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In the Floating World

WOMEN AND COMMERCIAL PUBLISHING

TWO DEVELOPMENTS IN THE late sixteenth century formed the backdrop, indeed, the *sine qua non*, of this book. For the first time in Chinese history, a considerable number of women managed to publish their writings within their lifetime; at the same time, printed books became so accessible that reading ceased to be the prerogative of the upper echelon of the traditional elite. A booming publishing industry was instrumental both in the birth of the woman reader-writer and in the emergence of a reading public. The purpose of this chapter is to outline these two related developments in the context of commercial publishing in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The birth of the woman reader-writer — as a type, not an isolated individual — required the presence of a critical mass of literate women who were not necessarily legendary household names. Although almost every successive dynasty boasted a handful of women distinguished by erudition, they stood as lonesome reminders of the incongruity between their individual gifts and the yoke of their times. In the seventeenth century, in contrast, in every Jiangnan city and in every generation there were women who wrote, published, and discussed one another’s works. The growth in the number of educated women, together with expanded opportunities for them to interact with one another and with society at large, created a critical mass that had not existed before. Hence the role that literate women played in the culture of seventeenth-century China was qualitatively different. This book is about these women and the culture they shaped.

The debut of women as author and audience was in itself one of the most conspicuous elements in the urban culture that had been taking shape in the Jiangnan market towns since the mid-sixteenth century. The quickening pace of commercial publishing and circulation of books cre-
ated a fertile ground for cross-fertilization between the ideas of men and women, between local and cosmopolitan cultures, and between written and oral traditions. In this world in flux, men of letters envisioned new philosophical and literary possibilities in which educated women played active and constructive roles, possibilities I analyze in terms of a cult of *qing* in Chapter 2. To highlight the fluidity of boundaries that characterizes this culture of the reading public, I refer to it as the "floating world"—an allusion to the urban culture depicted in Japanese *ukiyo-e" ("pictures of the floating world").

Educated women were at once consumers and producers of this new culture. As readers, writers, and editors, they emerged from their supposed cloistered anonymity to assume a visible place in literate culture, the prerogatives of the male literati. The term *floating world* evokes a second meaning when applied to these women, who used the creative acts of reading and writing to negotiate the domestic/public boundary as well as the thin line between fiction and reality. Readers of fiction and drama, in particular, found in the fanciful plots and characters metaphors for the realities they experienced. In everyday life, in turn, they conversed with fictional characters, creating their own fantastic world by way of wordplay, games, and rituals. In other words, the reading woman inhabited a world much larger than her boudoir by exercising her intellect and imagination; she became all the more entrenched in the public world when she was moved to wield the brush herself. In this sense, reading opened up a floating world in which the familiar constraints on her life appeared less formidable and more open to negotiation.

To illustrate the import of the rise of the woman reader-writer, in this chapter I situate her in a series of larger social phenomena of which she was a part—the emergence of a reading public, commercial publishing, urban culture, and the development of a commercialized society and money economy. In the sections that follow, I first briefly examine the changes in social relations brought on by the influx of silver into China. I then turn to the pivotal roles played by book merchants as well as private and commercial publishers in heralding a new urban culture, which I refer to as the culture of the reading public. I pay special attention to one of its salient elements—the visibility of women who could read and write—by analyzing the floods of books that the commercial presses issued for and by women. Finally, I speculate on the conflicting implications of the growing presence of the woman reader-writer for greater gender equality.

*Money and Disorder in Social Hierarchies*

It all began with money. In the sixteenth century, silver imports from the Americas and Japan completed the transition of the Jiangnan economy into a thoroughly monetized one. It was estimated that in the first three decades of the seventeenth century, at least 250,000–265,000 kilograms of specie reached China's coastal and Central Asian borders every year. It is hardly surprising that an intrusion of such magnitude into production and exchange created havoc in social hierarchies. Traditional social distinctions—between high and low, merchant and gentry, male and female, respectable and mean—were idealized constructs best suited for a self-sufficient agrarian society. By the sixteenth century, these binary oppositions seemed at odds with the complexity of human relationships in the highly commercialized region. The ideal Confucian norms, devised to instill social harmony by perpetuating hierarchies and distinctions, became more prescriptive than descriptive, although they were no less powerful because of that.

The growing complexity of social relations in a monetary economy can be understood on three levels: definitions of personhood, principles of social organization, and the perceived boundary of so-called local society. Underlying all these changes was the reduction of webs of personal economic dependency between landlord and tenant to ties of mere economic exchange. Peasants pursued new opportunities for social and physical mobility by producing for the market or by migrating to the burgeoning cities. As a result, itinerant laborers and vagabonds became common sights in the Jiangnan cities and countryside. This undermining of old attributes of status and personhood, however, rarely translated into heightened personal freedom, nor did it give rise to a less stratified society. Not only did the freedom to compete breed insecurity, it also strengthened old forms of servitude and introduced new ones. A freer labor market, in fact, coexisted with heightened condemnation and subjugation of bond-servants to the local gentry.

The Japanese historian Kishimoto Mio astutely observes that "from the eyes of those who lived in the sixteenth century and after, their world was marked by the collapse of traditional hierarchies: high/low, respectable/mean, senior/junior." Yet she goes on to note that this perceived collapse by no means implies that the seventeenth-century society had disintegrated into an unstructured mass of free individuals. To the contrary, people in the Lower Yangzi formulated a complex of new social groupings structured by both vertical and horizontal ties, ranging from literati societies to friendship pacts to master-servant bondage to lineage organizations to networks of vagabonds. With the decline of traditional mechanisms of social control and welfare, people became all the more ingenious in utilizing old and new organizational principles to create a modicum of collective security in a competitive and uncertain world.

The result was not only a proliferation of social groupings that arose from societal needs rather than the imperatives of the state but also a new
repertoire of principles on which these groupings were organized. The most salient example of such new principles was that of the female gender, as evinced by the networks formed by literate women. Through face-to-face contacts and exchange of manuscripts, woman poets forged their own communities with like-minded readers from different families, cities, and even social stations. By way of concrete examples of these communities, we will investigate in Part III of this book how the category of female gender intersected with other existing principles of association such as kinship and neighborhood ties while maintaining a separate identity.

These women and their social networks were very much products of the commercialized society. The affluence enjoyed by many families in the Jiangnan urban areas, now sponsoring schools and publishing ventures, greatly enhanced educational opportunities for women. The gates of learning, an exclusively male vocation according to the ideal of separate spheres, increasingly became opened to women in practice. In this sense, alongside the collapse of such traditional hierarchies as high/low, the male/female division also appeared to be less strict than before. Once educated, women became all the more agile in exploiting the gap between theory and practice to expand their horizons and to construct larger and more formal women’s communities. Since these issues, all major themes of this book, will be further expounded later, suffice it to note here that the growing incongruity between idealized hierarchical boundaries and the realities of mobility and fluidity in a monetarized society was conducive to the emergence of the female gender as a category of social organization.

Whereas women’s communities were born of a new principle of social organization, other associations represented new applications of aggregates of existing principles. Later in this chapter, we will encounter examples of business arrangements forged on the basis of kinship and locale in the publishing trade. The Japanese social historian Ueda Makoto coined the term circuit (kairo) to distinguish this and other social formations in Ming-Qing society from traditional social networks. “Networks” refers to personal groupings built on individual ties, which could not last beyond its members’ lifetime, but “circuits” are institutional arrangements that are fixtures in the communities in which they operate and lend them stability. Constructed on a multitude of overlapping and shifting criteria such as lineage, bureaucracy, membership in secret societies, and native place, these circuits outlived economic cycles of depression and inflation and survived the political upheavals of the Manchu conquest in the mid-seventeenth century.

Both heightened mobility and the proliferation of new social organizations accelerated the demise of imperially sanctioned village chiefs and tax chiefs, which created a hiatus in local leadership. This weakening of the village as a natural habitat, coupled with heightened traffic between town and country, called into question the very idea of a contiguous “local society” with clear-cut social and spatial demarcations. Instead, local society became a multivalent entity, whose boundaries and composition shifted with the task at hand and the vantage point of the viewer. For example, the field of action of the landowning gentry increasingly expanded to that of the county, the lowest administrative unit. This was in large part due to the prevalence of absentee landlordism, which meant that local disputes could no longer be resolved at the grass-roots level and had to be dealt with at the county level and above. Prominent lineages, too, often selected marriage partners from distant areas within their county. Another repercussion of the hiatus in local leadership was the ascendance of lineage organizations in local society. I will elaborate on the import of growing lineage power and the marriage alliance circle to women’s education in Chapter 4.

In short, the intrusion of money created a mobile and fluid society in Jiangnan, a floating world in which definitions of identity, social relations, and community were no longer predetermined but were defined by situational context and could change over an individual’s lifetime. Commentators at the time were all too aware of the incongruity between realities in this floating world and the idealized Confucian order frozen in terms of such binaries as high/low, senior/junior, or male/female.

This gulf between the ideal and the real, the most important cultural legacy of the monetary economy, enabled the production of new knowledge while prompting many to seek the reinvention of old orders. The emergent world of commercial publishing and women’s involvement in it were situated squarely at the crossroads of these tensions. As the women saw it, they could enjoy de facto freedoms and opportunities for personal fulfillment without overtly challenging the ideal order. These educated women were extremely skillful at exploiting the social and ideological fluidities to expand their own social and intellectual horizons. Their growing visibility as reader-writer and expanding social networks constituted the most salient examples.

The widening gap between norms and social realities affected women in a second way, by enhancing their educational opportunities. Instead of diminishing the lure of moral education, the glaring distance between ideal norms and reality prompted crusaders to redouble their didactic efforts through mass-produced texts. These crusaders, some of whom were educated women themselves, identified the cultivation of motherly virtues as the key to setting the world straight. Challenges to ideal norms wrought by social disorders, in fact, provided the strongest justification for women’s
education. Yet since this education was intended to strengthen the ideological underpinnings of social and gender hierarchies, its implications for women’s well-being were problematic. I will return to this issue in my discussion of commercially published didactic books for women.

The inadequacy of age-old moral guidelines in providing for everyday survival created a volcano of demands for a new form of knowledge—practical, how-to guides. From the safest travel routes to terms used in real estate contracts to proper conduct in brothels and gambling dens, the vexed traveler in the floating world could draw upon an encyclopedia of know-how that the Classics did not provide. The fluid commercial society now promised multiple channels to wealth and a modicum of prestige outside the civil service—manufacturing, trade, and para-bureaucratic services—but competition was stiffer than before. Books were useful in more ways than one to the social climbers: students mimicked the latest model examination essays; merchants kept abreast of market conditions; families consulted almanacs for auspicious dates before launching building projects, planning trips, or binding a daughter’s feet. Those who thus rose above the fray, in turn, found book ownership a time-honored symbol of their newfound status.

In other words, heightened competition for social status increased the demand for books, both as ammunition and as taken of victory. It was this new market for practical instruction that fueled the commercial publishing industry and created a distinct feature of the emerging reading public. In the gap between ideology and practice, boundless possibilities emerged. Having been engraved onto woodblocks, they would soon gain a material existence from the printed page.

The Publishing Boom and Birth of the Reading Public

The publishing industry that fed on the appetite for practical knowledge was itself part of the commercialized and monetarized society. Recent work by Japanese scholars has shown that nothing short of revolution describes the transition that the Chinese publishing industry went through in the Jiajing period (1522–66). It was not a technological revolution—all the know-how for woodblock printing was in place by the ninth century—but a revolution in the economics of publishing and the culture of learning. In the second half of the Ming dynasty, the supply of and demand for books soared, and prices plunged, triggering an unprecedented publishing boom throughout the country.

The influx of silver and the ensuing commercialization in sixteenth-century China ushered in an age of mass publishing. The proliferation of trade routes and regional markets quickened the circulation of books and ideas at the same time as it created a newly affluent class of consumers. Many of the publishing houses that thrived were centuries-old family enterprises dating back to the Song dynasty, yet they responded to changing market conditions by catering to the needs and tastes of a new group of readers who did not hail from the traditional scholar-gentry elite. Specifically, the mid-sixteenth century, which coincided with the Jiajing period, marked the transition from the age of quality printing to that of quantity printing. In the age of quality printing, which lasted from the Song to early Ming, blocks were cut and proofread with meticulous care and only high-quality paper and ink were used. Books, as objets d’art, were prerogatives of the wealthy.

The heyday of quantity printing, in turn, began in the Wanli period. The advent of mass printing was propelled by a host of economic and cultural factors, namely, cheaper paper, which lowered production costs substantially; new fonts with more strokes crisscrossing at right angles, which simplified woodblock cutting; and craft specialization, which facilitated the division of labor and improved efficiency. Riding on the crest of change, private publishing ventures in the form of family or commercial presses mushroomed, outstripping official presses in both variety and volume of output.

As a result of this publishing boom, people with no previous access to the printed page or those who had previously had to expend time and effort borrowing and handcopying books could readily buy books in the open market and build a private collection. These people, including aspiring students, holders of lower-degrees, petty rural landlords, owners of small businesses, and women from gentry families, joined the traditional elites to make up a new reading public. The taste of this new reading public was as eclectic as its social composition. Not only did more people come into contact with books, they also devoured a dazzling array of genres—stories, poetry, prose, plays, primers, encyclopedias, religious tracts, didactic books, travel guides, and household almanacs, besides the examination-related canon, model essays, and study aids. Hence in the diversity of its constituency and taste, the reading public exemplified the plurality of the monetarized society of which it was a part.

The term mass printing calls attention to the soaring number and variety of books produced in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Similarly, the term reading public highlights the end of the monopoly of the scholar-official elites as authors and consumers of literate culture. The word public, however, does not carry the connotations of “public sphere” or even “civil society” as it often evokes in European history. Nor do the descriptions of “mass” or “popular” press rest on the social existence of a middle class. The reading public in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century
Leaving aside the problem of variations in degree of purity, the purchasing power of one ounce of silver varied from place to place and from year to year. Without delving into the macroeconomics of exchange rate fluctuations, it is clear that one ounce of silver was not an amount that the majority of the population could easily dispense with. To cite an arbitrary example, according to commodity prices listed in a 1585 statute book published in Nanjing, one ounce of silver could buy 3.2 shi of rice, or 320 catties of salt, or 80 catties of tea, or 200 sheets of bond paper, or 400 writing brushes. In terms of wages, an average agricultural laborer in Huzhou received full board and five ounces of silver in return for a year’s work in the period from the 1630’s to the 1650’s.19 Evidently, paying one ounce for a book was a considerable expense, but not a prohibitive one, for a family of some means. It was, however, still out of reach for a lower-class family. The newly affluent group of book buyers thus inhabited an ambivalent social position. Although they might appear rustic to holders of metropolitan degrees, to the majority of the population they still lived in a world apart.

To be sure, in a society where most were illiterate, no matter how fast the reading public was growing, it did not exceed 10 percent of the entire population. Its impact on the cultural and intellectual life of the day, however, was more profound than sheer numbers can convey. I will elaborate on the significance of this reading culture below, after surveying the two major vehicles of its production and propagation—family and commercial publishing enterprises. The phenomenal growth of these two forms of non-governmental publishing greatly enhanced the opportunities for ordinary writers, including women, to gain access to books and to have their own works published in their lifetime.

**Official and Family Publishing**

As books became cheaper, less sacred, and more in demand, the pace of all three forms of printing enterprises—official, private, and commercial—quickened in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Official publishing (gunzuka) refers to printing financed by public funds and supervised by government bureaus, imperial princes, and bureaucrats. The most prolific bureaus were the National University system under the Ministry of Rites and the Directorate of Ceremonial of the Imperial Household Department. In the main, official publishing specialized in the Confucian canon that formed the basis of the civil service examination and printed matters necessary for governance—calendars, gazetteers, medical treatises. Extant records, however, show an occasional inclusion of such popular novels as Romance of the Three Kingdoms and The Water Margin.20
These books, distributed through the bureaucracy, were mostly stored away in pavilions or purchased by local academies as textbooks with government funds. The monopolistic nature of this enterprise ensured that prices were high and circulation outside official channels limited.21

More relevant to the needs of readers and authors in urban Jiangnan were the other two forms of publishing, family and commercial. Family publishing (jiake), a means of converting a family's cultural capital into prestige or even profit, could be conducted on an ad hoc or a long-term basis. In the former, gentry families would hire a team of workers for a specific project, usually the collected works of their erudite son(s) and daughter(s). These books, symbols of the financial and cultural attainments of the family, were mostly given away to cement social ties. Occasionally they were also sold in bookstores.22 The large number of collected works of Ming and Qing individuals or families found in today's library vaults can be attributed to the popularity of this custom. Genealogies, too, were printed as ad hoc projects, with families hiring itinerant workers who traveled with a stock of movable type. The poetry collections of many gentrywomen were also published in this way. A second kind of family publishing involved full-fledged presses that prominent writers and collectors built in their villas. Staffed with permanent workers, they produced high-quality reproductions of treasures from the family library and published works penned by the master of the house himself.23

The flourishing of family publishing would not have been possible without the affluence generated by the commercialized economy. It is indicative of the spirit of the floating world in seventeenth-century Jiangnan in three ways, all of which had a direct bearing on the rise of the female reader-writer. First, it bespeaks the quickening pace and multiple channels through which information was generated and exchanged. The dispersion of book production from government venues into family villas meant a decentralization of venues for the production of knowledge. This is particularly crucial to the generation of a critical mass for women readers and writers. Collected works of individual women were predominantly issued by family publishing enterprises, as were men's writings of a more private and emotional nature, which had formerly been considered unworthy of publication. The commercial presses seized upon these private musings by both men and women and manufactured a cult of emotionality from them (see below).

Second, family publishing constituted one facet of a general trend toward privatization in Chinese life in the Ming-Qing period, when the family became the locus of a host of formerly "public" activities and family life assumed increasing emotional significance. This development altered the content and texture of life for both males and females, but its impact on the supposedly housebound females was particularly drastic. Without venturing out of the family compound, the gentry daughter could devour the family's library collection, watch operas on the living-room stage, and befriend visitors from far and near. In other words, even as gentrywomen remained physically cloistered, the boundaries of the inner chambers became permeable as a brave new world came toward her from without. I will elaborate on this fundamental shift in the meaning of domesticity in Chapters 3–5.

Third, family publishing played a role in facilitating the reception of a new image of women as intellectual beings. In bringing the world of culture and scholarship to the heart of a woman's traditional domain, family publishing helped cement a new relationship between women and learning. Not only did more women learn to read and write in this conducive atmosphere, but many were even hailed as the pride of their family, who financed the publication of their works. This incorporation of women's talent into the family's repertoire of cultural capital helped promote the legitimacy of a literary education for daughters and led to the valorization of women writers in local histories. In helping to redefine domesticity, family publishing was instrumental in constructing a new womanhood.

Commercial Publishing: Books for Money

Even more so than family publishing, the organization and style of a third kind of publishing — commercial — epitomized the profound cultural changes brought about by the monetary economy. Books became firmly linked with profit, in both the economic and moral sense, in the minds of readers and publishers. In order to promote sales, merchants fused didacticism with entertainment and words with pictures. By doing so, they produced not only new kinds of books but also a new milieu for interactions between authors and readers. Directness, sincerity, and personal rapport became the order of the day.

Commercial publishing (fangke) grew phenomenally in the mid-sixteenth century and continued to prosper in the Qing. Like family publishing, its operation was decentralized due to the portability of the instruments needed for woodblock printing and the relatively low overhead involved.24 The Jiangnan cities — Hangzhou, Suzhou, and Nanjing — excelled in the elite market, but publishing centers flourished in every region of the empire. Even in provinces as remote from the Yangzi heartland as Shanxi, Guangdong, Hunan, and Hebei, printers vied to issue the latest bestsellers.25 In the Wanli period, the onslaught of mass publishing shifted the dynamics of the trade to such new areas as Wuxing in Zhejiang and Shexian in Anhui.26 Northern Fujian, having specialized in the lower end
of the market since the Song dynasty, continued to thrive until the early Qing. Its eclipse then boosted production in the establishments of Nanjing, Suzhou, and Hangzhou. In the eighteenth century, Jiangnan returned to the center stage of publishing as it increasingly catered to the mass market.27

Commercial publishing was part and parcel of the general commercial expansion changing the face of the empire. Publishing houses in Huizhou in Anhui and Jianyang in Fujian, in particular, heralded the new styles and genres that appealed to the eclectic taste of the reading public. Similar to the renowned Huizhou and Shanzhi merchants, these printers utilized such traditional cultural resources as lineage ties to run their rationalized businesses.28 And, just like the banking industry established by Shanzhi and Ningbo bankers, there was a remarkable degree of regional and lineage specialization in commercial printing. A renowned example was the Huangs of Gu Village, Shexian, Huizhou, who produced successive generations of woodblock illustrators from the early Ming to the twentieth century. With their earliest extant work dating from 1489, the Huangs reached their peak of productivity in the Wanli period, when they turned the works of leading painters into prints that graced the pages of novels, dramas, and books of precepts. Winning for their family the name of Dragon-Carving Hands (diaolong shou), these craftsmen followed the footsteps of their fellow Huizhou merchants in migrating to the major Jiangnan cities in the seventeenth century.29

Another example of the regional-cum-lineage specialization in the trade is provided by the Liu and Yu families in Jianyang, Fujian. The princes of mass publishing, they led the trade in volume and were renowned for speed and efficiency, if not always for accuracy and originality. Their specialty was illustrated novels and almanacs. Both northern Fujian families started business in the Song dynasty, experienced a surge in production in the early to mid-sixteenth century, and saw their fortunes peak in late Ming.30 The Yus, the biggest printing conglomerate in Jianyang, left records of over thirty independent publishing houses that flourished in the Wanli period and produced over a thousand titles in Ming times. Emulating the names of literati studios, these houses were often called “xx tang,” “xx guan” or “xx zhai.” Each was headed by one man from the Yu lineage, entitled “master” (zhuren), with the combined duties of publisher, administrator, and sales manager. Very often he also wrote and edited manuscripts.

One such man-of-letters / entrepreneur was Yu Xiangdou (ca. 1560–ca. 1637), who took up his family trade in 1591 after failing the civil service examination. An expert promoter, he often included his own portrait in the books he published, as well as the names of the copyist, block-cutter, and binder. This public recognition accorded these master craftsmen, however, obliterated a new division of labor that arose in the mid-Ming. To expedite production, carvers with varied skill levels began to work in teams, with trainees concentrating on the straight lines in characters and masters specializing in the more taxing strokes. Besides supervising these craftsmen, Yu Xiangdou also delighted in collecting oral stories and compiling household almanacs. In modern terminology, his was a vertically integrated enterprise merging writing, editing, block-cutting, printing, retailing, and advertising. In the year 1591 alone, his publishing house issued over ten titles.31 The fact that many portraits of Yu Xiangdou are preserved in his books but almost no biographical data survive bespeaks the preponderance of visual representations in his day.

In their efficient business operation, mass production of literature and practical guidebooks, aggressive self-promotion, and ample use of graphics, commercial presses such as Yus set the tone for the age. Commercial publishing made books one of the myriad commodities that money could buy. To compete for the attention of the consumer, books had to speak directly to the readers by serving their needs, be it edifying their minds, gratifying their senses, or instructing them in practicalities. When merchants spoke of selling books at cutthroat margins to hasten turnover and reap bigger profits, the secularization of books was complete.32 This coupling of books with money was a most telling feature of the culture of the reading public.

Book Merchants: Architects of a Cosmopolitan Culture

The many meanings of the marriage of books and money were exemplified by the social position of the book merchant, who personified the myriad contradictions in the commercialized society. He at once inhabited previously disjointed worlds, being at the crossroads of money and culture, business and scholarship, entertainment and morality, and inter-regional and local cultures. His agility in weaving these disparate worlds together helped forge a new urban culture, the culture of the reading public.

This cosmopolitan culture was neither an “elite” nor a “mass” culture, the lines of which had never been clear-cut in Chinese society.33 Nor should it be called a “middle-class” or “merchant” culture, which presupposes an autonomous bourgeois power at loggerheads with the old scholar-official elites. In China, family members of the old elite, if not the scholar-official himself, were often entrepreneurs; merchants who struck gold, in turn, sponsored scholarship and the arts while purchasing their sons the best classical education available.34 The new cosmopolitan culture that arose
from commercialization differs from that of an idealized agrarian society governed by Confucian gentlemen in the prominence it accorded to merchants and monetary exchange, but it was neither an entirely new creation nor a rebel against the old. For lack of a better term, we may call it the “culture of the reading public,” referring to its constituency, or “the new urban culture.” It is characterized by a blurring of traditional dualities and fluidity of boundaries—between gentry and merchant, male and female, morality and entertainment, public and private, philosophy and action, as well as fiction and reality. It is, in short, culture of the floating world.

The term urban culture has many specific connotations in the history of Western Europe. There were two salient differences in China, however. The urban culture resulting from the publishing boom was in fact trans-urban in character, in the sense that it permeated the commercialized Jiangnan cities and market towns without necessarily fostering distinct urban identities. Nor does the pivotal role played by the book merchant in shaping this culture imply a bourgeois class consciousness. In contrast to the destruction of the old aristocratic rule in Europe, commercialization in China did not pit the merchants against the imperial government in a struggle for political power. There were, in fact, no effective social or legal distinctions between scholar-officials and merchants. The culture of the reading public, in other words, cannot be contained within fixed geographical boundaries, nor can it be identified with any specific class. Born in a fluid and mobile society, its hallmark was none other than the possibilities for the mingling of disparate worlds that it engendered.

The composite possibilities opened up by commercial publishing were most evident in two sets of tensions that characterized the culture of the reading public: the uneasy co-existence of the cosmopolitan/parochial dimensions in its spatial location and the convergence of scholarship/business in its sociocultural orientation. The ambivalent spatial location of this culture found its parallel in the patterns of commercial agriculture. Regional cash-crop specialization, which necessitated interregional trade, created the conditions for both a heightened awareness of local specialties and identity as well as the forging of a common trans-urban culture. Constant movement and fluid identities bred insecurity, prompting people to reaffirm the familiar cultures of their native place or place of residence. Book merchants catered to this revival of parochial sentiments by publishing local gazetteers and travel guides to local sights, which proliferated in

(Opposite) The publisher-author Yu Xiangdou presents himself to the readers of his household almanac as a scholar-magistrate surrounded by the refinements of literati life (Yu Xiangdou, page following contents. Courtesy of The Institute of Oriental Culture, University of Tokyo).
the seventeenth century. It was also in such an environment that local sons promoted books by women writers and stories of chaste widows from their county, prefecture, village, or city, thus implicating women into contests of localism. The culture of the reading public, in this sense, was both trans-regional and local in scope, and at once coalescing and divisive in orientation. The meaning of “local” was inevitably ambiguous, since the very boundary of “local society” was no longer fixed.

Yet more significant than the forces of division were the frequent traveling and cross-fertilization among people from different areas. The most successful book merchants operated on an interregional scale. To cut costs and to ensure product quality, they routinely transported the raw materials for book production — paper, wood, and ink — as well as craftsmen from one province to another. The long-distance trade routes for a burgeoning traffic in grains and textiles were conduits for an equally profitable movement of books, people, and ideas. For example, Huizhou woodblock cutters were hired to work in Beijing, Suzhou, and Hangzhou; Suzhou copyists and cutters collaborated with those from Nanjing, Jiangxi, and Fujian; the Yus of Fujian sent relatives to Nanjing to operate subsidiaries. Through them, Nanjing books were reprinted in Fujian, and vice versa.

The distribution of books was just as cosmopolitan as their production. In the late sixteenth century, bookstores thrived in such metropolitan centers as Beijing, Nanjing, Suzhou, and Hangzhou. Books produced in one region were available throughout the country, although books shipped from afar naturally cost more. Book merchants from central Zhejiang, for example, supplied the flourishing Jiangnan market with books shipped via the waterways that crisscrossed the region. Even the more parochial populace had access to local book fairs, part of the periodic marketing network. The book market in Jinyang, Fujian, for example, convened every five days and attracted merchants from all parts of the empire.

More conducive to cross-fertilization of ideas than the shipment of books was the mobility of the book buyers themselves. Buyers from every corner of the empire congregated in Beijing, in particular. The metropolitan examination, held every third spring, provided an ideal occasion for bookstores in the capital to peddle their wares. With candidates present from every province, Beijing book merchants set up temporary booths outside the examination hall. In addition, these merchants also tapped into the capital’s monthly and annual periodic markets. Every year for three days beginning on the fifteenth day of the second month, book merchants participated in a festive early spring bazaar held at the Lantern Market in the eastern part of Beijing. On the first, fifteenth, and twenty-fifth days of every month, they joined other merchants on the grounds of

the City Temple on the western edge of the city. When examination candidates and other travelers to the capital returned home, they disseminated novels, model essays, and books on hobbies to readers in provinces far and near.

From among the newly affluent group of book buyers in dispersed areas reading the same books emerged a cosmopolitan culture that emulated the refined tastes of the existing literati culture but was different in social origins and raison d’etre. The civil service examination had long fostered a homogeneous culture among those who passed and became officials; in the process of preparing for the examination, they had for decades plowed through the same classical works, spoken the same language, and exchanged poetry with each other. Homogeneity was a device for cultural exclusion that perpetuated the scholar-officials’ monopoly of political power. The new trans-urban culture, in contrast, was an eclectic and inclusive one, open to all who could afford it. This culture was not intended to compete with the entrenched scholar-official culture, for it had no independent philosophical or canonical base. It co-existed with literati culture, for it belonged to a different realm altogether, being concerned more with the minute and mundane pleasures of daily life than with the ultimate concerns of philosophy or governance. Most indicative of the germs of this trans-urban culture was the popularity of books on the hobbies and tastes of the refined gentleman — tasting tea, burning incense, collecting rocks and antiques, for example. These guidebooks appealed to the nouveau riches from every town, who were eager not only to buy books but also to buy into the lures of the mandarin lifestyle.

Guidebooks to genteel tastes were by no means a sixteenth-century invention. The classic on tea was written in the Tang dynasty; the Song saw an abundance of treatises on the art of calligraphy and antique collecting. Yet the mass reproduction of treatise after treatise on all manners of hobbies in late Ming encyclopedias and anthologies bears witness to how widespread the problem of vulgar imitation had become in an age of commercial publishing. In a Song bibliophile treatise often reproduced in late Ming guidebooks, for example, a seasoned book collector lectured novices on correct reading habits: “Don’t fold dogears; don’t scratch the characters with fingernails; don’t wet your fingers with saliva before turning the pages; don’t use your book as a pillow.” There is also the frequent admonition that excess betrays vulgarity. Hence the author of a guide to flower arrangement in the course of discussing the appropriate utensils, the art of balancing the main flower with “maids,” water, the need to clean the petals daily, and the like, issued repeated warnings: place the vase on a simple table bulgy in feel but fine and smooth to the touch; get rid of lacquer tables inlaid with gold and mother of pearl; do not burn incense next to the
flower arrangement, lest you cannot discern the natural fragrance you so meticulously cultivated; sip tea, preferably unseasoned, in the presence of flowers and stop chattering away with friends; if you like to get drunk while watching flowers, you might as well do so in a brothel. These warnings, similar to that of not using a book as a pillow, were issued as markers of distinction between the gentry connoisseurs and their imitators.

The popularity of guidebooks to polished tastes is indicative of several subtle changes that commercialization brought to the culture of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century China. Although the tastes of the old gentry still set the standards to be emulated, the growing number of people with the leisure to busy themselves with dusting flower pots now hailed from non-official as well as official families. Both old moneyed families and the nouveaux riches enjoyed a previously unmatched affluence that allowed them to pay meticulous attention to pleasures of daily life in the domestic setting, pursuing one fad after another in interior design, mundane hobbies, and decorative art objects. This constituted another aspect of the privatization of Chinese life alluded to above in the context of family publishing. In subsuming this emphasis on practicality and license given to mundane pleasures under the rubric of a new trans-urban culture, I do not mean to suggest that the old scholar-official culture was immune from these developments or that the old and the new cultures were in opposition. My interest is, rather, the key roles played by commercially produced guidebooks and the wide trading networks of book merchants in the dissemination of this new culture as well as the more diverse social base of its constituency. The new cosmopolitan culture, while maintaining continuities with the old, was more eclectic and comprehensive in its spatial and social locations.

Besides its composite spatial dimensions encompassing the local and the cosmopolitan, a second characteristic of the culture heralded by the book merchant was the convergence of commercial and scholastic pursuits, or of money and culture. The confidence with which the book merchant straddled these two worlds is graphically conveyed by a Nanjing bookseller’s self-introduction in The Peach Blossom Fan (Taobua shan), a drama by Kong Shangren (1648–1718): “Nanjing ranks first among cities for the wealth of its books, and most of these are in Three Mountain Street, where I keep the largest bookshop.” The successful merchant showed off his impressive stock with the familiarity of an academian: “Here are the Thirteen Classics, the twenty-one dynastic histories, all the tomes of the nine schools of philosophy, of the three religions, and the hundred thinkers, besides collections of eight-legged essays and fashionable modern novels. They cram the shelves and innumerable boxes and rooms. I have traveled north and south to gather this collection, minutely examining old editions to make fine reprints with scholarly annotations.” The rewards for expertise were manifold: “As well as earning a handsome profit by these transactions, I have helped to preserve and circulate the noblest thoughts of mankind. Even the doctors and masters of literature greet me with deference. I have reason to be satisfied with my reputation.”

The bookseller’s business acumen brought him into the heart of bureaucratic politics. Not only did he have to keep abreast of the political fate of examiners, he even played a leading role in propagating favored literary styles and philosophies:

[He laughs] “This year the general civil service examination will be held again, and the finest literary talents will receive due honor. The government has endorsed a proposal by the Minister of Rites, Qian Qianyi, advocating a new style of writing to express the spirit of the new reign. Consequently I have invited several leading critics to compile anthologies as models for composition. They will start work today. I’ll hang up my latest advertisement. [He hangs a couplet on each side of the door, which he reads] ‘The style in vogue was created by men of renown, / Imitation of these models will please the chief examiner.’”

Instruments of leisure: designs for a ventilated picnic basket with ample space for food and utensils for a party of six, as well as a portable stove to boil water and warm wine (Tu Long, Youju fian, 8ab, in Kaopan yushi).
At once bibliophile, businessman, literary trendsetter, and self-promoter, the book merchant set the tone for the culture of the reading public. Although this Nanjing book merchant was a fictional character, his agility in both the scholar's studio and the cutthroat business world rings true when seen against the careers of such commercial publishers as Yu Xiangdou introduced above. In addition to their ability to blend the seemingly incompatible concerns of money and learning, book merchants like Yu were no less skillful in imparting a personal touch to an increasingly impersonal industry. In fact, so successful were they in doing this that the mass-produced book became the ironic vehicle for the propagation of a cult of personal rapport.

Facsimile of Self and Primacy of Human Communications

Product of an assembly line, a typical commercially published book has a dull, mass-produced appearance that is a far cry from the antique book, each volume of which is an object of art bearing the individual mark of the artists who crafted the blocks and assembled the pages. Ironically, it was on the uniform pages dotted with mechanical fonts of the mass-produced book that the ideals of human sincerity and personal rapport became widely disseminated. This primacy of matters of the heart was the most important feature of the culture of the reading public.

Frederick Mote and Hung-lam Chu have described how mass production brought uniformity to the script style of a book printed in the sixteenth century:

In place of characters that previously could be identified as “Yen style” or “Ouyang style” or “Chao style,” mid-Ming printers began using homogenized styles loosely designated “Sung dynasty characters.” With repeated application to wooden blocks by ordinary craftsmen, such nondescript calligraphy came to be called “craftsmen script.” This dominance by the artisan indicates a broad trend toward dull standardization of Chinese script, presenting an overall uniformity, as in the mechanically produced fonts of Western alphabets; consequently, individualistic liveliness and expressiveness waned. . . . If such books gained in legibility, they lost much of their presence and personality.

Yet as if to compensate for this dullness, commercial printers developed the practice of printing facsimile pages of personalized calligraphy in the front matter of a book:

Whether or not there is apparent deception in the insertion of the facsimile prefaces and postfaces in books of that age, the visual impression on the reader is one of individuality — personalities perceived through distinctive calligraphy.44

This “visual impression of individuality” facilitated by the technology of facsimile reproduction epitomized the ideal of natural and truthful communications embodied in the catchwords of the day: qing (feeling, emotion, love), zhen (sincerity, truth, and, interestingly, portraiture), and qi (resonance). In fiction, prose, and verse, sincerity of heart was hailed as the raison d'être of human existence; so potent were torrents of emotions that they leveled even age-old hierarchies. The printed page itself emerged as a medium through which strangers developed rapport; reading and writing crafted new social realities by joining people from afar.

Curiously, even as valorization of matters of the heart and the popularity of visual representation of individuality created the theoretical possibility of a new construction of the individual self as an autonomous agent, this possibility was not exploited in China as it was in early modern Europe. Instead of viewing reading as a private and individual act, the Chinese reading public became fascinated by the social and communicative possibilities that reading engendered. Specifically, the printed page became the arena for the forging of three sets of personal relationships: publisher—reader, author—reader, and reader—reader. I explore the import of the latter two on the educated women who constituted the reading public in subsequent chapters; here I focus on the extent to which the publisher—reader relationship was mediated by pictorial illustrations of the publisher's face.

No reader who opened the covers of a novel or almanac would be surprised to find the publisher looking at him or her in the eye as if he were the reader's best friend. As mentioned above, the Fujian merchant Yu Xiangdou delighted in presenting portraits of himself in almanacs and novels he published. In another example, a Nanjing publisher included a portrait of himself clasping volumes of books in a work he issued in 1615 together with this sales pitch: “First you heard my name, now you see my face. I handle all kinds of books, selecting only the finest editions.” Such personal appeals first appeared in books printed in the late Yuan, but they did not become customary until the late Ming.45 In an age of creative advertising, the publisher, in effect, rendered himself the commodity that was being promoted. This facade of personal rapport, expressed in the form of a supposedly truthful rendition of the advertiser's face, masked the primarily economic and impersonal nature of the exchange between the publisher and his customer.

This pictorial representation of self was just as popular outside the publishing world. In scholar-official circles, it was customary for men and women to paint and exchange self-portraits as tokens of friendship. In spite of, or because of, the prevalence of discord and rivalry that informed
human relations in a competitive society, direct face-to-face communications and resonance between like-minded individuals became cherished ideals. I will return to the gendered meaning of these ideals in my discussion of the cult of *qing*.

Not only did the publisher seek to speak to the reader on a personal level, the reader also expected the same cordiality from the author. A reader who picked up a drama text, a novel, or a poetry collection did so not only to be instructed but also to engage in a dialogue with the author or even to attempt a projection of self onto the fictional world. I examine the emotional involvement of female readers with their authors in later chapters; here, I consider the import of facsimile technology for this author-reader rapport. The vogue of illustrated books in the seventeenth century helped change the very meaning of reading by inviting direct participation from the reader. The blending of textual and visual representations on the pages of an illustrated book was another characteristic of the floating world of the reading public.

The first half of the seventeenth century witnessed the golden age of Chinese woodcut prints. Color printing by woodcut, a Ming innovation, produced elegant five-color albums and maps that were collector's items. At the lower end of the market, books of every genre, be they novels, plays, encyclopedias, almanacs, books of precepts or primers, had to include at least a black-and-white picture or two. So prevalent was this habit for illustration that the Hangzhou publisher of a 1625 edition of *The Peony Pavilion* sounded almost apologetic for following suit: "Books of drama simply do not sell without pictures. So I, too, ape the fashion and furnish these illustrations for your pleasure. As they say, 'Can't go against the tide.' That's all." The symbiosis of words and pictures, devised to stir the reader's heartstrings and to instill a sense of personal involvement, signified a new taste among the reading public. Less steeped in the classical education catering to those preparing for the civil service examination, the new book consumers shunned ornate literary styles and abstract speculation. Instead, practicality, instant gratification, and emotional expression were the order of the day. It was in this context that the needs of the woman reader were foregrounded, allowing her to leave an indelible mark on the general culture of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century China. According to old gender stereotypes, not only were women so likely to be uneducated that they could at most "read" picture books, they were also the temperamental sex, who inhabited a private world ruled by natural emotions. In other words, both a craze for illustrated books and the primacy of emotional rapport represented, in the minds of those who subscribed to gender stereotypes, women's tastes and concerns that had now gained currency and become universalized.

Illustrated books have long been identified with the education of women. Often mentioned in the same breath with "illiterate masses," women were supposed to be among the least educated, hence the most given to drawings and the vernacular. It is no accident that one of the earliest woodcut illustrated books was a didactic work intended for women, namely the *Biographies of Exemplary Women* (*Lienü zhuan*) produced by the Yus of Fujian, probably during the Yuan dynasty (1280–1368). Based on the classic text on exemplary women, good and bad, penned by Liu Xiang (79–8 B.C.), these illustrations are so artistically skilled that Ming and Qing carvers of illustrated novels and plays also imitated their style. As we will see, illustrated editions of *Biographies of Exemplary Women* and other didactic works for women were best-sellers that inundated the market in the seventeenth century.

This equation of woman reader with pictures was a fanciful ideological construct that was undermined by social developments in seventeenth-century Jiangnan. The spread of women's education and the visibility of prolific woman writers invalidated the image of women as illiterate masses. Nor were women the only consumers of picture books: men were equally enthusiastic readers of *Biographies of Exemplary Women* and other illustrated texts. Yet both gender stereotypes — women the illiterate and emotional beings — died hard. I investigate the implications of such stereotypes for women's self-perceptions in my discussion of the cult of *qing* in Chapter 2; here a positive development — the visibility of women in the new urban culture — is more relevant. The craze for illustrated books in the seventeenth century focused attention on the different needs of the woman reader; this spilled over to more general discussions on women's abilities, their differences from men, and their rightful roles in society. In short, the very definitions of womanhood and gender differences were being articulated in a new context generated by commercial publishing. This new discourse on womanhood, which resulted in a more complex and multivalent image of the ideal woman, is the subject matter of Chapter 4.

The primacy of human communications fostered on the pages of the illustrated book was in part a creation of the woman reader-writer herself. In the next chapter, I examine how women viewed the personal author-reader relationship, one manifestation of the cult of *qing*. Here, I analyze the most important development that ensued from the cult of sincerity and emotions: the genesis of a positive image of the woman writer. In an age that valued the natural expression of emotions, some men of letters came
to recognize that women's exclusion from the examination system was a blessing in disguise. Not expected to conform to conventions and spared from the rote memorization of the Classics, a woman was free to create literature purely as an expression of her true self. Hence women's writing was a corrective for the stylized and formulaic prose and verse purveyed by male scholars. The marginality of women's words, irrelevant to any claims of formal political power, was the very source of their literary salvation. Not only was a female writer different from a man, she was better.

This valorization of the woman writer was predicated on her supposed distinctions from man, distinctions perceived to have arisen from nature and reinforced by political culture. Wu Guofu, a man of letters who contributed a preface to the poetry collection of Wang Duanshu (1621–ca. 1701), a professional woman writer, focused on women's exclusion from men's public world, a result of the prevailing gender system: "Talented ladies from the inner quarters have nothing to do with the civil service examination. Since they do not aspire to fame, their words are true. Nor are they distressed by the rise and fall of empires. Since national affairs are not where their minds focus, their words are detached." Another man of letters, Xu Yejun (Shijun; 1602–81), focused on the distinctiveness of women as a result of biology. In an essay defending his inclusion of women's correspondence in a volume of letters, Xu stated tersely: "Women differ from men in their appearance and constitution."

Yet Xu Yejun went on to emphasize that this biological distinction was secondary to the moral and intellectual potentials of women: "But remember that talented women composed ingenious circular poems; faithful women persevered in poverty and served their husbands with industry; virtuous women severed their arms or threw themselves off cliffs; women decorated with medals led armies out of sieges and subdued rebels. In which area are they willing to be second to men?" He went on to point out the potential superiority of women, one that was, again, rooted in their divorce from men's public world: "Although there are women who are not inclined to learn, those who do are sure to surpass men. Why? Without the distraction of external affairs, their hearts are still and their minds can concentrate better." Although Xu did not question the gender inequality inherent in such female virtues as fidelity and chastity, by celebrating women's willpower and success in fulfilling the strenuous demands placed on them, he was in effect arguing that women could measure up to men. If given a chance to learn, women are men's intellectual and moral equals.

From a modern feminist perspective, both Xu and Wu can be faulted for holding up male achievements as the norm and standard for women. This male-centered bias reflected the exclusive nature of the gender system at the time. Although we should recognize both personal and systemic biases, it is also important for us to acknowledge the positive impact of their arguments on the women of their times. The conviction that women can be worthwhile intellectual beings prompted these men to promote women's education and to compile and publish women's words. Later, we will see that commercial publishing promoted an explosion of interest in anthologies of women's poetry in the seventeenth century. These volumes were often compiled and published by such men as Wu and Xu who recognized not only the market value of women's poetic voices but also their literary merits. This valorization of the female poet, which promoted a positive self-image among female readers, reverberated in the works of women who took up the writing brush. In encouraging numerous women to keep on reading and writing, this valorization was the most far-reaching legacy of the primacy of human communications engendered by commercial publishing.

Morality and Entertainment: Books That Women (Were Supposed to) Read

The novelty and significance of this valorization of female poets become more striking when seen against the educated women's highly problematic standing in the orthodox Confucian tradition. The emboldened woman readers and writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had to eke out a precarious existence in a learned tradition that allowed them no formal place. The doctrine of separate spheres relegated men, literature, and political power to the public sphere and women, procreation, and household labor to the domestic realm. Since literacy and knowledge of the Classics constituted the gateway to bureaucratic appointments and hence political power, reading and writing were deemed, at least in theory, an exclusively male privilege. A woman's contribution to this scholastic tradition was at best subsidiary and indirect, albeit indispensable. As mother, she was to give birth to sons, supervise their early education, and work incessantly at the spinning wheel and loom to support their studies. As wife, she was to provide for the family's daily needs so that her husband could concentrate on his public pursuits.

To train females to meet the demands of motherhood and household management, didactic texts were written and transmitted through the dynasties, beginning with Liu Xiang's Biographies of Exemplary Women. If Confucian education can be said to consist of two emphases and goals—moral cultivation and cultural education—males were supposed to excel in both, but females were to devote themselves only to the former. In other
the mass of books on the other hand, called attention to the dis-
tinction made between the two. The best edition was that of a woman was not supposed to be literary,
non-fiction. It was the first that was accepted in the early 19th century, and it set a trend for women's writing. The edition
was published in 1814. It includes a foreword by a woman, and it was dedicated to women. The foreword is
written in a natural, personal style, and it is addressed to women. The edition was also
published in a serialized format, which made it more accessible to
women. The edition was a success, and it sold well. It was also
translated into several languages, including French, German,
and Italian. The edition was later revised and expanded, and it
remained in print for many years. It was an important early
work in the history of women's writing, and it helped to
establish women as serious authors.
This joint project in Huizhou is revealing of the ways in which the publication of didactic books served a multitude of needs in this commercialized society. As money disrupted traditional hierarchies, the publication project provided a rallying point for a new social organization encompassing wealthy patrons from diverse social origins. The organizational strength of lineages in this fluid society was amply demonstrated by their generous contributions to the fund-raising campaign. The published book itself stood as testimony to the local pride and identity of Huizhou in a cosmopolitan age when books, people, and ideas traversed regional and social boundaries.

The uses to which readers put these didactic books were as varied as those of their publishers. One seventeenth-century man of letters who moved from Jiangnan to Beijing in search of patrons and employment wrote a friend in Hangzhou for a copy of the *Biographies of Exemplary Women*. His reasons: "I have not stocked up on tales of women in the past and today, and hence cannot very well exchange verses with the ladies here. If I had a copy of the *Biographies of Exemplary Women*, I could compose more enchanting songs in the *Lianhua luo* style. Please help me." Lianhua luo were ballads that beggars sang. Here, this man of letters uses the term to poke fun of himself, equating writing social poems with begging for a living. The usefulness of *Biographies of Exemplary Women* to this pursuit attests both to its popularity and to its non-didactic uses. The very subject of women's morality had become a form of entertainment.

True to the spirit of the age of visual representations, this conflation of morality and entertainment was poignantly expressed on the pages of illustrated books. Katherine Carlitz has discovered that one picture block for an edition of *Biographies of Exemplary Women* was reused for a play issued by the same publishing house. Moreover, an illustrator who carved the blocks for didactic books produced more of the same for not-so-pious romantic plays, so that a chaste widow reappeared as a lovesick maiden, in the same pose and setting, in another book. It is doubtful that contemporary readers knew the difference or that it mattered to them at all.

Not only did morality and entertainment become more indistinguishable, moral teaching and practical guidance were also conflated within the covers of illustrated household almanacs. An eighteen-century handbook entitled *Golden Guide to Feminine Virtues* (*Kuan de baojian*) provides a graphic example. Half its chapters preach domesticity and docility through stories of virtuous women; the other half contain tips on such chores as how to wash colored clothes, get rid of pimples, prepare garlic so that it does not cause bad breath, and turn a female fetus into a male one. The almanac concludes with a large selection of recipes, embroidery designs, and patterns for making hats and shoes. Written in colloquial
language and printed in large type with ample illustrations, this almanac was issued for the benefit of housewives who were not necessarily highly educated.

More ironic than the combination of didacticism with fiction and practical advice was its conflation with poetry, considered by the most doctrinal to be detrimental to the development of womanly virtues. One example of this curious juxtaposition of morality and poetry was an anthology of women's verse, *Pouch of Pearls from Famous Ladies* (*Mingyuan jī'àng*), compiled by an obscure editor known only by his pen name, Sojourner on the Pond (*Chishang ke*). The editor prefaced a rather pedestrian selection of women's verse from antiquity to the Ming dynasty with a short didactic text, *Analects for Women* (*Nü jùyì*). Although he did not state his intentions, judging from the hastily produced volume and its commercial success (at least two editions were printed from different blocks, one in 1592 and the other in 1595), the addition of precepts was intended to, and did, enhance sales.

Curiously, in this reprint the author of this didactic text, a Tang woman named Song Ruozhao, was mistaken for Ban Zhao. Sojourner on the Pond proceeded to write a formal biography of Ban, even lecturing his readers on the correct reading of Ban's honorary name, Cao Dagü (*gù* in other usages was pronounced *jiá*). He got everything right but this line: "[Ban Zhao] wrote a twelve-volume book to instruct girls entitled *Analects for Women*."66 The book that Ban wrote, in fact, was *Precepts for Women*. Was the Sojourner so busy pushing the beads on his abacus that his memory failed him? Or was he shrewd enough to recognize that Ban Zhao was a more marketable name than Song Ruozhao? Both explanations are plausible.67 In any case, the appearance of moral precepts under the same cover as women's verse is suggestive of how commoditization of women's words had brought about a convergence of didacticism and poetry, both being read as, above all, entertainment.

The proliferation of didactic texts ostensibly for women—conflated with entertainment, practical advice, and poetry—is thus a complicated phenomenon that defies simple characterization in terms of intentions or results. Similarly, the casting of the woman reader in a learned culture populated by men has equally ambivalent implications. In the eyes of men steeped in Confucian orthodoxy, the many new faces of didacticism were worrisome. The wide circulation of didactic books facilitated the popularization of such virtues as domesticity and chastity but threatened to dilute their didactic meaning and relevance. Hence even a scholar-official as farsighted and pragmatic as Lü Kun, who sought to harness the power of mass publishing by promoting colloquial didactic books for women and the masses, complained that too many books on the market spelled disas-

ter.68 The impossibility of his position was symptomatic of the contradictions that shaped Lü Kun's moral, intellectual, and social universes. The image of a woman engrossed in a book bought from the marketplace captures many of the contradictions that commercial publishing inflicted on the Confucian tradition.

Every Fragrant Word: Books That Women Wrote

If the image of the reading woman appears awkward against the ideal moral woman, even more problematic is that of a woman wielding a writing brush—who becomes famous for it. Yet women participated in the publishing boom in Ming-Qing Jiangnan not only as readers, but also as authors and publishers. Even more so than stories of moral women, writings by women themselves were investments that promised hefty returns. Poetry anthologies appear to have been most popular, but other genres such as collections of correspondence and drama also found their way into print.69

Not all women's writings were issued for profit. There were two distinct venues of publication and distribution, although details on funding and number of copies printed are scant. Whereas commercial publishers printed anthologies at the behest of the market, collected works of individual women were often issued by their families for limited circulation to commemorate domestic bliss or to evidence the family's sophistication. Examples of family publishing projects will be discussed in subsequent chapters; here I concentrate on women's writing produced for the marketplace. Table 2 lists extant anthologies of women's verse and prose; although by no means exhaustive, it conveys the high profile that the woman writer assumed in seventeenth-century print culture.70

The valorization of woman poets discussed above, or the equation of a woman's voice with sincerity, naturalness, and truthfulness, was a major impulse behind the boom in anthologies of women's verse. The import of this valorization may be further explored from two angles: the commoditization of the female voice and the integral role it played in seventeenth-century literary reform movements.

Men of letters began to recognize the literary and market potentials of women's words around the end of the sixteenth century. From the perspective of literary history, this attention to women's writings was part of a reaction against a rigid stylistic conformity that many critics saw as prevailing in the sixteenth century. The Chinese scholar Cao Shujian has termed this movement, which flourished from the Longqing period (1567-72) to the end of the Ming (1644), "the literature of inspirational gusto" (*xingling wénxue*). Influenced by philosopher Li Zhi's (1527-
full exploits both the personally expressive and socially communicative aspects of poetry in the seventeenth century. The perceived expressive and emotional qualities of the genre coincided with literary and philosophical emphases as well as social stereotypes that construed females as emotional beings in the private sphere. No wonder there were so many women poets, and few wondered their works carried a special appeal for the reading public.

The association of poetry, emotions, and women was particularly strong in the case of song lyrics (ci), a form of verse with uneven lines that was considered more expressive and hence more feminine than regular verse. Kang-i Sun Chang has observed that many Ming-Qing critics saw "a convergence of biological femininity and stylistic femininity" of the genre, hence they thought women would make better song lyrics poets. The late Ming revival of the genre was thus integrally related to the popularity and valorization of female poets. Both were, in turn, predicated on a cult of qing.72

The most eloquent advocate of the woman poet was Zhong Xing (1574–1627), editor of the most famous of late Ming anthologies, Poetic Retrospective of Famous Ladies (Mingyuan shigui). In this comprehensive collection, one-third of the 36 juan are devoted to Ming women alone, and the remaining two-thirds covers women poets of all the previous dynasties. In his preface, Zhong Xing, a leader of the so-called Jingling School of literature, issued a manifesto for the primacy of inspirational gusto to the poet. Central to his arguments was an antithesis between woman, nature, and the private sphere on one hand, and man, human traditions, and the public sphere on the other. Not only was true poetry, in his view, born of the former, but it was the very embodiment of female innocence and sentimentality.

"Poetry is none other than the voice of nature," Zhong proclaimed. It "cannot be mastered by following rules." He then cited the Book of Songs, one of the Five Confucian Classics and believed to be in large part composed by women, as the hallmark of natural expressiveness. Having criticized contemporary male poets who mistook the rules for the essence of poetry, Zhong drew an analogy between the poet's coming of age and the development of the female psychology: "A grown-up woman starts life as a girl who knows neither the difference between the skilled and the crude nor any hidden worries." Yet as she grows up, innocence gives way to an intuitive experience. A teenage girl slowly begins to realize that "life has its ups and downs. When she is happy, she can change ice crystals into flowers; when she is sad, dark clouds turn into snow. [Her mind can be] as serene as jade or as melancholy as flowers in dreams. All of a sudden a thread arises from nowhere, tying loose ends neatly together. This is the

<table>
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<th>Year of Publication</th>
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<td>Yu Xian</td>
<td>Shun shi</td>
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<td>Mingyuan shigui</td>
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<td>nishui</td>
<td>(31 genres —</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>epistles, memorial</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>letters, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1636</td>
<td>Shen Yixiu</td>
<td>Yirenshui</td>
<td>mostly shi poetry</td>
<td>46 (Ming)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>also ci and a preface</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1667</td>
<td>Wang Duanshu</td>
<td>Mingyuan shiwei</td>
<td>shi poetry</td>
<td>about 1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(mostly Ming-Qing)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1673</td>
<td>Liu Yunfen</td>
<td>Guoju ji</td>
<td>shi poetry</td>
<td>201 (Ming)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1685</td>
<td>Gui Shufen et al</td>
<td>Guoju mingyuan</td>
<td>shi poetry</td>
<td>26 (Ming)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>baihua shiwei</td>
<td></td>
<td>45 (Qing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Xu Shummin</td>
<td>Zhiangshi ci</td>
<td>ci poetry</td>
<td>410 (Ming)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1716</td>
<td>Qian Yue</td>
<td>Banzhu mingyuan</td>
<td>shi poetry</td>
<td>57 (Qing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ho Baoyi</td>
<td>shibian</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1773</td>
<td>Wang Qishu</td>
<td>Xiefang ji</td>
<td>poetry</td>
<td>2,000+ (Qing)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: The scholars listed the following criteria: all are general anthologies, not collected works of individual writers or families; all contain the work of at least ten women; all are published works, not private manuscripts; all contain substantial portions by Ming and/or Qing women and are not reprints of Song and Yuan works; all focus exclusively on women's writings. See the bibliography for full citations.

*Female editor.
source of [words that are] prodigal and lush, high and lofty, slender and graceful, murmurous or vociferous." Inspirational insight, in other words, is a natural and spontaneous occurrence in the mind and cannot be forced by deliberate learning or mimicking rules. "Tomorrow's great poets are invariably those who are clumsy in poetry today."

Not only are females likely to be better poets because they are less corrupted by the human learned tradition, they personify the essence of poetry. "Poetry is a creature of serenity. Her body likes leisure, not toils. She likes her place clean, not filthy. Her sphere is to be secluded, not rowdy. No one can surpass females in these aspects." Zhong then made the same argument as Wu Guofu: women's exclusion from men's public and political endeavors is a blessing in disguise. In addition, Zhong made a most interesting contrast between the materiality of a man's world and the imaginary and psychological nature of a woman's world.

A male travels to the four corners of the world, and he knows what these corners are like. [The Sui dynasty official] Yu Shiji authored the Gazetteer of Ten Commanderies (Shijun zhi) in which he conveyed a picture of mountains and waters by describing the landscape; he conveyed a picture of territorial jurisdictions by describing the commanderies and counties. . . . But females do not have to do this. They embrace villages and districts on their beds and pillows and [imagine] fortresses on the frontier in their dreams. They can do this because they are serene.

Zhong Xing's conviction that serenity constituted the true nature of poetry prompted him to publish women's verse as model for men who went astray. This valorization of the female voice reversed the traditional gender hierarchy; the notion of separate spheres itself, however, became even more entrenched. The male-female distinction was construed as rooted in psychology. Women remained the intuitive and sentimental sex, whereas men continued to be identified with learning and the intellectual tradition. At the same time, however, Zhong's recognition of the female freedom in imagining and constructing a vision of reality was a remarkably astute observation. This disjuncture between the physical location of a woman's body and her inner world, as we will see, was a most effective weapon for the woman reader-writer obliterating the rigidity of separate spheres and her supposed confinement in the inner chambers.

To the association of women, poetry, and spontaneity so well articulated by Zhong Xing, a fourth link should be added: money. The success of Zhong's compilation, reprinted and incorporated into other anthologies throughout the seventeenth century, inspired other publishers. The next major anthology of women's writings to appear, Lady Scholars from Past and Present (Gujin niushi), was the work of a Hangzhou commercial publisher, Zhao Shijie, whose profit motive was much more apparent. Zhao's method of distinguishing himself in a crowded field was to include both verse and prose, unearthing an impressive array of genres of "public" writings previously considered male prerogatives. The profitability of women's words prompted comments from those who feared that women's literary integrity would be compromised. Even Zhong Xing, who published his anthology in large part as a statement of his literary convictions, was accused by another editor of "smirking of the profit-seeking merchant." The accuser, Xu Shumin, headed a team of 29 male scholar-officials and men of letters who compiled a rare and wide selection of song lyrics, Song Lyrics from the Fragrant Crowd (Zhongxiang ci). Although he also credited four male financiers, it is possible that donations were made as investment and that the team was not entirely immune from the profit motive.

The competition to produce an ever bigger and newer selection of women's verse prompted an incessant search for hidden manuscripts. Hu Baoyi of Suzhou, for example, combed printer shops, the studies of relatives and friends, and warehouses of book merchants for women's verses, annotated them with the help of his wife and disciples, and published an anthology. In the introduction he included his home address and encouraged "women poets from all over" to send in their works so that he could print a sequel. The commercial purpose of the venture was betrayed by his stern warning in the end: "The blocks [of this anthology] are kept in the Lingyun ge. Issuers of pirated copies will be pursued even if they are ten thousand miles away!" (Lingyun ge was Hu's studio and doubled as the name of his publishing venture.) The personal tone of such solicitations was reminiscent of the advertisements that publishers made by way of printing their own portraits.

Many of the anthologies that flooded the market were monumental works issued in sequels—if the first sold well, then the profits could finance the next, and so on. A personal invitation from publisher to reader was thus a sales pitch in disguise. One success story was that of Deng Hanyi (1617–89), a leader of Yangzhou salons and compiler of Perspectives on Poetry (Shiguian). Alongside the verses of 45 women he interposed his own comments, a practice initiated by Tian Yiheng in Poetry of Lady Scholars (Shinishi) over a century earlier. Deng's appeal to readers at the end could not have been more personal: "As soon as this anthology is printed, I plan to compile volume two. If you have poems or comments, please send them to my home in Taizhou, or to Cheng Muqian, at Crossed-Scissors Bridge, New City, Yangzhou." Having listed the addresses of three other friends in Yangzhou, Beijing, and Nanjing, Deng cautioned overzealous readers who might show up at their doorstep that "it is most convenient to drop them in the mail." Six years later he published a sequel containing the works of 33 women.

The more the demand for newer and larger selections of women's
words, the stronger the incentive not only to make already popular names more visible by re-anthologizing them but also to discover previously unknown works. All this combing of dusty archives and soliciting of manuscripts smacked of voyeurism on the parts of both publishers and readers. The result, however, was the heightened visibility and ready availability of a large body of women's verse that would otherwise have been lost to history. Not only did the number of poets thus brought to public view soar, but the geographical and social locations of published women also diversified. The earlier anthologies tended to feature writers from Jiangnan, often women who were personally known or indirectly related to the editors, but as the seventeenth century advanced, writers hailing from peripheral regions and even such foreign countries as Korea became common. Peasant poets, too, made their debut, although their authenticity remains an open question.79

More powerful than philosophical treatises, the commercial and literary interests of such men as Zhong Xing, Hu Baoji and Deng Hanyi in women's poetry promoted women's education and popularized a positive image of woman writers. They, and like-minded men of letters who contributed prefaces to these collections, did not launch arguments for equality of the sexes, nor did they champion women's education overtly. Yet their appreciation of women's poetry for its direct and natural outflow of emotions amounted to public recognition of women's creative talent. The popularity of women's verse must have persuaded parents that it was natural for their daughters to read and write. Thus the promotion of male publishers helped create a niche for literate women, poets in particular, in the urban culture of Jiangnan.

The literate women themselves took the clue and began to compile women's poetry to serve their own ends—the creation of a women's community across time and spatial distance. In subsequent chapters I will return to the lives of two of these editors—Shen Yixiu (1590–1635) and Wang Duanshu—and their historical mission of preserving and transmitting women's writings.

Rare as they must have been, there were even women publishers. The verses of a Hangzhou woman, Liang Ying (1707–95), for example, were published separately by two printer's wives. Madame Wang, wife of the Huizhou printer Wu Dilan, issued Liang's poetry in Huizhou. Madame Li, wife of the owner of a Yangzhou press, Yuanguo tang, published Liang's poetry on plum blossoms in 1730. According to a twentieth-century scholar who saw a copy of this volume, Every Fragrant Word (Zixi xiang), both the cutting of the blocks and the printing were first-rate, making this one of the best-produced collections of women's writings.80

Liang Ying's husband, Huang Shugu (1701–51), was instrumental in Liang's writing career. Huang, a fifth-generation descendant of a Hangzhou matriarch and renowned poet, Gu Ruopu (1592–ca. 1681), initiated Liang into a family tradition of woman writers and poetry clubs. A man of letters who roamed Jiangnan for patrons, Huang was staying on the estate of Wu Yirong, a Yangzhou merchant, in the early 1730's.81 Although it is not clear if Wu and the printers who issued Liang's verses were related, it is most likely that Huang arranged the publication of his wife's works when he was in Yangzhou. He also invited two good friends to write prefaces for her. Huang's involvement, as we will see in the later chapters, was typical of the male relatives of famous woman poets.

Reading, writing, editing, and publishing, educated women in Ming-Qing Jiangnan became visible participants in literate culture as consumers and producers. Both the print culture and their own lives would never be the same again.

**Gender Relations in the Floating World**

The appearance of a critical mass of women writers and readers was a striking feature of urban culture in seventeenth-century Jiangnan. This appearance, however, carries contradictory implications for gender relations. The very visibility of the social and cultural changes that transpired masks their underlying contentious nature.

Visibility was the essence of the urban print culture and the monetary economy that sustained it. The new moneyed families engaged in conspicuous consumption; the woman reader-writer emerged from her cloister into public view. The novelties of the print culture were graphically clear to all those with eyes to see at the time and in posterity: a profusion of books—books laden with mistakes, books with pictures, portraits of publishers and artists speaking personally to the reader, stories of virtuous women reiterated in various genres, women's verse anthologized in series of publications. The age of visual representation demanded that hidden words be exposed and novelties be projected in exaggerated fashion.

The implications of these changes, however, were by nature controversial, for they depended on the values and vested interests of the viewer. What a scholar-official feared as an erosion of social and gender boundaries could appear to his wife as an opportunity to advance her freedom and mobility. At the same time, she was likely to join him in bemoaning the degenerate and decadent age. No blanket statement can do justice to the complexity of the changing times, which often manifested itself in contradictory positions embraced by one person simultaneously.

It is therefore extremely difficult to assess the impact of the changes on women. Scholars have argued that the new urban culture sowed the seeds
of more equal gender relations. Paul Ropp, for example, characterizes the eighteenth century as a battleground between the "dominant culture" of orthodox Confucianism, with its increasingly restrictive norms for women, and an "emergent culture" that arose from Jiangnan urban and commercial centers, where novelists portrayed intelligent and strong female protagonists and men of letters decried concubinage and footbinding. Charlotte Purth also argues that the values and lifestyle of a "bohemian counterculture" posed a challenge to the authority of the patriarch in the family, but she cautions that the dissenting artists depended on the old elite patronage system and did not have an independent economic base. Both scholars concur that commercialization created the possibilities for more equalized gender relations.

My study of women in the Jiangnan print culture is built on these pioneer works. On the location of this culture and its implications for gender relations, however, my interpretations differ. First, to call this floating world an "emerging culture" or "counterculture" is to draw too rigid a line between the Confucian tradition and the urban culture that arose in late Ming Jiangnan. As argued in this chapter, this culture was not an abnormality; instead, it grew out of developments from within "mainstream" Confucian literati culture and in turn transformed values and behavior in that world. Furthermore, the premium placed on private aesthetic expressions of emotion touched every aspect of Chinese life. Intimate matters in the bedrooms of gentry households were affected, as much as business transactions in market towns, liaisons in the pleasure quarters, the appeal of popular religious sects, and the mode of communication in literature and schools of literary criticism. The culture of the reading public has to be seen as a dominant motif in the general culture of seventeenth-century China.

My second disagreement concerns the implications of the inclusion of women in print culture for greater gender equality. From hindsight, the impact of the urban print culture can only be described as a paradox. On an individual level, some women gained parity with men in the world of learning and literature; the opposite is true on a systemic level, where the promotion of the woman writer served only to reinforce the prevalent premise of gender distinctions. This paradox is equally evident in the two primary modes of woman's inclusion in the emergent print culture: the spread of women's cultural education and the valorization of women's poetic voice.

The seventeenth-century print culture changed the theory and practice of women's education by giving legitimacy to cultural education. But cultural literacy did not diminish the strong hold of Confucian morality on the educated women's lives. In fact, never before had the vehicles for propagating Confucian ideology been more powerful and pervasive. Tales of moral exemplars, now vividly illustrated and presented as vernacular stories, reached more homes and perhaps hearts and minds than did dry treatises. Even more persuasive was the advocacy of educated women, as they composed poems and songs to teach other women the virtues of fidelity. The rise of the woman reader-writer, in other words, was a sign largely of the strength of the Confucian gender system, not its demise. The educated woman brought her new cultural resources to the service of her supposed natural duties of motherhood and moral guardianship. With the support and promotion of the new woman as erudite mother and teacher, the underpinnings of the gender system became even more solid than before.

The implications of the valorization of the female poetic voice are just as ambivalent. Because of it, more women were encouraged to pursue an education and to devote themselves to writing; they were, in this sense, becoming more like men. Yet this very valorization was predicated on an insistence of male/female distinctions in constitution, sensitivities, and outlook. The gender system as a whole, thriving on these perceived distinctions, proved to be resilient enough to survive the onslaught of socioeconomic changes.

In short, seventeenth-century Jiangnan was a transitory world full of contradictions. It allowed educated women unprecedented room for creative expression and emotional fulfillment, but these opportunities, tied to family backgrounds, were not freely available to all. Old gender stereotypes died hard, often co-existing with more sympathetic thoughts on women in the same person. Voices of individual women were heard, but women in seventeenth-century China had yet to articulate their collective aspirations. In such a floating world, the story that matters most is that of individual and everyday struggles. As the pages that follow will show, each of these stories is woven of its own bittersweet blend of hope and frustration, freedom and bondage, friendship and loneliness.