MAJOR, John S.
1986 New light on the Dark Warrior. *Journal of Chinese Religions* 13/14: 65–87.
ROBINET, Isabelle
1993 *Taoist meditation*. Translated by Norman Girardot and Julian Pas. Albany: SUNY Press.
SEIDEL, Anna
1985 Geleitbrief an die Unterwelt: Jenseitsvorstellungen in den Graburkunden der Späteren Han Zeit. In *Religion und Philosophie in Ostasien: Festschrift für Hans Steininger*, eds. G. Naundorf, K. H. Pohl, and H. H. Schmidt, 161–84. Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann.

Livia KOHN
Boston University
Boston

FENG JICAI. *The Three-Inch Golden Lotus: A Novel on Footbinding*. Fiction from Modern China. Translated by David Wakefield. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994. xx + 239 pages. Cloth US$28.00; ISBN 0–8248–1574–2. Paper US$12.95; ISBN 0–8248–1606–4.

If a novel is itself improper, perhaps a reviewer is allowed to begin a review in a slightly improper way, that is to say without a single word of comment. Let us thus consider first this passage, lifted from the eleven-page preface of *The Three-Inch Golden Lotus*, entitled "Some Idle Talk Before the Story."

> One fact is quite clear: it would take two or three days to go into a discussion, even a brief one, of the care, rules, knacks, criteria, techniques, attainments, cultivation, and unique and secret methods related to foot binding. It was a complete body of knowledge. Now, I don't want to fool anybody; I'll cover all these things later in the book. And please, if you haven't studied this subject, don't go interrupting my story with your comments. If you think foot binding is painful, well, it can also be quite beautiful! If you think it's ugly, then, hey, maybe it thinks you're ugly, too. If it weren't so, then why, when the Qing dynasty fell, did some people cry, while others laughed? (2)

Several aspects of this quotation are indicative of this fascinating and important novel as a whole. For starters, we meet a narratorial persona both jaunty and confident, and one who insists that readers must bend to the rules of the text. We detect a propensity for litany ("the care, rules, knacks"). There is in fact a lot of repetition in this work, much of it no doubt by design since it deepens and intensifies the comedy and social criticism here. The quote above indicates that *Lotus*, set in the waning years of the Qing dynasty and extending into the 1930s, is also concerned with matters historical, if not outright political. (Standing in the wings from first breath to last are all sorts of allegorical ghosts relating to the Cultural Revolution and a host of other ideological waves.) Finally, our narrator advises in the preface that we should prepare ourselves to encounter mixed feelings within ourselves as we read: "If you think foot binding is painful, well, it can also be quite beautiful." And yes, this novel is indeed an entire text about mixed feelings.

The violence is graphic. In one scene a young husband loses face when his wife loses a "competition" for the most beautiful bound feet. He becomes enraged.

> He roared, "I'll kill you, you stinking pig!" . . . He grabbed the thick pole used to bar the gate, raised it in the air, and began to beat Fragrant Lotus. The others tried to stop him,

> but the idiot was too powerful. . . . A single blow shattered the porcelain stool Fragrant Lotus was sitting on . . . (and) even from his room could be heard the sounds of breaking furniture and shrieks of "I don't want her stinking feet!" . . . Her idiot husband raised hell the whole night, stripping the shoes and bindings off her feet and throwing them out the window into the courtyard. Toward midnight, amid his shouts and shrieks, he beat her up and drove her from the bedroom. Fragrant Lotus, her hair and face an utter mess, stood barefoot and crying in the courtyard. (72)

Some passages are manifestly voyeuristic, with the translator's and presumably the original narrator's tone struggling to maintain a sense of distance.

> Before Fragrant Lotus could react, Eldest Young Master lifted the edge of her skirt, and her bound feet lay fully exposed for all to view. The entire hall stared bug-eyed at her feet. . . . From all sides broke out cries of "wow," "oh my," "ahhh," "woo woo," "zounds," "aiya," "wowie." Fragrant Lotus felt stripped naked and exposed to public view. Her entire body froze, and in her kneeling position she was unable to move. (41–42)

One of the most disturbing threads that runs through the text is the raw thirst for power and prestige on the part of women who use the "beauty" of their feet to triumph over other women and capitalize upon the shortcomings of men. Aunt Pan, an expert in the exotic art of foot binding, comments to Fragrant Lotus on the attitude she should have:

> In terms of your natural feet, you've been given the best pair in the world — the bones are soft and the flesh is tender . . . The person to blame is you and you alone. You don't know how to take care of them. It's like having a good piece of meat, and all you can do is boil it. If you don't know how to stir-fry, or broil, or stew, or deep fry, how can you make a decent dish? (81)

By the time the novel reaches its rather predictable conclusion in chapter 15 (a farcical beauty contest between The Natural Foot Society and the Rebinding Society), readers are more than amply prepared to see huge sections of the story as an allegory for the pain and, regrettably, the shambles of much of modern Chinese politics. In scene compositions (gatherings of scholars, literary-philosophical debates, flashes of sexual innuendo) the text in my view owes much to the eighteenth-century classic *Ju-lin wai-shih* 儒林外史. But in many more ways *Lotus* is indebted to the sixteenth-century *Chin ping mei* 金瓶梅, this because of its devotion to social locus, its naturalism, its occasional eye for quotidian detail, its brutal social criticism, and of course its frank treatment of sexual interests. Readers familiar with the *Chin ping mei*'s memorable femme fatale, Pan Chin-lien 潘金蓮, (Golden Lotus) are sure to enjoy the character Fragrant Lotus in Feng Jicai's novel. While Pan Chin-lien is deservedly noted for her sexual insatiability, Fragrant Lotus can perhaps be charged with an appetite of a different nature. There are also parallels in tastes and behavior — accidental or not — between *Chin ping mei*'s foolish hero Hsi-men Ching 西門慶 and the hapless Tong Ren-an. If Tong dies in a manner less spectacular than Hsi-men, nevertheless he dies in a way that reflects to the *n*th degree the farthest stretch of his life's values.

Forays to no less than nine Taipei book stores did not unearth the original Chinese text for this reviewer, a bitter disappointment. Bravissimo for an English translation that does not read like a translation, but reflects vigor, sensitivity, and a fond appreciation for Chinese culture.

Daniel J. BAUER
Fu Jen University
Taipei, Taiwan ROC