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FOOTBINDING, EXPLOITATION
AND WRONGFULNESS:
A NON-MARXIST CONCEPTION

My purpose in this paper is to present a non-Marxist conception of exploitation. While this analysis of exploitation may share features with a Marxist conception, its acceptability is not dependent upon a prior agreement with that world view.

In this effort I still use the historical example of the traditional Chinese practice of footbinding to both illustrate and instance my analysis. It could be objected that there are practices, nearer in time and culture which would serve equally well as examples of exploitation. Perhaps this is so. My justification for using this practice, however, is simply that it seems to be such a clear case that if anything should be called exploitation this should.

The practice itself is easily described. The "Lotus Foot" was produced by taking a girl-child, usually somewhere between the ages of three and seven and binding the foot so that the toes were drawn back towards the heel.¹ A missionary, Adele M. Fields, living

¹ "The success or failure of footbinding depended on skillful application of a bandage around each foot. The bandage, about two inches wide and ten feet long,

Footbinding, Exploitation and Wrongfulness

in Swatow in the 1880's delineates a sometimes consequence of the practice:

The flesh often became putrescent during the binding and portions sloughed off from the sole; sometimes one or more toes dropped off. The pain continued for about a year, and then diminished, until after the end of two years the feet were practically dead and painless.²

Once the properly configured bound foot had been achieved, the configuration was maintained by a lifetime of binding, the bindings only being removed to wash the feet or during sex play. This custom almost always resulted in the lifelong constriction of mobility. Howard S. Levy writes on this that:

Palace dancers probably originated footbinding in about the tenth century which suggests that compression at first was only slight and not severe enough to seriously hamper movement. But as time went on and the practice spread beyond the palace the foot became so compressed that women usually hobbled about with difficulty or had to lean on a wall, or another person for support. One result of this virtual crippling, especially severe among the upper-class ladies, was to confine the women to the boudoir. They were thus physically prevented from moving about freely and unchaperoned and were rendered immune from the social disease of conjugal infidelity.³

The reasons given for this practice were several:

(a) It kept females in their proper place. "Why must the foot be bound? To prevent barbarous running around".⁴

was wrapped in the following way: an end was placed on the inside of the instep, and from there it was cornered over the small toes so as to force the toes in and towards the sole. The large toe was left unbound. The bandage was then wrapped around the heel so forcefully that the heel and toes were drawn closer together. The process was then repeated from the beginning until the entire bandage had been applied. The foot of the young child was subjected to a coercive and unremitting pressure for the object was not merely to confine the foot but to make the toes bend under and into the sole and bring the sole and heel as close together as physically possible" as found in Howard S. Levy, *Chinese Footbinding*, New York, Bell Publishing, 1967. pp. 23-26.

² *Ibid.*, p. 26.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 29-30.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

(b) It was believed to enhance coitus, particularly, if not solely, for the male. “The smaller the woman’s foot, the more wonderful the folds of the vagina”.⁵

(c) It produced other effects physiologically which were deemed aesthetically pleasing.⁶

(d) It figured in a variety of sexual practices.⁷

(e) It was identified with upper class status.

(f) It may have helped to emphasize the difference between Chinese culture and alien cultures such as that of the Mongols.⁸

(g) It conferred direct economic benefits on some social groups.⁹

These were what a sociologist might call the functional reasons for the development and maintenance of the practice. Of these (a) is probably the most important, the rest were secondary, historical adaptations derived from the institution once it was in place. The term “functional reasons” means here the reasons given for the design or adoption of a specific social role, action or practice in order that some end be secured. Such functional reasons may include or presuppose a moral dimension but need not do so explicitly or necessarily. Functions may be regarded in general as instruments and as such their moral status is partly dependent upon the goals towards which they are directed. A different set of considerations over and above those concerned with perceived workability or efficiency must be brought into play if the meaning of exploitation is to receive some definition. These are explicitly moral considerations.

Before reviewing the moral dimension of the practice of foot-binding it must be pointed out that not one but two distinct ethical questions and two distinctive sorts of rationales may be considered. There is the problem of the internal rationale(s) of the social participants then and there is the question of justifying the extrinsically imposed standards of the external investigator. It

⁵ For the curious, the third volume of *The Record of Gathering Radishes*, excerpts of which are to be found in Levy’s book, detail the connection of the multiple use of the lotus foot during sex play in chapter six “Secret Chronicle of the Lotus Interest”, p. 157-171.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 140-141.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 110-111.

is particularly important in this case that a somewhat detailed justification of the charge of wrongfulness occur, for there is an immediate *prima facie* difficulty for anyone who might wish to make a coherent claim that this social practice was morally reprehensible using the idea of exploitation. This difficulty involves accounting for the fact that women, the persons who suffered all the worst consequences of footbinding were among, for a time, the strongest proponents of it.

While the first question may receive a quick initial answer by observing that the practice was maintained as a means towards affecting certain sociably desirable goals and that the ends justified the means, the second of these questions, however, involves a more complex set of considerations, which must both account for and override the internal justification. Part of the reason also for this complexity is the result of attempting to transport the moral perceptions, injunctions and categories of one culture to another in a non-arbitrary way. There is also the constant temptation to provide overly simple resolutions to uncomfortably alien social facts.

Consider again the role of women in relation to this practice. One brief way of accounting for this social phenomenon might run as follows: given a powerful and persuasive social practice which clearly operates in the real or supposed interests of the group which dominates the society, the disadvantaged—females, in this case—couldn't resist it since they were "socially determined" by it. Women bound their feet because men said they must and they couldn't do otherwise. The solution, however, conveys an oversimplified picture. It is an oversimplified picture because non-Han peoples occupying Chinese territory such as the Mongols, Hakka, Miao and Tibetan did not bind the foot, nor was the bound foot practiced equally by all social classes nor even universally within the Chinese upper class. So that whatever the necessity of this social practice, it was not a strict necessity nor was it, even prior to substantive contact with the West, without its critics.¹⁰ We find a woman poet of the Chien-Lung era writing as an instance,

¹⁰ One of the earliest writers, a writer called Ch'e Jo-Shui of the Sung dynasty says: "I don't know when footbinding began. Children not yet four or five years old, innocent and without crime, are caused to suffer limitless pain. What is the use of binding and restraining...?" *Ibid.*, p. 65.

Three-inch bound shoes were non-existent in the ages before.
And the Great Kuazin had two bare feet for one to adore.
I don't know where this custom began.
It must have been started by a despicable man.¹¹

The interesting point of all this is that despite the pain, the discomfort, the crippling effects, by the 19th century at least, women in the areas and classes where this practice was widely accepted, were among the strongest proponents of it. Thus a simple description in terms of the powerful and overpowered won't do. Supposing that footbinding was in general considered an acceptable practice by both sexes, can the case still be made that its practice constitutes exploitation and as such provides an example of wrongful human behaviour? Before this question can be answered it must of course be decided just what it is which formally constitutes "exploitation" and what distinguishes it as a wrongful social practice from other kinds of unjust customs.

One condition for the existence of an exploitive practice would seem to require that there be a power differential between individuals or groups of individuals such that the individual or group with the power utilizes that power to their own advantage and at the expense of an individual or group without it. Such a circumstance while necessary for the existence of exploitation is not sufficient. Consider the following cases:

Case I - *Bank Robbery*

A bank robber or a gang of such use power to their advantage and to the disadvantage of bank customers. What they do cannot, I think, be properly called exploitation. One reason that robbery does not fit the category of exploitation is that the use is not directly or centrally the use of individuals *per se* as "means" in the pursuit of the advantage. *Persons* then must fit directly into the practice as instrumental to some end if a practice is to be typed as exploitive.

¹¹ The Chien-Lung era 1736-95. See Levy. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

Case II - *The Waiter*

A waiter brings me my soup. I use the waiter in pursuit of my advantage in assuaging my hunger but this seems not to be exploitation as the waiter could do otherwise and I do not compel the waiter to bring the soup. Compulsion seems to be a feature of exploitation. A situation not only of inequality must exist but of coerced inequality.¹²

Case III - *The Dancer*

Someone forces some other individual at the point of a gun to dance on a stage as this gives the gun holder some sort of pleasure. This situation, however wrongful, I do believe, would not as an isolated event count as an example of exploitation. Suppose, however, the individual was made to dance many times or many individuals relevantly constituted as a class, made so to dance, then this might well be labelled "exploitation". It might well be labelled exploitation because exploitation would appear to involve a pattern of use where certain individuals on the basis of some criteria are identified as liable for just such a systematic use. To label a situation exploitive, it appears to be required that it is an instance of a social practice which happens as a rule.

While cases I-III involve the interaction among persons, a fourth case referring to the use of non-humans does, I believe, serve to illustrate another feature of exploitation.

Case IV - *The Dancing Duck*

In days somewhat rougher than our own, ducks were made to

¹² Perhaps compulsion is too strong a word here. A colleague, professor Phil Koch, has suggested the possibility that a more powerful group might be exploited by a less powerful group through trickery and deceit. My answer to this apparent counterexample would be to the extent that the more powerful group could be exploited in this way if there is a gap in their power which offers a temporary advantage to the exploiting group. Trickery and deceit imply a lack of manners on the part of the exploited who are perhaps compelled by hidden factors. Nevertheless I am not fully satisfied with this as an answer.

dance on hot plates for the amusements of crowds. This again would appear to be a case of wrongful action but not of exploitation. I believe this expression can only be properly, that is, non-metaphorically applied to human interactions. However even if the line should not be drawn here it must be drawn elsewhere because such practices as rock crushing do not in a sane person's lexicon constitute such. Rocks simply lack the relevant properties to make the application of this label to their systematic use meaningful.

The identification of a practice as exploitive would seem to require that the practitioners of it systematically overlook or ignore the presence of certain morally relevant properties, the recognition of which would function to disbar or disallow the practice. The duck's ability to feel pain is that which puts it morally beyond the category of consideration applicable to rocks but its lack of self awareness also sets the wrongfulness of its abuse outside that of exploitation. Unlike Cases I-III where relatively few individuals are involved in a transaction characterized by situation inequality and circumstantial disadvantage, footbinding (a) involved the use by a dominant group (males) of another relatively powerless group (females), (b) was to the advantage of the first and the disadvantage of the second, (c) served as a means towards the promotion of the interest of the powerful group irrespective of the interests of the powerless group in a systematic and historically continuous way. Social inequalities, even systemic inequalities, are not exceptional social phenomena. (It is difficult if not impossible to think of a known society or culture which does not contain instances of patterned inequalities.) What makes social inequality acceptable or contrary-wise would appear to be the grounds upon which the inequality relations are drawn. This involves making distinctions which are established through the recognition of morally relevant properties and characteristics. As a general historical rule, correctly or incorrectly, the most basic category for the application of moral judgement is the species. Tacitly or overtly, human beings have held and acted as if there is one set of behaviours appropriate to members of the human species and another due to everything else. Although it is hardly possible to imagine any limit established by the adoption of this category which has not been, somewhere or at some time, violated, nevertheless, the

case can be made that social groups have tended to maintain, to establish and to re-establish limits to behaviours on the basis of a recognition of a human/non-human distinction. The instance of a duck which is made to dance on hotplates would, I suspect, be held by any person with a developed moral sensibility to be a case of wrong treatment but this would not be likely to be considered to have the same depth of wrongfulness as if the same thing were done to a woman, child or man.

To suggest of course that there is some sort of rough and elastic moral category operative in human affairs is to say nothing about its justification. Nevertheless if there are meaningful moral statements that can serve as a basis for the judgement behaviours, then some sort of perceptual cue must be present to supply an occasion for their application. Psycho-biological discriminations seem to have had and appear to still provide the most basic cues. Going beyond the strictly biological cues a cultural anthropologist might well point to the attitudes, rules, social understandings and what-not which often serve to define a given social practice. Once again however such descriptions while potentially helpful in arriving at a moral description need contain no ethical reference whatsoever.

To claim that some such practice as footbinding is an instance of exploitation is to evoke a specifically moral theory which rejects simultaneously social determinism and cultural relativity and which requires the recognition of the dual description or at least distinctions along two different dimensions. First there is the description in terms of structure and function which would compare and contrast footbinding as a social practice from different and similar social institutions in terms of its intrinsic rationale and then there is the description which identifies exploitation as a kind of wrongful act as illustrated by case I-IV, on the basis of moral categories which are beyond or other than those considering mere questions of functionality or efficiency. Both sorts of descriptions are liable to start from roughly the same data base but the second type of description entails the utilization of that notoriously hard nut, the notion of "wrongfulness". Despite the difficulties involved however, in order to define exploitation and to identify as a species of moral act, some sort of theory of wrongfulness is required and what is to follow involves both a sketch of such a theory and the outlines of a rationale allowing it trans-cultural application. The

starting point of this sketch and outline is the biopsychological cue previously referred to and some theoretical consideration about what such cues mean.

For the traditional Chinese, perceived psycho-biological differences between men and women appear to have provided both the criteria for and justification of the practice which operated to the advantage or perceived advantage of men and to the primary disadvantage of women, for over a thousand years.¹³ Where it is reasonably clear why men should actively accept and promote the Lotus-Foot it is not so clear why women in the areas of China where the custom was widely observed should have so strongly supported it.

On the assumption that a rational creature will avoid that which is disadvantageous in the absence of countervailing constraints then the pervasiveness of this practice may be partly accounted for, directly or indirectly, by the power of the institution or the power of its accumulative developmental social effects (attitudes, economic advantage, social status, etc.). Put simply, young females were coerced into adopting the Lotus-Foot by an older woman and, given their average age and social situation, the female child was completely unable to effectively resist the process. It was done in the name of the child's own good and in fact given the social context it was the case that having a daughter with bound feet conferred many potential benefits both on the girl and her family. This is an instance where a biological disadvantage bestowed a sociological advantage. The difficulty, as usual, is to know just which of the contrasting advantages should count as the true good.

The moral criticism of one culture by a member of another would appear to be futile unless for example some trans-cultural hierarchy of common goods and ills can be established. Only the presence of some sort of social universal can warrant ethical judgements about the lack of completeness, consistency, coherence, or moral reprehensibility of alien social institutions. In many ways

¹³ Levy reports that the Sung Philosopher Chu Hsi supported footbinding because it promoted chastity by confining woman's place in the home and that it was seen as a "means of spreading Chinese culture and teaching the separation of men and women". *Ibid.* p. 44. Also, "Traditional apologists asserted that footbinding, by making the woman's foot smaller than a man's, more clearly defined visual points of difference between the sexes" *Ibid.* p. 30-31.

the social institutions of traditional Chinese society were exceedingly different from their Western counterparts.

As a culture it seems fair to claim that the traditional Chinese society tended to a form of naturalism. Health, longevity and good food among other things somewhat less tangible received a special cultural emphasis.¹⁴ These are surely perceived as positive values by all mankind, even if weighted somewhat differently. On the other hand, if anything counts as a natural evil in the absence of mitigating circumstances, then pain does.¹⁵ Also, although less obviously and perhaps more problematically, constraints on the natural powers of locomotion would appear to be universally perceived as natural evils.¹⁶ The infliction of pain and the constriction of mobility in the absence of mitigating circumstances would then entail the doing of wrong. The question then becomes what could count as a mitigating circumstance?

Many peoples have been uncomfortable with the destruction of the life of non-human species in the pursuit of human advantage. Nevertheless the negative aspects of this process were for many individuals overwhelmed by the following considerations. To begin with, we have the power to use the non-human world for our species' benefit, and we have the need to so use it. Also there is, in general, no definitive consideration which precludes such use. Further, every animal requires environmental sustenance and at a given level of complexity this need requires the destruction of the configurational integrity of one organic entity by another.

Given any two such organisms with similar needs, the problem of which will give way to the other cannot be decided by reference to needs but only by reference to powers. The more powerful will overcome the less powerful and the reasons for this resides in both the necessity and ability to do so. Human beings, as animals,

¹⁴ See for example Bruce Holbrook, *The Stone Monkey: an Alternative Scientific Reality*. He argues among other things that the focal point of Chinese medicine was "health" both individual and social. Morrow, New York, 1981, 408 p.

¹⁵ This assertion does not appear to me to require defence. Even in times and places which put in practice at least no high premium on human life. Given a level of development, there were institutions directed explicitly towards the alleviation of the pain of the innocent. See for example William R. Jones "The Clinic in three Medieval Societies", in *Diogenes* No. 122, Summer 1983, p. 66-101.

¹⁶ Hence the use of incarceration as punishment, the use of "lesser evil" to check a greater evil.

partake of the same dynamics and to suggest that mankind as a species ought to do otherwise is to suggest that there appears on the human side some overriding consideration excepting humanity from this natural process. It implies, also, that there exists a plausible alternative for the mass of mankind to this usual power dynamics. The essential point here is that whether or not needs and powers are considered morally sufficient to vindicate the destruction of one organic system by another, this question of justification becomes meaningful if, and only if, there exists both the possibility of and some good reason for pursuing an alternative course. The presence of self-awareness would appear to create one condition of the possibility for such meta-natural acts.

The self-conscious organism is capable of representing to its awareness the impact of its own activity. This includes the possibility of recognizing to some extent the meaning of the destruction of others and its likely correlate, the presence of pain. This awareness, *per se*, does not alter either need or the difference in power but it does create one of the conditions for the introduction of factors other than needs and power. Supposing this condition and some others unspecified, should be those which allow the constitution of individuals as moral *beings* then the idea of wrongness in general and exploitation as a kind of wrongness would be the *result* of the self-conscious organism reflecting on its own biologically dictated activity and finding it wanting.

Whatever the specific content of these judgements of value might be, the judgement plus the ability to affect it could stand as factors over and above those of preconscious biological needs and powers. *vis.* I can do *A* or I have done *A* but I ought not to on account of *X* or I can do *B* and ought to do *B* because of *Y*. It has been traditional in Western ethical theory to construct these reasons out of one of three considerations, that is beliefs about individual properties or property sets (persons) or beliefs about social relations or social entities, or both as an interactional whole.

Non-arbitrary judgements of value, in other words, may ascribe some worth to a social event only on the basis of observations and of theories which define the moral significance of that event. The activity observed (property, relation, function, system, whatever) need not be identical with that which is valued but need only be a mark which allows the discrimination of moral value; e.g. self-awareness.

Consider again the practice of footbinding. Initially as a social practice it looks very much like what has been described as the ahuman organic power dynamics. There is one group, males, who violate the systematic integrity of another group, females, to the advantage of the first group and the disadvantage of the second. If there are considerations over and above those which are biological, (sex) justification for this practice must be sought by reference to considerations other than those merely descriptive of power and advantage.

The justification must allude to some difference between men and women which renders the first as a *group* not liable to mutilation and the second liable for it. Now, to state the obvious, there is nothing about a woman's foot which makes it uniquely liable or about a man's which renders it the reverse. Given whatever real differences there may exist between the sexes it cannot be demonstrated that there is some difference *as entities* which qualifies females *per se* for the bound foot and disqualifies men for such.¹⁷ Considered merely physically, there appears to be no relevant difference between the sexes that could justify the practice. If the justification or vindication of the practice is not to be located in individuals, as such, then its locus must be something external to the individual. In the case of this practice the something external would appear to be the conception of a good (the best) society.

If, as appears to be the case, the practice was justified on the basis of its utility for conserving or maintaining the good society, the one possible line of argumentation would involve directly challenging the goodness of that "good" society. Fortunately a somewhat less risky line of argumentation is available.

The purported differences between men and women relative to their respective abilities to exercise power appears to have been seen as a *prima facie* evidence for the cogency of a particular belief about the nature of the world. This belief entails the proposition

¹⁷ Of course it might be argued that it is not the slight perceptual differences as such which make for the moral distinction between the sexes but rather either (1) the accumulation of the additive sum of these differences or that (2) the small physical differences simply mark some deeper hidden morally significant difference. In response to (1) it may be asked "which combination and what makes that combination relevant to differences in treatment?" and in response to (2) there can be a demand for evidence, and appeal to such non-question begging evidence is notably lacking in the Confucian rationales.

that there is a lawfulness to nature and that any human society must reflect this lawfulness if it is to be a good society.

Certain social arrangements it seems, according to this set belief, better approximate the requirements of the Mandate of Heaven than others and the outcome of such a better approximation would appear to be harmonious stability. For a variety of reasons, relations between equals offer a much greater scope for contention than that between non-equals and social harmony was perhaps the central value for the Classical Chinese scholar.¹⁸

In so far as footbinding can be construed to be a means for the maintenance of this state of affairs, that is social harmony, its practice appeared to be both vindicated and justified.

A practice, however, cannot be justified merely on the grounds either of its longevity or its instrumental worth. In order to justify this particular practice certain other conditions have to be met. If it could be shown, granting the assumptions about the shape of the natural order, that this practice was a uniquely necessary instrument for the end sought, then given the rightness of that end, it is difficult to see what argument could be brought against it. The existence of the Muslim Seraglio, however, suggests other means as efficient for containing the potentially disruptive influence of women on the perceived natural order of things. So this instrument appears not to be uniquely necessary.

The other condition would be to require that a given social practice is not unnecessarily in conflict with some other basic social value. The prevention of pain was not an explicit value for Classical Chinese society. Yet there was a considerable importance attached to the practice of medicine and the maintenance of health both individual and social. This suggests that the Chinese shared in common with the rest of humanity the judgement that the infliction of pain, at least in the absence of mitigating circumstances, involves the practice of an evil. Since there is no question in the case of footbinding of the practice involving legal consider-

¹⁸ Levy writes "Footbinding was part of a set of rules which insisted on coercing women and treating them as intellectual inferiors... *Op. cit.* p. 65, and he quotes the last century author Kuan-Yung as opponent of the custom who says, "Men commonly regarded being born as a female retribution for the evil of a former life; a mother might remind her suffering daughter that she was subjected to the pain of footbinding because of an evil done in a previous existence". *Ibid.*, p. 70.

ations, punishment, prevention or whatever, mitigation cannot be looked for in those directions.¹⁹ The justification of the practice would reside only in its social utility. However surely it is the case where alternative ways of producing a social effect exist and where one involves an evil and the other does not involve such, then if the first is practiced it is practiced wrongfully. Since there were alternatives, and since the practice of the Lotus-Foot created and perpetuated a social evil (this unnecessary infliction of pain), then it may be characterized as wrongful use. In so far as it also meets the other conditions set out above, it may be labelled “exploitation”.

There is, I believe, a stronger case which can be made against the practice, but the acceptance of its strength is contingent upon the linkage of two distinct considerations: the one involves the moral meaning of an act or practice, the other its epistemic status. Put in its barest form, if there exist two alternative ways of behaving, the one which has the *surest* impact in terms of its moral consequences and/or the fewest problematic elements, in terms of the assignation of value, is the one which should serve as the basis for action.

Pain carries with it its own value import. It is enough to experience intense pain under most circumstances to recognize its status as a natural evil, that is, something to avoid, if at all possible. While the status of pain is relatively unproblematic the value of the sort of order required by the Classical Chinese society is on the other hand highly problematic. It is problematic not so much in relation to its internal consistency but in terms of its assumptions about human nature and the nature of the good society.

If it is true that the moral meaning of an activity is partly determined by its epistemic status, then given the alternatives of adopting a practice whose impact is clear in relation to its pervasive negative effects in the interest of promoting a theoretical good, whose benefits are highly problematic, then it seems wrong to

¹⁹ This was clearly recognized by Ching Kuan-Yung “the custom of footbinding is unknown throughout the vast universe with the exception of China. Now there is nothing that parents will not do through love of their children, with the one exception of this cruel and senseless custom in which they indulge... The injuring of her physical well-being is looked upon as beautiful, and doing such a profitless thing is regarded as profitable. This is the height of lewdness”, p. 71.

adopt the practice. Both the overwhelming worth, attributed by the Confucians to social stability and the reasons for giving it such a weight emerge from a frail and dubious assumptive base while the pain, discomfort, and debilitating effects of the practice of footbinding were abundantly clear. The Classical Chinese were keen observers of social experiences but such observations were, in general, limited to the Chinese experience and the sense of the variety of ways in which human beings may react to and resolve social difficulties was notably lacking for them.

There is, as many historical examples would suggest, no necessary connection between the actual worth of any human institution and the way in which its practitioners regard it. Those who have an interest in maintaining a social pattern may continue to defend it in the face of overwhelming evidence of its actual irrationality. The survival strength of an institution may have nothing to do with its real value, moral or otherwise. While longevity is no guarantee of social value, the prolonged existence of an institution tends to create in its participants a disposition to regard it as sacrosanct. This, plus the psychological process of identification with institutions as well as whatever socially constructed rewards are conferred on its participants by their acceptance of it, goes some distance in explaining the previously mentioned power of social constructs.

In any event it is a question of historical fact that by late in the century women were the main vehicle for the transmission of the practice of the Lotus-Foot. This however need not be considered paradoxical if a distinction between the primarily advantageous and secondarily advantageous is accepted.²⁰ The damage done to women by footbinding has been alluded to but the rewards for the acceptance of the lifelong constriction of mobility and the penalties for not conforming is suggested by the following once popular Chinese ditty,

Her face is passable,
But those big feet, laughable²¹

²⁰ The whole question of what is "natural" and what is "unnatural" is of course notoriously tricky, while my concept of the "advantageous" coincides with the notion of naturalness: it is not synonymous. The primary advantage is that which enables or empowers in a direct biological fashion while the secondary advantage only occurs in the mediation of social constructs.

²¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 110.

Given the economic disadvantages accruing for the large-footed e.g., “a large-footed woman carries, for no one wants to marry her”²² and given the cultural assumptions about male superiority, it is hardly surprising that women became the chief vehicles and purveyors of the custom. The fact remains, however, that there is considerable evidence to suggest that women would not have chosen to participate in this institution if there had been a viable alternative to it. This is to say from outside of the particular assumptions and pressures created by the extant institution in light of its real disadvantages it does not stand as something likely to be chosen, in the absence of compelling factors, by anyone with normal cognitive equipment.

If this is true and granting certain basic assumptions about human beings it suggests a standard against which the moral worth of any social practice, footbinding or otherwise, may be judged. This standard undoubtedly has its own problems but these do not appear to be so overwhelming as to remove its usefulness as an indicator of the presence of structural wrongfulness. If

(a) the institution cannot be shown to be necessary to group survival; if

(b) the institution operates to the clear disadvantage of a portion of a group and this disadvantage occurs to them independently of anything for which they can be morally liable; and if

(c) no individual would willingly participate in that institution given viable social alternatives, without the same or equal disadvantage,

then it is likely that the institution cannot be justified.

Footbinding cannot be shown to have been necessary to group survival; it conferred primary disadvantages on its recipients and there is considerable evidence to indicate that these recipients given a choice would not have participated in it. If true, then footbinding offers a clear case of a wrongful social institution: it has been argued further that because of its structural features, footbinding is a type of wrongful social practice which may properly be termed “exploitative”.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 110.

It may however be objected that these conditions smack of cultural imperialism, that what is important to a social group is not, for example, only survival but rather the survival of patterns of social interaction deemed right or proper by them and that no given social pattern can be considered superior to or inferior to any other. To this it may be answered that either human institutions are at least partially a matter of choice but the moral consequences of that choice are conventional or arbitrary or that institutions are the consequences of the working out of some sort of determinism or that institutions are the result of human choice based on reasons and these reasons can be morally evaluated by standards which are trans-cultural.

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