



Journal of the Short Story in English

Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

48 | Spring 2007
Varia

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/777>

ISSN: 1969-6108

Publisher

Presses universitaires d'Angers

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 June 2007

ISSN: 0294-04442

Electronic reference

Judie Newman, « The Readerly Politics of Western Domination : Emily Prager's "A Visit from the Footbinder" », *Journal of the Short Story in English* [Online], 48 | Spring 2007, Online since 01 June 2009, connection on 03 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/777>

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The Readerly Politics of Western Domination : Emily Prager's "A Visit from the Footbinder"

Judie Newman

- 1 China runs as a theme through Emily Prager's work, centrally in *A Visit from the Footbinder and Other Stories* and *Wuhu Diary*, intermittently in *Eve's Tattoo* and *Roger Fishbite*, and vestigially in her other works. Prager's biography offers a partial explanation. When her parents divorced, her mother remarried and sent Prager alone, aged seven, with a tag round her neck, to her father in Taiwan. Prager spent three and a half years in the East (Taiwan and Hong Kong) and never went back to her mother. Later she adopted a Chinese daughter, LuLu, and returned to China when her mother died, to show LuLu her native city of Wuhu. Prager repeatedly describes China as "a very maternal place for me"¹ because, when she was a lonely seven year old, the Chinese people she knew were so kind to her. At the same time Prager is no sentimentalist, as her career indicates. Employed as a child as a soap opera actress, Prager became a satirical columnist, worked for *National Lampoon* in the 70s, then from 1978 for *Penthouse*. It was not then usual for a feminist to write for a man's magazine. Prager commented that "What I found there was complete freedom to write female supremacist humour, good pay to go with it, and a thoroughly unconverted audience."² Her anthology, *In the Missionary Position*, collects her pieces, which include pro-choice columns, the first reviews of live television, parody ("Mrs Chaucer's Canterbury Tales"), and an article about the Wonder bra patent dispute which generated so much publicity that the manufacturers sent her ten Wonder bras in different colours. Prager has offended both the puritan and the libertine. While *A Visit from the Footbinder and other stories* was banned in South Africa as a danger to public decency and morals, one of her journalistic pieces "How to tell if your girlfriend is dying during rough sex" was censored by the *Penthouse* editor as too sensational. Interviewed on *The David Letterman Show* in 1982, she was asked "What's a feminist like you doing writing a column for *Penthouse*?" The implication was that she had sold out, despite the

feminist content of the column. Prager's answer revealed her pragmatic concern to avoid preaching to the converted: "I'm in the missionary position over there," she answered ³.

- 2 Prager's topic in "A Visit From the Footbinder" raises the issue of how far she sells out to a Western agenda in which China features as underdeveloped, timeless or backward, in need of assistance in order to participate fully in a globalised world. Footbinding features prominently in the archetypal Western vision of China as primitive and barbarous, the film *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness* (1958) in which Ingrid Bergman quite literally occupies the missionary position, is a biopic based on the life of Gladys Aylward, a missionary in China ⁴. Aylward used storytelling to Western, Christian ends; she ran an inn in order to convert travellers, attracting them by telling them Christian stories. In the film Bergman is horrified by the "barbarity" of the Chinese (demonstrated in a particularly unpleasant public execution) but eventually adopts China as her home. In order to finance her mission, she pragmatically accepts the role of "foot inspector" following a decree against footbinding, and convinces the local villagers not to bind their daughters' feet. Bergman, of course, is effortlessly successful (cue many little Chinese girls cutely wiggling their toes) but her only real interest in the cause is the bargain she strikes with the mandarin which allows her to evangelise in the villages she inspects, thus maximising the number of converts to Christianity. This is not a film with any great claims to subtlety, or of presenting any accurate image of China. The main Chinese roles are not played by Chinese actors but Westerners in "yellowface": Curt Jürgens as the love-interest, Lin-Nan (of mixed Chinese-Dutch extraction), Robert Donat as the Mandarin. Filming took place mostly on the river Colwyn in Wales with local Welsh residents of Chinese ancestry cast in supporting roles (though not in speaking parts, since they had strong Welsh accents.) The "China" displayed here is envisioned through a Cold War lens, either as greedily rapacious or as a helpless victim, needing to be rescued by western intervention, modernisation and development. The film therefore appears to exemplify the tendency of the West to renew itself from non-Western cultures, in the imperial belief that the world is totally accessible to the Western traveller or observer, as a commodity or spectacle for Western view. In this kind of reading, the West uses the East to prove its own greater civility, using an account of horrors as a legitimisation of its own domination. As Spivak has argued,

Imperialism's image as the establisher of the good society is marked by the espousal of the woman as object of protection from her own kind. ⁵

- 3 Prager is obviously open to the same critique. "A Visit from the Footbinder" is a heartbreaking story as the knowing reader follows the rapid movements of innocent Pleasure Mouse, aged six, bounding around the palace, quite unaware that after this day she will never run anywhere again but at best hobble short distances with the help of a cane. In the story Prager spares no details of the pain suffered in the process of footbinding, and is clearly open to the accusation of gratuitous horror-mongering. Nobody is footbinding today, after all.
- 4 Prager is not, however, alone in her interest in footbinding which has become a topic for feminist theory. In *About Chinese Women* Julia Kristeva interprets the Chinese system of footbinding as having specifically feminine significance, exemplifying Chinese culture's understanding of women's equal claim to the symbolic ⁶. Kristeva notes that "Freud saw footbinding as a symbol of the castration of women, which Chinese civilization was unique in admitting" (83) thus to a degree admitting women into the symbolic order. Thus, in the West, female sexuality is denied symbolic recognition, as opposed to China

which organises sexuality differently by a frank admission of genitality. As a result of footbinding, the body is marked and therefore "counted in" to culture rather than being excluded. Kristeva argues that because of the existence of two unequal poles of familial power, the individual has more room for manoeuvre in China than in the monotheistic patriarchal family, and that "in ancient China a certain balance seems to be reached between the two sexes" (85). In *Woman and Chinese Modernity* Rey Chow's reaction is withering. Chow criticises Kristeva for the sexualisation of China as "feminine", and Other to the West. In her view, to read with Kristeva is to envisage the Chinese practice of maiming women's bodies as if it were Chinese society's recognition of women's fundamental claim to social power. Chow argues that Kristeva fantasises the "other" culture into some sort of timeless "before", an originary space before the sign, so that China is constructed as the negative or repressed side of western discourse. Kristeva, she argues, is allochronistic, situating China in an ideal time marked off from our time, a time which has much in common with the way femininity is described in her work. Woman in Kristeva is a space linked to repetition and eternity, a negative to the time of history. Her formulation is particularly Utopian in respect of the idealisation of a supposedly maternal order in China.

- 5 Prager's description of China as a maternal space apparently promotes a similar vision.

Wuhu Diary opens with her invocation to

China, guardian of my memories, nurturer of my spirit . . . China is China to me no matter who rules it. It is a matter of people, trees, birds, smells, and earth, not politics.⁷

- 6 In fact, Prager spent her childhood with her father as an American military dependent in Taiwan, a location which could hardly be more politically and historically resonant. In "A Visit from the Footbinder" the relations of mother to child act as a figure for the discussion of development. "A Visit from the Footbinder" is set in the China of 1260, as development comes to a crashing halt, quite literally, when six year old Pleasure Mouse is crippled by the footbinder. Footbinding (at the mother's behest) holds the child static, immobilised in a traditional role, unable to develop, as is physically exemplified in the broken feet and shuffling, slow progress of the boundfoot women in Prager's story, suggesting an implicit argument for modernisation and development.

To what extent therefore does Prager promote a readerly politics of western domination? And why dramatise footbinding, now a relic of the distant past? Footbinding was already associated with unmodern practices when Mao came to power and denounced those who failed to share his blueprint for revolution as old women with bound feet. Prager describes footbinding as follows:

Golden Lotus was the name men gave to the disgusting, shrivelled up, rotten, ingrown bound foot of a grown woman . . . It was comparable in size and shape to a well-chewed cat toy.
(*Wuhu*, p. 169.)

- 7 The story draws most of its facts from Howard S. Levy who describes footbinding as "a vivid symbol of the subjection of women"⁸. First described by Friar Odoric in 1324, with the first Chinese reference occurring shortly thereafter, footbinding began with the aristocracy and filtered down, eventually lasting more than a thousand years. Its origin was attributed to Li Yu (937-978) the second emperor of the Southern Tong dynasty who supposedly forced his favourite concubine Yao Niang to dance with small bound feet on the golden image of a large lotus flower, and subsequently made a six foot gilded stage in the shape of the lotus⁹. There were opposition movements over the years. The Manchus

conquered China in the 17th century and tried to outlaw it, unsuccessfully (their own women adopted tiny high heels to simulate bound feet); Christian missionaries intensified the challenge; and it was banned officially in 1902, though it still went on until the middle of the 20th century. Even once the practice was abandoned, women with bound feet had to keep them bound, because it was too painful to do otherwise. Footbinding confined woman to the home, the interior, thus preserving her chastity and (in a hot climate) her facial beauty, effectively reducing women to the operative space of the boudoir. It was believed that it led to a teetering, swaying walk which was considered erotic (like modern day high heels), and that the need to compensate for tiny feet by clenching the upper leg led to bigger buttocks and a tighter vagina. Men supposedly wanted to have sex with a bound-foot woman because of the sensation of tightness on intercourse, considered akin to intercourse with a virgin. In short, footbinding made a woman into an eternal child, to be violated repeatedly and yet always for the first time, eternally timeless in a rather different sense to that envisaged for woman by Kristeva. Bound-foot women spent a lot of time and care embroidering their shoes which are now collected as beautiful art objects. The object stood in for the woman. A prospective bride would send her shoes - not herself - to the prospective mother-in-law, since small and beautiful shoes were evidence of a docile, obedient girl who accepted discipline. The physical effects were also psychological. As Fan Hong comments,

the intense physical sufferings brought about by the process of breaking and binding the feet in early childhood produced a passivity, stoicism and fatalism that effectively 'bound' not only the feet but the mind and emotions.¹⁰

- 8 The process of footbinding was excruciating, as the small toes were bent under and into the sole, and the big toe and heel then forced close together till the arch broke and the foot shortened.

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 at the end of two years the feet were practically dead and painless.¹¹

- 9 It took about two years to achieve the desired three-inch model. Levy's informants describe the pain, graphically. In summer their feet swelled and smelled offensively, in winter they hurt if they approached a heat source. One describes her little toes as curled under "like so many dead caterpillars"¹². Unbinding restored circulation and was painful, so the feet were not often exposed to air or washed. The foot was rarely unbound, almost never seen, a more secret part of the body than the vagina. Holding a woman's foot was thus considered an act of great intimacy. The awful smell of the rotting foot was appreciated much as that of a rare cheese is to a contemporary "foodie". Although the age of binding varied, the process was usually undertaken before the age of seven, so that the bones were still cartilaginous, and would be soft. The girl being bound was usually bound by female relatives, mother or grandmother¹³. The girl held water chestnuts in her hands so that her feet would be as small as them; her feet were soaked in a broth of monkey bones or other potions to soften them; an auspicious date was chosen, often the 24th day of the eighth lunar month, the festival of The Little-Footed Miss (usually in late September or early October when the cooler weather began, a time when there was less risk of the feet swelling, and perhaps therefore fewer deaths from gangrene). Tiny shoes might be placed before the goddess's altar and incense burned. Afterwards the girl was forced to keep moving about to avoid gangrene and to speed up the process. Every week or two the feet were then bound tighter and forced into smaller shoes. The result was to

create a short pointed foot, always hidden beneath a beautiful embroidered shoe, which made the foot look like an extension in line of the leg.

- 10 Prager's story is faithful to almost all of the above details and therefore at first appears to conform to a fairly obvious feminist agenda, in which footbinding features as a classic example of the ways in which woman is subjected by patriarchy, in line with the argument that deployments of power are directly connected to the body, with membership of the community transcribed into the flesh¹⁴. Footbinding has also, however, been interpreted in terms of economics. Theodore Veblen explained it in the context of the theory of conspicuous leisure – which required small hands and feet, to signify a person incapable of useful effort, and thus not a peasant¹⁵. Like 19th century crinolines or tight corsets, the rationale is to demonstrate the pecuniary reputability of the male owner by showing that his woman is useless, expensive and has to be supported in idleness : what would today be described as a "high maintenance babe". Cinderella (a story which is first recorded in ninth century China) is a footbinding story. Small feet rescue her from kitchen drudgery and transport her into the arms of a prince. In Prager's story, Warm Milk, a peasant become a concubine, is similarly transported.
- 11 While faithful to the historic facts, Prager's story employs a fundamentally ironic perspective, privileging reader over protagonist. "A Visit from the Footbinder" depends upon a series of oppositions between exaggerated movement and stasis, contrasting the rapidity of Pleasure Mouse with the slow movements of all the other women, tottering on canes or being carried. The formal effect is not unlike that of an animated cartoon, *Tom and Jerry* perhaps, or any other "cat and mouse" screenplay. The playful, speeded-up movements of Pleasure Mouse lull the reader into a state of unwariness, as if the story were only a game in which the protagonist, however often threatened or apparently injured, will always bounce back, unscathed. In cartoons the little mouse usually wins; the reader remains distanced by the form, observing from an omniscient position, rather than anxiously involved. The fate of the other women, however, strikes a warning note. While Pleasure Mouse "danced a series of jigs", was "leaping up and down", "fled", "raced", "ran trippingly alongside", "scampered", "sped", her mother Lady Guo Guo "tottered", "shuffled", and "lost her balance", her sister "toddled", "wavering slightly", and her aunt Lao Bing, relies on being carried about in a sedan chair. In a series of vignettes, the bound-foot women are portrayed as always inside, their interiority featuring as an image of a rotting, living death, from the sickening atmosphere of the smelly sedan chair to the mother's ceremonial tomb. Warm Milk, as pale and ghostlike in the moonlight "as pure white jade" (24), and heavily pregnant, complains that her feet "stink. . . like a pork butcher's hands at the end of a market day" (23) and has to be carried back to her bed by her maids. When Lady Guo Guo goes out into the courtyard (27) the sunlight strikes her like a crossbow bolt, because she is so unused to being outside. The static vignettes of the immobile women are connected only by mobile Pleasure Mouse, scampering between boudoirs and rooms on her last journey through a series of ominously named landmarks, the Felicitous Rebirth Fishpond, the Perfect Afterlife Garden, the Bridge of Piquant Memory, the Stream of No Regrets, and the Heavenly Thicket, all of which will exist for her only in memory once her feet have been broken. They will be too distant for her to walk to them. Unlike the reader, Pleasure Mouse has no understanding of what is to come, and is eager to become grown-up. The Path of Granted Wishes reminds the reader of the fairy tale motif of the danger of the granted wish; the Avenue of Lifelong Misconceptions is her final destination. The problem with this ironic

procedure is that the story remains enclosed within the mode of omniscient narration. The narrator is entirely knowledgeable, even intervening in first person mode to give a short account of events in the tenth century "before our story began". (16) As opposed to the ignorant Pleasure Mouse, the reader is superior in knowledge, aware from the very beginning of the story what the final horror must be, and implicitly positioned within a readerly politics of western domination. "We" are enlightened; Pleasure Mouse is mired in ignorance. We look ahead to a final horror, secure in our superior knowledge.

- 12 Prager was motivated to write the story when, in Beijing in 1979, she saw in a shoe store a pair of six inch long slippers. When she pointed to them the patrons giggled. These were orthopaedic shoes for crippled women whose feet had been unbound when the Communists took over in 1949. Prager's reaction at that point is chilling in its insouciance: "This was a tremendous find and the perfect gift for my collector friend Michael."¹⁶ Nobody would take her money however, and finally a woman gave her the cotton coupons necessary to buy shoes, refusing to take anything in return. Prager left "vowing to write something worthy of this gift"¹⁷. The anecdote, told against herself, reveals the crassness of the Westerner, buying a piece of another culture, a representation of trauma and pain, exhibited as commodified alterity. As James Clifford argues, for the Westerner

identity is a kind of wealth (of objects, knowledge, memories, experience) . . .

In the West, collecting has long been a strategy for the deployment of a possessive self, culture and authenticity.¹⁸

- 13 The modern period enjoys an "aesthetics of decontextualisation"¹⁹ in which value is enhanced or accelerated by removing objects from their contexts, as in the display of "primitive" or "ethnic" objects as art. In the lush colour plates of Beverley Jackson's book on footbinding, *Splendid Slippers*, Chinese embroidered slippers are "splendid" as art only because they have been removed from their context of smelly feet, pain and blood, and photographed against a silk background, as objects in a collection²⁰. Rey Chow argues that even when looking at images of a brutal past from an "enlightened" perspective, there remains a residual pornography of the gaze. There is therefore a risk that the woman is exploited not once but twice, in the reproduction of her as object. The story which condemns footbinding can therefore also exploit the victim a second time. Western observers, and arguably readers, are "voiced subjects" looking at "silent objects"²¹ – embroidered slippers, or in this case Pleasure Mouse, who has no voice in the story but is merely seen from outside. Narrative practice thus appears to perpetuate the opposition between Western observer and Eastern "object", reinforcing a readerly politics of domination.
- 14 But the story is more complicated than this would suggest. Prager's tactic is to place the footbinding at the centre of a series of transactions, erotic and commercial, in which power is founded not on straightforward domination, but on a process of negotiations between male and female. Prager's is a risky strategy, inviting the accusation of "blaming the victim", but it is a procedure designed to prevent the Western reader occupying a position of smug superiority. In a recent thesis, Wang Ping has argued that ultimately the bound foot was the sign of division between the sexes in China – a woman with unbound feet was not really a woman²². By binding their feet women turned their bodies into art, and culture; the raw became the cooked. In Prager's story the tale is told of how a piece of the first footbinding became a precious stone and then a ring worn by the courtesan Honey Tongue, an image of raw material transformed into art. The footbinding process

begins in art –the dancer and the poet-emperor – and it serves to reinforce and stabilise gender divisions, in a culture anxious about the shifting and eroding boundaries of gender, sex and hierarchy. The practice is understood less as merely brutal subjection of women, more in terms of a transaction between the sexes in which women acquiesce to – and then exploit – their own subjection. The footbinder, a Buddhist nun, is linked to the tenth century nun of myth, and moves across time to the present, transforming magically into Honey Tongue, a high class courtesan, the main attraction of the Five Enjoyments Tea House, where she sells herself at so high a price as to be almost beyond Lord Guo Guo's means. As a character who moves across time zones, who exemplifies beauty as construction, and clearly has full access to the symbolic realm, she is also expert at offering sexual pleasures (implied by her name) for pay. At the moment of footbinding, Honey Tongue, with her painted face and nails, turns into the unadorned, natural-footed footbinder in the pain-affected vision of Pleasure Mouse. They are aspects of the same role, collaborators in a transaction, the natural and the constructed. One draws her power as well as her pain from the other. Honey Tongue makes this point in the story when she tells Pleasure Mouse that the pain will recede "and then you have a weapon you never dreamed of" (17). The emphasis on woman as both prey and predator continues in the imagery, and in the name of Pleasure Mouse's sister, Tiger Mouse. Her feet are described as "no longer than newborn kittens"(13). Pleasure Mouse plans to embroider cats and owls on her slippers; both feed on mice. The story plays a similar game of cat and mouse with the reader, arousing our sympathy for the child but refusing to simplify the phenomenon of footbinding into easy categories of innocent women/brutal men, symbolic East/functional West, or enlightened West/barbaric China.

- 15 In her tale Prager explicitly draws attention to the notion of a transaction in order to alert the reader to the complexity of the issues, but she keeps the experience of pain firmly in view, taking the attack on the commodification of trauma into art as her central focus, and introducing a plot innovation. In footbinding practice it is usual for the mother to bind and break the daughter's feet. Here, however, she invents a professional foot binder who is employed for pay. The process is not so much traditional as partly modernised. Lady Guo Guo justifies the departure from custom in terms of modern progress, and a better aesthetic result.

"It is an aesthetic act to her, objective, don't you see? For us it is so much more clouded. Our sympathy overcomes our good judgement." (32)

- 16 Importantly the footbinder sends away the large audience gathered to enjoy the footbinding, and its attendant zither players, tellers of obscene tales, skilled kiteflyers and owners of performing fish. As an artist herself, she does not tolerate lesser performance artists. As readers we are therefore invited to register our distance from the audience on the page and to question our own role. Is Prager's also an obscene, gratuitously horrific story? How are we different from those who are waiting to hear obscene tales as Pleasure Mouse screams? Are we merely, as readers, voyeurs to a staged ethnic spectacle? The third person narration makes us into spectators, an audience watching a series of scenes, only to make us recoil in horror from the actual spectators. The technique plays with our distance from events by placing a second audience inside the story.
- 17 Above all, the story condemns the commodification of trauma. The woman's flesh is treated by the footbinder as the raw material of art. Pleasure Mouse's artist friend Fen Wen, the master painter, weeps when he realises that Pleasure Mouse will never be able

to visit him again in the Meadow of One Hundred Orchids. The symbolism of the orchid is significant here. In Chinese culture the "four gentlemen" (plum blossom, orchids, bamboo, chrysanthemum) are popular subjects for paintings, signifying the four seasons. The orchid (spring) represents purity, an appropriate association for a six-year-old child whose carefree spring is about to end abruptly. Fen Wen buys into the cultural for his living and therefore sees Pleasure Mouse as an art object, constructed rather than natural, who has "grown from a single brush stroke to an intricate design" (14). In the story, Pleasure Mouse runs through a landscape of signs, of carefully constructed gardens and enclosures. Fen Wen's meadow encloses lines of trees on each of which grows one orchid; the scene is explicitly cultural rather than natural. He is employed by Lady Guo Guo, painting scrolls for her enormous ceremonial tomb. The tomb is employing hundreds of artists (making screens, scrolls, hangings, paintings, and sculpture) plus silk weavers, poetry chanters, trainers of performing insects and literary men, "throng[s] of humanity of every occupation crammed into the burial chamber and its anteroom hoping to be hired for a day's labour." (19). Some artists live off death, some off the child's mutilation. The chamber's interiority is a monument to a life which is a living death. Lady Guo Guo is entombed, confined by footbinding to immobility.

- 18 In the story we see "beauty" paid for – but we also see it paying off. The footbinding is at the centre of a series of transactions. While ostensibly preoccupied with immortality and the eternal, Lady Guo Guo is entirely focused on economic transactions. She has spent the preceding sixteen years seeing to the construction of her tomb and is now decorating it, haggling briskly over the soft furnishings from a bargaining table set up in the tomb itself. The death mask and ancestral portrait are next on the list to be commissioned. When her husband appears, there is a rapid exchange of hostilities concerning her extravagance, which he argues will bring down the aristocracy by enriching the merchant class. She counters that he has been trading as a merchant himself under a false name, while imposing excessive taxes and price-ceilings. Lord Guo Guo, infuriated at the discovery that she has been buying marble expensively imported from the West (Egypt), cuts off her funds. To obtain extended credit from her husband for the tomb, Lady Guo Guo successfully deploys the threat to leave Pleasure Mouse with natural feet – unbound, and therefore unmarriageable. She uses a non-western concept of time to pressure him into an immediate decision, citing the geomancer's insistence that the "propitious hour" (29) for footbinding is upon them and will not recur for twelve seasons of growth. Time is money for Lady Guo Guo. Their conversation exposes the collaboration between the male and the female in maintaining footbinding. Although he argues that "No man could do a thing like that" (29), and that it is women who carry out the practice, she counters that "No man would marry a natural-footed woman." (29). Faced with the threat of Pleasure Mouse's social ostracism, the husband capitulates – and in his turn presents an imported western object, an expensive ebony cane from Africa, for Pleasure Mouse to lean on. The story exposes the fact that a bargain has been struck between the different camps (aristocrats and merchants, East and West, male and female) in a mutually beneficial transaction over the child's body. Essentially Lady Guo Guo has traded her child's body for her own profit, enforcing the "correct" sexual definitions in a transaction with her husband in which she uses her own subjection to her advantage. Pleasure Mouse's pain pays for both the expensive raw materials and the artistic realisation of the monument. Just as beautifully embroidered silken slippers conceal beneath them the deformed and rotten feet of the women, so an entire artistic economy is built upon the mutilation of the female body. Kristeva says of the Chinese woman that she will suffer, "But in the long run

she will have the symbolic premium as well : a sort of superior knowledge, a superior maturity." (84) Lady Guo Guo, manoeuvring and striking a balance with her husband gets a premium which is far from symbolic. Pleasure Mouse's entry into the symbolic as an "intricate design" is accompanied in Prager's story by heartrending screams.

Waves of agony as sharp as stiletto blades traversed the six-year-old's legs and thighs, her spine and head. She bent over like an aged crone, not fully comprehending why she was being forced to crush her own toes with her own body weight. (p. 36)

19 Honey Tongue offers her the choice of life or death and for a moment "Time was suspended in the temple" (36), until Pleasure Mouse opts for life, bellowing with pain, and "Time, its feet unbound, bounded on." (36). What Kristeva leaves out of her account – and what Prager leaves in – is the pain of a very small child.

20 Nobody is footbinding today, but they are buying trainers made in Asian sweatshops and envisaging the East as a global market. "A Visit from the Footbinder" shifts from an understanding of footbinding as either patriarchal horror story or feminist symbolic capital, to envisaging it as part of an economic transaction. Footbinding, in Prager's narrative, is situated in a series of what might be termed, to use Rey Chow's terminology, biopolitical transactions. Chow draws upon Foucault's argument that the various institutional practices devised by society to handle human sexuality are part of a biopolitics, a systematic management of biological life and its reproduction. Although Chow's major focus is upon ethnicity, in the course of her discussion she raises the image of China and the West as collaborative partners in an ongoing series of biopolitical transactions, where human beings are the commodity par excellence. In her example, political dissidents are exiled one by one, as others are arrested, so that the Chinese government is setting itself up as a business enterprise dealing in politicised human beings as precious commodities, as if China has to maintain a supply of the "goods" demanded by the West. If some are traded off, others will be caught :

human rights can no longer be understood purely on humanitarian grounds but rather must also be seen as an inherent part – entirely brutal yet also entirely logical – of transnational corporatism, under which anything, including human beings or parts of human beings, can become exchangeable for its negotiated equivalent value.²³

21 The West is not innocent in the transaction. The humane release of famous dissidents is also a means of palliating the embarrassment of Western companies doing business with the Chinese regime. Importantly in *Roger Fishbite*, her rewriting of Nabokov's *Lolita*, (also a novel centred upon female child abuse) Prager restores the voice to her abused child, now a first person narrator, and puts the blood back on the shoes, in the context of corporate globalisation. Unlike Nabokov's victimised heroine, Lucky Linderhof shoots dead her abuser (in Disneyworld), and founds a charity and a TV chat show dedicated to combating abuse. Lucky's mother collects chinoiserie, including bound-foot shoes. "She had the tiny pairs of shoes in little glass boxes all over the house."²⁴ Obsessed with her "retro Chinese life theme" (71) she is murdered by her new husband, the predatory Roger Fishbite, in a staged hit-and-run accident outside a shop, Boxer Rebellion Antiques, where she has just purchased lots of pairs of tiny shoes, now scattered all over Madison Avenue. The Boxer Rebellion, in 1900, was the pretext on which the United States gained a trading foothold in Chinese markets, and involved widespread looting of the Forbidden City by the International Relief Force. The shop might as well be called "Eastern Loot" or "The Spoils of the Orient". Afterwards Lucky finds the shoes stained with blood – her mother's (149).

As the rest of the novel demonstrates, the Chinese retro lifestyle is not as "retro" as it appeared, as the Chinese shoes turn into the sneakers made by bonded child labour (against which Lucky demonstrates) and the small shoes of sexually exploited American child models, actresses and child beauty queens. Tellingly however, Lucky's fellow demonstrators in the piece of anti-globalisation street theatre which she devises are rich Asian consumers, the daughters of a deposed Cambodian war criminal (Keema Thep), a Hong Kong multimillionaire importer (Inharmonia Chen) and a social-climbing software billionaire (Sondra Kowtower). Lucky's mother's fate demonstrates the risks of museumising cultural otherness. But Lucky's Naomi Klein-inspired protests are examples of limousine liberalism, still part of a consumerist world, in which shopping is envisaged as a weapon and a moral statement²⁵. Katharine Viner reports Klein as suggesting that the careful use of enlightened consumer power (so-called supermarket activism) could counter the reach of globalisation. Klein's own sweatshop-free wardrobe depended upon the fact that "I happen to live a few blocks from some great independent designers, so I can actually shop in stores where I know where stuff is produced."²⁶ Similarly, when the newspapers describe her fellow protesters as wearing "Ninja outfits" (p. 180), Lucky is shocked to her uptown core : "We're in a time when salesgirls on Madison Avenue can't tell Armani when they see it." (p. 180). The West does not get off lightly. Despite her resistance, Lucky is still part of the commercial mechanisms which she seeks to oppose by buying "No Logo" goods. Where "A Visit from the Footbinder" incriminates the past and the Chinese abuser, *RogerFishbite* turns the tables to direct the spotlight onto abuse going on in the developed world. It is rather as if Cinderella's slipper had transformed into Naomi Klein's trainers.

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NOTES

1. Gaby Wood, p. 3.

2. *Missionary*, p. 21. Page references for subsequent quotations will be cited in parentheses in the text.

3. *Missionary*, p. xv.

4. *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness*. Directed by Mark Robson. Written by Isobel Lennart. Produced by Buddy Adler. Twentieth century Fox, 1958.

5. Spivak, p. 299.

6. Rey Chow, *Women and Chinese Modernity*, passim. Kristeva, *Of Chinese Women*, pp. 83-5.

7. *Wuhu*, p.3. On the treatment of the adoptive mother in *Wuhu Diary* see Judie Newman, "Biopolitical Transactions : Transnational Adoption in Emily Prager's *Wuhu Diary*," in *Largeness of Nature: American Travel Writing and Empire*, ed. David Seed and Susan Castillo, Liverpool University Press, forthcoming 2007.

8. Levy, p. 23.

9. See "Footbinder", p. 16. Page references for subsequent quotations will be cited in parentheses in the text.

10. Fan Hong, p. 289.

11. Levy, p. 2.

12. Though there is a record of one town in China, Liuxia, near Hangzhou City, which specialised in expert footbinding. Levy, p. 28.

13. Ping, p. 68.

14. See Pasi Falk.

15. Veblen.

16. *Wuhu*, p. 150.
 17. *Wuhu*, p.150.
 18. Clifford, p. 218.
 19. Appadurai, *The Social life of Things*, p. 28.
 20. Jackson, *Splendid Slippers*.
 21. Chow, "Where Have All the Natives Gone?" p. 130-132.
 22. Ping, p. 68.
 23. Chow, *The Protestant Ethnic*, p. 21.
 24. *Roger Fishbite*, p. 40. Page references for subsequent quotations will be cited in parentheses in the text.
 25. Klein, *No Logo*.
 26. Viner, p. 18.
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ABSTRACTS

Orpheline de mère, Emily Prager a passé une partie de son enfance en Chine. Elle y est revenue pour adopter sa fille. Dans "A Visit from the Footbinder", la Chine est présentée comme un endroit très maternel. Le rapport que la mère entretient avec son enfant devient ici un tracé pour aborder plusieurs thématiques : la problématique du développement et de la modernisation ; les oppositions entre l'Ouest et l'Est, l'homme et la femme ; enfin, la transformation de la blessure humaine en produit littéraire consommable. Par le truchement de son narrateur omniscient, Prager confronte et renverse les principes standards du modèle de lecture occidentale pour s'engager activement dans les thèses défendues par Julia Kristeva (dans *Des Chinoises*, 1974).

AUTHORS

JUDIE NEWMAN

Judie Newman is Professor of American Studies at the University of Nottingham, and the author of *Saul Bellow and History*, *John Updike*, *Nadine Gordimer*, (as editor) *Harriet Beecher Stowe's Dred; A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*, *The Ballistic Bard*, *Alison Lurie*, and *Nadine Gordimer's Burger's Daughter: A Casebook*. She is currently researching *Fictions of America*, a critical study of transnational narratives for Routledge. She is a past President of the British Association for American Studies, a Founding Fellow of the English association, a winner of the Arthur Miller Prize in American studies, and Chair of Main Panel L of the Higher Education Funding Council Research Assessment Exercise.