procession, a linear and continual process of Father reproducing himself by erasing the creativity of the Mother/Goddess in the Greco and Christian traditions. In the second passage, the Hag sees through the Enemy's intent of Goddess murder. It is here that Chinese footbinding figures as an example of Sado-Ritual, appearing in between Indian suttee and African female genital mutilation,

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6 In a famous rebuttal of Daly, African American feminist Audre Lorde objected to the fact that Daly failed to name any black goddesses. Daly mentioned the objection in her preface to the 1990 edition of the book, but countered by saying that "*Gyn/Ecology* is not a compendium of goddesses." *Gyn/Ecology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), xxx.

followed by European witchburning as well as contemporary American gynecology (rooted in Nazi medicine) and psychotherapy. In the third passage, the Hag journeys to the Otherworld to discover her true Self, where she sits with a loom of her own spinning cosmic tapestries of texts/textiles.

Ethnic differences are both elided and highlighted in Daly's poetics. In highlighting the power of archetypes, she gives the impression that Hags are Hags everywhere. Defined as the Other of patriarchs, women transcend cultural and temporal variations. Other than an occasional "universal" (e.g. p.172,) Daly prefers "intergalactic" or "planetary" in describing this commonality of cosmic proportions. Against this cosmic scheme, the insertion of such ethnic markers as "Indian," "Chinese," "African," "European" and "American" before each case study of Sado-Ritual syndrome creates the impression of an recurring pattern. But the parallelism between African and American customs is an illusion. The Hag-as-Other-of-Man is more at home in the Christian tradition, as evinced by the vast discrepancy in length, texture and nuance of the three "ethnic" chapters (64 pp.) and the Euro-American chapters (134 pp.) Conceived in 1975, the height of postwar disillusionment with the West, *Gyn/Ecology* is a radical critique of the Christian and capitalist religions; herein lies its subversive power. In this regard it is remarkably similar to an otherwise different work, Julia Kristeva's *About Chinese Women*. First published in France in 1974, feminist Kristeva's reading of footbinding as women's claim to the symbolic serves to criticize Western epistemologies by idealizing China.<sup>7</sup>

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7 Julia Kristeva, *About Chinese Women* (New York: Marion Boyars, 1986), pp.83-85. Kristeva and Daly both used the ethnic Other to launch a radical self-critique of the West. But the parallel ends here; their means of deploying the Other and readings of footbinding are radically different. Kristeva visited China in 1974, but even as she saw them, the bound feet remained unknowable to her as a foreigner: "I can still see them, in Peking or in the provinces, these elderly women all dressed in black, with tiny babies' feet that I hardly dared to look at, let alone photograph. It doesn't help to know that this tiny foot exists, and that it is very tiny:

Without detracting from Daly's pioneering vision and influence, it is necessary to acknowledge that the feminist utopian Homeland of the Hag is not cosmic, a realm of freedom beyond culture, but a product of Daly's own culture-bound notions of body, language, and selfhood. She sees and knows the ethnic other in terms of her culture. Central to Daly's critique of footbinding and other sado-rituals is the bifurcated body and mind, even as she proclaims the interconnectedness of the two. Hence "the foot purification (mutilation) ensured that women would be brainwashed as well" (p.136). Bodybinding *necessarily* results in mindbinding, not only on the parts of the footbound women but also on the parts of scholars whose detached objective tone was said to normalize and legitimize the practice (p.144). Daly has taken an anti-intellectual stance in her radical attempt to re-attach the Cartesian mind-body split. There can be no mind without the body. Moreover, it is a body that can feel the pains of other bodies, but Daly does not explain how this can come about. One can only surmise that this communion of bodies across culture by sympathetic magic is a mystical process.

Daly's endorsement of Andrea Dworkin, another pioneering feminist, suggests that the only responsible knowledge--the only feminist way to talk about footbinding and other women's bodies--is by way of body and senses.<sup>8</sup> Daly is heartened that Dworkin, who describes "the horrible physical reality" of foot maiming in *Woman Hating*, shocks the reader into activism by way of the physical body. Daly's and Dworkin's pathway to activism is bodily knowledge: "to know, to sense, become incensed" (p.151). The priority enjoyed by the physical body is unmistakable despite Daly's verbal insistence that holistic

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it is perfectly unimaginable" (p.85). Rey Chow saw in this idealization and distancing an example of sexualizing a foreign culture by making it the feminine and primitive other, hence "repeating the metaphysics she wants to challenge." (*Woman and Chinese Modernity*, p.7)

8 Much of Daly's vocabulary is Dworkin's: sadism, necrophilia, planetary, 1000 years. *Woman Hating* (New York: Plume, 1974), passim.

knowledge involves "mind/imagination/emotions" (p.151). The mind does not do much other than serving as an instrument of deceit in legitimizing atrocities. The body alone knows and acts. By harping on the body that pains and rages, the Hag ends up privileging the body over the mind as the gateway to truth and freedom.<sup>9</sup>

If we recall that the sexual refers to "those areas of psychic life that are excluded from the conscious mind as a result of the pressures of culture and that are available to us only in 'irrational,' apparently disconnected forms," then Daly's phantom Mind has taken on the characteristics of the sexual as the repressed and the cut-up. The slippage, no doubt unintended, is revealing: in protesting the castrating impulse ("he cuts to pieces") of all men in all cultures, the Hag cuts up her own being and exposes the fragmented feminist self in 1975 U.S.A. All the earnest pleas of "connection," "interconnectedness" (e.g. xvi) and "sisterhood" fall short of restitching the parts into a whole because Daly does not question the terms of this incorporation. The utopian union of Self and Friend (p.371) in Otherland/Homeland, is necessary and desirable only in a culture whose image of selfhood is bounded, integral, and individuated. Similarly, the utopian union of erotic love and friendship between women (pp.372-6) is meaningful only in a culture that insists on a split between mind and flesh, or between platonic and erotic love. In embracing the body that feels and a language that moves, Daly reinscribed the terms of this bifurcation. In the end, *Gyn/Ecology* is not about India, China, or Africa but rather about Daly's body-bounded self yawning for transcendence in a mystical merging with the other's body.

What purpose, then, does the inclusion of the ethnic Other serve? Why

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9 Daly was perhaps not aware that her radical view of the physical body as the gateway to truth and transcendence is close to that of Daoist women saints, as discussed by Suzanne Cahill. See her "Discipline and Transformation: Body and Practice in the Lives of Daoist Holy Women of the Tang Dynasty," unpublished paper, 1997.

bother to bring in suttee, footbinding and genital mutilation? As it turns out, the ethnic Other is essential to Daly's fantastic idealized Self of "Mind/Spirit/E-Motion" (xv), or the Self of knowing/acting/self-Centering in the utopian woman-identified environment called Gyn/Ecology (p.315). For only in visiting the ethnic Other but erasing culture--the very nature of an intergalactic journey--can the Hag forget her own physical body by giving it to the Chinese. Hence the admission that: "Only Hags... can kick off spiritbindings. This is possible, for mind/spirit has a resiliency that feet, once destroyed, can never have again" (p.42). In theory, Chinese, Indian, and African women can become Hags, but Daly's mode of representing and identifying with them through their physical body and pain has foreclosed that possibility. So the identification of "Hag: Body" we have just seen is reversed when ethnic locations are brought into the formula. We have instead a set of dualisms, with "Hags: West: spirit-mind" on the one hand and "Victims: Other: body" on the other.

Clearly it is not the resilience of Chinese women's spirit but the resilience of Chinese tradition that stunned and impressed Daly; she mentioned that the ordeal lasted a thousand years four times in the first ten pages of her narrative (pp. 135, 137, 141, 145). It is thus not surprising that despite a profusion of bodies and pain in ethnic Otherland, their bodies are phantoms and their sexuality hopelessly mystified. Squeezing, biting, and sniffing the deformed stumps for a thousand years, Chinese men could be nothing but oversexed perverts whereas the women were undersexed and incapable of pleasures, their only desire being the desire to survive (p.145).

## Post-Socialist Postscript: The Sex of the Bourgeois Individual

It is the ultimate irony that twenty years later, the most interesting part about Daly's discourse on footbinding is her insights into its cultural logic.

Relying only on male-authored and faulty source materials, she cut through the mystification with her double axe and saw that footbinding can be explained as a fetish that functioned by way of the transcendence of culture (shoes as "cultural contrivance," quoting Ernest Becker) over the animal foot (p.147). As the Other, Daly offers remarkable insights that many Chinese critics missed.<sup>10</sup> My contention here is not that I know more as an "authentic native," but that *Gyn/Ecology* makes for a problematic agenda for a global feminist movement. Fortunately, we can all relax because as Daly so astutely pointed out, footbinding is dead; the Chinese nationalists and communists had championed its end since the 1920s not because they were radical feminists but because they needed to mobilize female labor for nation-building (p.142).

Unable to think beyond her body yet unable to think through it, Daly remains hostage to her culture. The sexualized female subject that she celebrates and struggles to realize is one who enjoys bodily integrity, control over reproductive options, and freedom in sexual expressions. This is the female version of the classic Enlightenment Man who is individuated, in control, and given to sexual gratification. Sexual pleasure and reproductive choice have come to signify the individuality we valorize. I am not suggesting that this sexualized individual should cease to be our feminist goal, but that it is merely one of many possible ways to conceive of female sexuality and desire.

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10 Daly's stance on her own privileged position as a North American intellectual is complicated. In a curious passage, she recognized the destructive power of imperialism but ascribed hegemonic power to the West as a result: "Virtually all of modern patriarchal society has been influenced/shaped profoundly by the West, becoming a sort of Total Westworld." (p.96) I wonder if she did not ascribe too much power to the West. In another instance, she seemed oblivious to her own location in insisting that "Haggard criticism should enable women who have been intimidated by labels of 'racism' to become sisters to these women of Africa--naming the crimes against them and *speaking on their behalf*--seeing through the reversal that is meant to entrap us all... Beyond racism is sisterhood." (pp.154, 172; emphases mine) Daly seemed unaware of or unconcerned with the tension between identifying with African women (becoming sisters) and speaking for them.



So accustomed are we in thinking of sex as a personal act if not an individual right that we need to backtrack by decoupling the sexual from the personal, which would allow us to explore constructions of morality, agency, and value that do not rest on bourgeois individualism.

Ironically, in the PRC many people are embracing bourgeois individualism in the 1990s as an alternative to the hollow models of sacrificial socialist heroes. Several Chinese women scholars are raising questions about this unquestioned acceptance of the myth of the rational, autonomous individual. As feminist critic Tonglin Lu put it, "Will women ever succeed in creating a space for themselves through the search for an individual identity? Since the notion of individual identities is predicated on male subjecthood, isn't the search necessarily doomed?"<sup>11</sup> These are not academic questions; the quest for an individual self has so suffused the post-socialist zeitgeist that it surfaces in every media and in cultures high and low. Allow me to quote feminist scholar Zhong Xueping at length: "Within the context of Chinese culture today, the search [for the true meaning of being a woman]... represents a desire for a recognition of individual values and individual expressions by both men and women. The insistence on a non-gendered real self is what is problematic. Instead of being perceived as a cultural issue, which is related to the notion of ideology, constructions of subjectivity, and possibility for resistance, searching for a real self is represented as an existential issue with some ultimate truth to it."

The desires of these self-searching women in China today are thus fraught with ambiguities. "What is problematic is that when they want to do away with conventional models for women, such as subservient wife and good mother, Marxist-Leninist granny, and androgynized professionals, they are left with the notion of a free individual, which many theorists have criticized as

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11 Tonglin Lu, ed., *Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Chinese Literature and Society* (SUNY Press, 1993), p.12.

both patriarchal and ahistorical." The problem of a post-socialist sisterhood comprised of women questing for an ungendered self is curiously similar to that of Mary Daly's intergalactic sisterhood: "The bond among women to quest for such a self, then, becomes a paradox. When women come together not only to challenge social norms but also to search for an ultimate self, their desire for such a self-identity is very often interpellated back into the patriarchy, where they may become more ready to accept their natural roles to be a real woman. And the existence of a sisterhood based on such a desire becomes too contingent to claim its ground."<sup>12</sup> We will ponder the activist implications of this bind at the end of this essay. Meanwhile, we return to the theme of sex by tracing its vital importance to the reproduction not only of the Chinese family, but also of the Confucian gender system.

### The Confucian "Natural" Body

"Confucianism" is a label manufactured by Jesuit missionaries in the seventeenth century. Not only does it impart an artificial coherence to pluralist systems of thought, it also creates the illusion that Confucianism is a religion comparable to Christianity that can be understood in terms of theology and liturgy.<sup>13</sup> We do not have the space to ponder the question "what is a religion;" suffice it to note that in the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties both elite and popular cultures were so suffused with Confucian, Daoist, Buddhist and other folk practices that it is futile to make clearcut distinctions. When we use "Confucian culture" or "Confucian gender system" in this essay, they describe two intertwined elements: a culture-power nexus that valorized the written word and a family-centered ethics that derived its

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12 Zhong Xueping, "Sisterhood? Representations of Women's Relationships in Two Contemporary Chinese Texts," in Lu, *Gender and Sexuality*, pp.171-72.

13 Lionel Jensen, *Manufacturing Confucianism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

authority from a state-sanctioned Confucian canon.

Mary Daly is misinformed in stating that "no one was to blame for the evil of maiming women, since the reality of evil and maiming was not acknowledged. There were only 'beauty' and 'the extremes of pleasure.' Among the Chinese, footbinding was universally legitimated" (p.138). The customary acceptance might have been the case in practice, but in rhetoric quite the contrary is true. Before the late eighteenth century, the predominant mode of writing about footbinding in Chinese took the form of a radical critique, indeed ruthless condemnation.<sup>14</sup> Even more curiously, the logic of this anti-footbinding polemics by Confucian male scholars is remarkably similar to that of Daly: footbinding is inhuman and barbaric because it maims the natural body and renders it useless.

The earliest extant writing on footbinding as a social practice was an indignant passage in the collected works of Che Ruoshui, a scholar-official from the Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279). Completed in 1274, this work was written at a time when domestic gentry women began to imitate entertainers in adopting footbinding: "The binding of women's feet, one does not know when this practice began. A little girl not yet four or five [*sui*,] is innocent and guiltless, but infinite suffering was being inflicted upon her. One does not know what good does it do to have the pair of feet bound into such a small size. When Dai Liang of the Later Han dynasty [25-220] married out his daughter, she was dressed in a silk upper garment and plain skirt, holding a bamboo box and wearing wooden clogs. That means one cannot blame footbinding on the ancients. Or, some say that it started with Consort Yang of the Tang dynasty

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14 The sexually explicit descriptions of man biting the bound foot or rubbing his penis against it, or the confessions of "Lotus Knower" cited by Daly (pp.137-38) are in fact products of nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the pre-modern period it was unthinkable to write about the sex of footbinding in such explicit terms. Indirection is key even for erotic novels, in which fondling the foot was euphemism for sexual intercourse. See Keith McMahon, *Misers, Shrews and Polygamists* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), passim.

[650-904]. But no citations can be found about this neither."<sup>15</sup>

Che's identification with the "innocent and guiltless" young girl and sympathy for her "infinite suffering" might have struck some as hypocritical, but I see his anger as heart-felt because Che's assumptions and modes of knowing are entirely consistent with those of a Confucian elite men educated in the classics. In fact, so seminal are his discourse of utility and quest of knowledge by way of philology that this passage became a model for a Confucian critique of footbinding in subsequent dynasties. Che Ruoshui cited the example of Dai Liang, an ancient from *History of the Later Han Dynasty*, to prove that footbinding was not practiced in the Later Han period (25-220). This search for origins from the classics is the typical mode of knowing of male Confucian scholar-officials. Philology reinforced the authority of the classical canon and the male scholar's prerogative as its sole transmitter and interpreter.

It is hard to exaggerate the extent to which language and scholarship--and by extension politico-cultural power--are androcentric in the Confucian world. According to the Neo-Confucian political philosophy enshrined as orthodoxy in the Song dynasty, males from all classes were, at least in theory, eligible to become scholars-officials if they passed the civil service examination, from which women were barred. In other words, men alone were privy to reading the classics, poetry, and histories; they were authors, commentators, and teachers. When the examination was made the sole gateway to officialdom in the Song dynasty, cultural power became synonymous to political power. Male hegemony thus constituted a hermetically sealed universe, a "culture-power nexus." Elite women did become educated but there was no channel that could translate their cultural knowledge into political power. Che's pity for the suffering footbound girls, however heart-felt, is thus an identification

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15 Che Ruoshui, *Jiaoqi ji*, 20a, in *Qinding Siku quanshu*, zibu 10, zajia lie 3.

with the inferior and powerless Other, a subaltern who otherwise could not be heard. If the footbound woman is Daly's ethnic Other, she is the Confucian gentleman's gendered Other. In either case she is the object being spoken-for.

What good does it do to bind the feet of women? Che's question invites us to ponder the larger question about the usefulness of female bodies in the male-centered Confucian world. There are two answers, one explicit and the other repressed and unspeakable. The explicit answer is that it is an instrument of filiality (*xiao*), indispensable to a male-to-male transmission of bodies and ritual authority in the patrilineal family.<sup>16</sup> In Confucian canonical and didactic texts, this function of the female body as a womb is acknowledged albeit only with averted eyes. The female body that did appear in texts is the body of decorum; her sexuality is elided, repressed, or denied. A good mother performs her duty not in the act of giving birth but in tending to the food and wine. A good widow is commendable not in battling her desires but in demurely spinning into the depths of the night.

The female body was more visible in a genre of medical texts offering advice on begetting children. Indeed, male physicians recognized and legitimized the importance of female pleasures to the goal of procreation. Charlotte Furth has written: "In this genre of writing, which became increasingly popular in the Ming and Qing, eros was valorized in a context

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16 Whereas the meaning of filiality for males is unequivocal, there is always a tension for females in a patriarchal and patrilineal family system. Upon marriage, the daughter has to transfer her loyalty from her parents to her in-laws. Susan Mann and Du Fangqin have discerned a historical shift in the official interpretation of filiality for women: in medieval times the filial duties of daughters were an orthodox concern, as evinced in such classics as the *Book of Filial Piety for Women*. In late imperial times, women were increasingly expected to lodge their loyalties to in-laws and gain recognition as wife/mothers. Marital fidelity and sexual purity became the dominant demands, hence the late imperial chastity cult. "Competing Claims on Womanly Virtue in Late Imperial China," unpublished paper, 1998.

which also encompassed successful conception, healthy gestation and childbirth, and even aspects of pediatrics."<sup>17</sup> Both male *and* female bodies were to be instruments of the Confucian family. This medical definition of good sex as sex that led to conception of fetus promoted self-mastery and moderation. Footbinding is at best marginal and at worst detrimental to this overarching concern by luring the family men into self-dissipation. For this reason, footbinding was repeatedly condemned by Confucian scholars.

The second, and unspeakable, answer to the question of the usefulness of female bodies is for male erotic pleasure. Living in the age of its initial spread, scholar Che Ruoshui might have truly found footbinding repulsive. Yet there is no question that a gradual transformation in male erotic taste took place between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries as the bound foot became an object of male erotic fantasies.<sup>18</sup> The decorum of the Confucian male-centered discourse, however, precluded male desires from being articulated in words except by way of such tactics of indirection as analogy, and only in selected genres: poetry, memoirs, and fiction.<sup>19</sup> Male desires for the bound foot in particular and for female bodies in general had to be mystified if females were to continue to subscribe to the ideology of good sex as sex-for-procreation. Hence all the sexually explicit descriptions of unwrapping the binders or licking

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17 "Rethinking Van Gulik," p.133.

18 Charlotte Furth has made an important observation that the spread of footbinding during the Song dynasty coincided with the rise of a view of the female body in the medical discourse as being a de-eroticized body of reproduction. In attaching erotic meaning to the foot, a part of the body that serves no procreative function, elite Song men thus contributed to the bifurcation of the body of desire and the body of reproduction. Furth, *A Flourishing Yin: Gender in China's Medical History, 960-1665* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), pp.131-33.

19 One familiar trope of male desires in lyrics is the male poet's quest for the goddess, which is at once a quest for religious transcendence and erotic love. See Suzanne Cahill, "Sex and the Supernatural in Medieval China: Cantos on the Transcendent Who Presides Over the River," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 105, no. 2 (1985), pp.197-220.

the bare foot were products of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when the very foundation of the patriarchal family came under attack.

Until then, the unspeakable male sexual fantasies were often expressed in terms of male desires for social power. As Tonglin Lu pointed out in her comparative readings of *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, an eighteenth-century French erotic novel, and *The Golden Lotus*, in the French novel "sexual power is identified with power of speech... By contrast, in *The Golden Lotus*, sexual power is much more closely associated with social position... an exclusive propriety of men."<sup>20</sup> This insight provides a partial explanation for the spread and normalization of footbinding: men's quest for *social* power. The bound foot was useful as a marker of elite status--not of the woman but of her man. This transfer of value from the female body to the social position of her men (and then conferred back to the woman as her social honor by the dictum of Thrice Following) is the principal operative mode in Confucian culture, evident also in the chastity cult. The economy of exchange is one of body for power, or to be exact, *female* body (either cut up, as in footbinding, or intact, as in chastity cult) for social position or elite status as public expression of *male* power.

Yet it is here that a contradiction in the desires of the Confucian man is exposed. Earlier we saw that the sanctioned answer to the question of a female body's usefulness is filiality, expressed in terms of social motherhood. Filiality also demanded, however, the preservation of a "naturally" integral body--the progeny of one's parents. Logically speaking, a Confucian man who desired a female to mother his son could not also desire her maimed foot. Many arguments against footbinding were in fact made on this ground, which are reminiscent of the Confucian attack on the Buddhist practice of cremation. There are, of course, no natural bodies in the Chinese cultural world as in ours.

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20 Lu, *Rose and Lotus* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991), p.26.

We cannot see or hear the body except by way of culture. Bodies are amorphous; in themselves they do not say much. Hence the first order of business for dominant ideologies is to engineer and police the boundaries that make gender, class, and ethnic distinctions visible but seemingly "natural." Footbinding made it easier to tell females apart from males, but it did so by calling attention to the contrivance of culture, the fluidity of gender, as well as the conflicting allure of purity and danger embedded in female sexuality.

Contrary to modern assumptions, keepers of the Confucian tradition did not consider footbinding a "Confucian" practice; no mention of it can be found in the didactic literature for women. In diverting the female body, intended as an instrument of filiality, to other non-productive use, footbinding can even be said to be anti-Confucian. The incessant attacks on the practice, however, did serve a useful purpose in enabling the discursive formation of a "natural" body. It is in condemnation of footbinding that we find the most graphic descriptions of the "natural" body as integral, even geometric, and purposeful.<sup>21</sup> The relationship between footbinding and Confucian culture is thus fraught with ambiguities. From the one-sided discourse of footbinding we begin to see how Confucian culture repressed the sexual. Furthermore, this repression exposed the contradictory male desires for woman to be both saint and tramp. Female sexuality is thus hopelessly mystified in the androcentric discourse.

### Bifurcated Female Sexuality: The Saint and the Tramp

The conflicting Confucian claims on the female body found an unsatisfactory resolution in a bifurcation between "domesticity: wife" and the "brothel: concubine-cum-prostitute." This bifurcation of female sexuality is

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21 I have written about this discourse of the natural body in "Footbinding as Female Inscription," unpublished paper, 1998.



expressed in terms of the bifurcation of the legal-social status of individual woman into good/mean (*liang/jian*). Goodness and meanness carry clear moral implications, but a socially mean woman is not automatically considered morally dubious. The policing of this stratified female sexuality took the form of periodic raids into brothels, temples, bookshops, and opera venues. These anti-pornography campaigns staged by imperial county magistrates and modern officials were never successful because bad sex is in fact the supplement of good sex, completing the claims of the latter while exposing its inadequacies.

The dynamics of bifurcated female sexuality is so entrenched that it recently created a stir in modern Taiwan. The prosperous island may not look like a "Confucian" society in the early 1990s, but after decades of education in Confucian morality the population remains steeped in the habits of Confucian mores. Rey Chow related the remarks of a feminist Xü Xiaodan as she campaigned for a seat as lawmaker. Xü promised her supporters that, "I will enter the Congress in the image of a dissolute woman; I will love the people with the soul of a female saint." In this posture Chow sees the possibility of a radical feminist activism: "Women's sexuality, hitherto strictly organized according to the difference between the female saint and the dissolute woman, returns to a freedom that is not an arbitrary freedom to act as one wishes, but rather a freedom from the mutual reinforcement between education and morality, which are welded together by stratifying female sexuality." In other words, this freedom is not modeled after that of the Enlightenment male subject, but is instead a refusal of the roles prescribed by Confucian ideology.

To Chow, a truly radical feminist analysis and activism is built on a subject position like Xü, one that encompasses the "bad" and the "good" woman. Only thus can we be sensitive to the inequality not only between the elite class and the masses, but also between the speaking subject and the spoken-for

object.<sup>22</sup> From this perspective, good sex is the sex of a holistic woman, at once tramp and saint, who is beyond reproach.

## The Good Woman Speaks: Texts, Not Textiles

If Confucian ethics demands that male desire be narrated with indirection, how much more treacherous it is to talk about female desires! The relegation of woman to the subject-position of the spoken-for is the clearest manifestation of the power of Confucian patriarchal culture. In such a predetermined discursive field, how does one retrieve female pleasures and desires? I offer no definitive answer, but merely a tactical reminder that we have to be mindful of this male-centered nature of the word when reading male representations of female desires. We have to be even more careful when reading female representations of their own desires (always in a language not their own.) Because of the hegemonic nature of the Confucian discourse, there is no "pure" or "authentic" female voice outside of it.

Mary Daly's *Labrys* is a useful tool as long as we wield it not two-ways but four-ways: what has to be cut through is not merely the doubletalk of male deception (the myth of the natural body) but also feminist self-deception (the myth of an ungendered autonomous self.) A footbound woman's relationship with patriarchal culture--or an un-footbound woman, for that matter--is at once

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22 Chow contends that conventional class analysis is not good enough, for the speaking intellectual committed to universal justice is not likely to reflect on her own privileged position. "This means that we can, as we must, attack social injustice without losing sight of the fact that even as women speaking for other women, for instance, we speak from a privileged position." Chow in Lu, ed., *Gender and Sexuality*, pp.36-7. Chow's critique of an overzealous commitment to universal justice certainly explains the pitfalls of such radicals as Mary Daly, who had no qualms speaking on behalf of African women. But is it an inherent weakness of class analysis? It seems to me that it is an inattention to global class formation that leads to a facile commitment to universal justice.

identification and opposition. A woman could be identifying *and* resisting in being a tramp; she could be identifying and resisting in being a saint. Female desires are neither pure nor impure; intimations of "false consciousness" are counter-productive. Our concern is not intention but the economy of exchange or power inequalities in each case: Who benefits? Who pays the price? Who is speaking? Who is spoken for?

With this four-way axe I wish to read one poem by an eighteenth-century poet Hu Shilan. Hu, a gentrywoman from the northeastern province of Zhili, fell upon hard times in mid-life and started to work as an itinerant teacher. In a poem she tried to recuperate the value of gentility in a nostalgic gesture:

Remember those bygone days in the depth of my inner chambers,  
 Perfumed pouch brushed against flesh lustrous as jade.  
 My little maid held me as I stood by the flowery shades,  
 Lest my arched shoes 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...<sup>23</sup>

The garden of her family mansion, the maid, jade-like flesh, and arched shoes all served as props in the recreation of a leisurely childhood before class degradation. Through the symbol of footbinding, Hu expressed her desire for female seclusion as a class phenomenon. This is the most explicit Chinese statement lending support to U.S. sociologist Thorstein Veblen's famous formulation that footbinding was a form of conspicuous leisure.<sup>24</sup> What do

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23 Wanyan Yunzhu, *Guochao guixiu zhengshi ji* (Hongxiang guan, 1831-36), 9.5b-6a. Hu's emphasis on gentility accords with the editorial purposes of Yun, as analyzed by Susan Mann in *Precious Records*, pp.94-117. Other female-authored poems depict shoes as mementos of female friendship, mediums of exchange in a sentimental economy.

24 Given how famous Veblen's theory of footbinding is, it is curious that he mentioned it only in passing. Equating the "constricted waist... of the Western culture" with "the deformed foot of the Chinese," he regarded both as products of a particular stage of economic evolution in which "conspicuous leisure is much regarded as a means of good repute, the ideal requires

we make of this view of footbinding as the marker of gentility?

It is clear that Hu Shilan saw agency, dependency, and freedom in terms very different from ours. Seclusion in her inner chambers did not signify imprisonment but contrarily the freedom afforded by her elite status. Similarly, Hu's physical dependency on her maid was a performance that reversed the truth: the maid was the one dependent on her for economic sustenance. All the social power of elite men were conferred onto their women as long as the latter fulfilled their filial duties as mother and wife. No wonder that elite women were defenders of the Confucian status-class system and the patriarchal family.

Yet the elite woman's identification with her male counterpart is not complete. Hu Shilan's "opposition" to the official discourse is most evident in the latter half of her life as described in the second half of the poem. In resorting to the poetic convention of complaining about the hardship of life on the road, she remained loyal to the taste of her class. But her chosen profession--a teacher of females in the classics--allowed for new gender configurations. Traveling from female quarters to female quarters, professional teachers like her opened the way for a female-to-female tradition of learning that at once opposed and identified with the Confucian male discourse. It is significant that Hu's poems appear in an anthology compiled by another educated elite woman, Wanyan Yunzhu. It is also significant that the anthology was entitled *Correct Beginnings*, an allusion to the Confucian classic, *Book of Songs*.<sup>25</sup> Both Hu and Wanyan claimed their cultural and

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delicate and deminutive hands and feet and a slender waist." *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 148-49. Whereas Veblen's evolutionary view of economic development is questionable, his insights that standards of feminine beauty are conditioned upon changing economic conditions merit attention. The logical conclusion of his theory, however, would put thirteenth-century China at the same stage of economic development as Victorian England.

25 On Wanyan Yunzhu and her work, see Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's*

moral authority by adhering to (some would say appropriating) the Confucian creed; they claimed their right to speak and to write by re-discovering learned women in the classics.

In the end, Hu Shilan reinscribed herself as an elite woman by way of her learning and lyricism. Not only did she speak for her maid, she also continued to claim the power of representation, and the power of making a living, through writing instead of manual labor or handiwork. Mary Daly's goal of an union of text and textile (*Texere* in Latin means both, pp.4-5) remains utopian in the mid-Qing cultural landscape Hu Shilan occupied and helped create. No matter how poor and beleaguered, in her learning and sensibilities she remained an elite woman. The power of the word, once acquired from her elite kinsmen, became a cultural capital for life, just as her pair of bound feet remained a marker of her genteel upbringing. In using her literacy, she was at once identifying with and resisting the terms of male dominance in the Confucian world that worked by bifurcating text and textile just as it bifurcated female sexuality. Although she was too modest to state it, Hu probably agreed with her men that good sex is sex that begets children.

## Beyond Individualism and the Politics of Identification

To summarize the journey we have taken: we first dislodged sex from the personal and returned it to culture; then we considered how culture represses the sexual by mystifying it; we argued that this mystification can be undone to some extent if we read realistically instead of romantically; with a clear eye on how culture-bound we all are, we searched for traces of the workings of body and power in specific historical and textual locations. Now we may finally ponder the meaning of good sex and return sex to the personal in the process.

Sex can be good to the woman concerned, her men, her family, women's networks, society, nation and spiritual communities. "Goodness" is a productive term in its very ambiguity. Good sex--in excess, moderation, or abstinence--can be pleasurable or painful, wasteful or productive, self-effacing or self-affirming. The gaze is finally returned to the woman. She chooses, acts, expresses, and creates, albeit not entirely as she pleases.

One footbound woman has spoken, but her voice is ambivalent. She did not speak the language of sado-ritual Mary Daly imagined, nor did she speak the language of defiant resistance we often wish a female speaking subject would. The ambivalence of Hu Shilan's voice echoed her ambivalent social location. As a literate woman and teacher of females, she was at once within and outside of the male-centered Confucian learned tradition. She surprised us; the clarity of her tone concealing the complicated negotiations she had effected. Instead of offering easy, a priori answers, Hu Shilan invited us into her world. She implored us not to judge by our standards, values, and commitments but to listen to her regrets, pride, and remembrance. We have entered a new space in between Self and Other, where our bodies are not bound by the culture of bourgeois individualism. This space is not a garden in which multicultural flowers bloom equally bright; cultural relativism is wrought of rigidly demarcated Self-Other boundaries that is in fact restrictive and parochial despite its "global" pretensions.

For us to visualize and realize this space as the basis of a new global community or solidarity, we need to revise the politics of identification that has constructed our perception of the Other: in order to complete our own selfhood and agency and in order to act, we have searched for the unfree Other who serves as the antithesis of everything we are and aspire to be. The footbound woman is useful to us because we need her to complete our own cherished sense of self. Herein lies the symbolic poignancy and continued relevance of footbinding, long after it ceased to be a living social practice. In defining with

whom we identify and to whom we oppose it is easy to fall into the habit of mirroring, reversing, or standing the enemy on its head. Hence to counter gender stereotypes post-socialist Chinese women yearn for an ungendered self; to fight the fragmentation and isolation of bourgeois individualism many feminists strive for a transcendental global commonality.

This kind of politics of identification, based as it was on dualistic oppositions, made sense in the context of anti-colonial nationalistic struggles in the first half of this century. In his study of the British colonization of Egypt, Timothy Mitchell has observed that "in the metaphysics of capitalist modernity, the world is experienced in terms of an ontological distinction between physical reality and its representation." He calls this power to manufacture a split between reality and representation a "colonizing power," one that is still at work after the sun had set on the empire.<sup>26</sup> It is important to view this mechanism not simply as a malice of the West but as a fundamental dynamic of the operation of power in the modern world. Only thus can we begin to move beyond the episteme of dualisms.

We need to reimagine ourselves without knowing what forms and colors our new selves will assume. So what if we do not at all look like a bourgeois male subject, or if we begin to resemble the unfree other? Beyond the dualities of self and other, domination and resistance, or body and mind lies a new way of seeing and knowing. This realm of freedom is not predicated on the isolated and fragmentary self that ensued from the doctrine of individualism, but on a dynamic view of the self-as-process, a self that is always in the making.

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26 Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), xiii. This bifurcating colonizing episteme also manufactured new forms of personhood and spatial configurations.