Teachers of the Inner Chambers

WOMEN AND CULTURE IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY CHINA

Dorothy Ko

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The Enchantment of Love
in 'The Peony Pavilion'

Contrary to persistent gender stereotypes that relegated females to an intuitive and sentimental existence, educated women inhabited a world rich in both intellectual and emotional meaning. In fact, it was the act of reading that joined the cerebral and sentimental into a closed circle. In the preceding chapter, I offered an objective overview of the sociocultural position of the woman reader in the print culture of seventeenth-century Jiangnan; in this chapter I examine the subjective meaning of reading—of dramas, poetry, and each other's works—to the woman herself. In particular, I focus on the craze of women for The Peony Pavilion, a tribute to love by the great late Ming playwright Tang Xianzu, to illuminate two significant results of reading: how reading romantic fiction helped shape women's self-perceptions, and how women projected their self-perceptions onto pages of commentaries and poems, fueling a cult of qing among the reading public.

The Obsessive Reader: The Three Women's Saga

Ming and Qing women did not read to master a canonical tradition in order to compete in the civil service examinations, nor did they leaf through books casually just to pass the time. They read for edification, often with an intensity that bordered on fanaticism. Drama and other fictional works were particularly engaging, for they gave shape to the reader's aspirations while offering solace for the imperfections experienced in real life. From pages of fiction woman readers built their own floating worlds in which intellectual stimulation conjoined with emotional and religious gratification.

Specifically, the meanings that the obsessive female reader found in fiction and drama can be understood in four ways, as this chapter will show. First, fictional characters provided role models for the socialization of girls. Literary critics have suggested that girls derived their expectations about the future not from observing real life but from reading fiction. This is particularly true for The Peony Pavilion, whose heroine, Du Liniang, became the alter ego of generations of young women.

Second, reading was also an inventive act in the fundamental sense of the word. Women who read created not only their self-images but also a multiplicity of meanings with which to construct their world as they pleased. The Peony Pavilion, a romantic tale with a happy ending, became structurally linked in the minds of some women with the lore of Xiaoqing, a romantic tale about a reader of The Peony Pavilion with an unhappy ending. Readers of both the romantic drama and Xiaoqing's tragedy themselves became celebrated figures and inspired new recitations of poems and tales. Readers were made into fictional characters, and the fictions, in turn, were read by more readers, who created new fictions. A simple story of the love-struck maiden Du Liniang, in the end, spun an entire tradition of tales with conflicting messages. Each reader had room to re-imagine the tales to satisfy her shifting moods and needs.

A third significance of reading stemmed from its addictive qualities. For many girls, an early love of books developed into a lifelong devotion to intellectual and literary pursuits. The fervor women brought to collating, handcopying, and circulating books and manuscripts often resembled religious fanaticism. Like all addictions, reading was gratifying but consuming; it could even be fatal. Indeed, the stories of the untimely deaths of Xiaoqing and other girls who loved literature were so prevalent that a superstition equating reading with fatality gained currency as the phenomenon of women reading became widespread.

Yet despite the power of superstition and the real dangers of consumption, women did not stop reading. Reading took on a fourth meaning as the ultimate transcendental act, offering the promise of salvation alongside the danger of fatalism. To read is to partake of a world that is larger than the one defined by the four walls of the inner chambers. Reading connected women to a social world of like-minded readers and an imaginary world of fictional characters that appeared to be larger but truer than life. Books, like religious devotions, provided a way out of the drudgeries of mundane existence. It is no accident that reading itself became a religious act, as readers took flights of fancy in devising female-exclusive domestic rituals honoring heroines from such plays as The Peony Pavilion.

How reading engendered these four meanings is vividly demonstrated by the story of the three young women who wrote and compiled The Peony Pavilion: Commentary Edition by Wu Wushan's Three Wives.
Ren's commentary on The Peony Pavilion. Wu himself, however, admitted freely who the true authors were. One day, in the Beijing living room of his old friend Hong Sheng, he used Chen's and Tan's expositions on dreams and emotions to debate with Hong, who was impressed.

In 1675, three years after her marriage, Tan Ze also died. The ill-fated Wu Ren married a third time, a Hangzhou woman named Qian Yi, more than a decade later. She, too, stayed up all night reading The Peony Pavilion and the comments by her two "elder sisters." Eager to preserve the women's manuscripts, Qian told her husband, "I heard that a woman named Xiaoqing once wrote an afterword to The Peony Pavilion that is no longer extant. But when I read her 'cold rain lone window' poem, my heart sank. Now elder sister Chen produced her commentary, which elder sister Tan completed, but it's a pity that they have been known under your name all these years." Xiaoqing, a Yangzhou concubine, wrote of the comfort she derived from reading the play in her famous "cold rain lone window" poem, as we will see later. Qian managed to convince her husband to reissue the play with commentary under the three women's names and sold her jewelry to finance the block-cutting and printing. The result was the publication of Three Wives' Commentary in 1694, graced by prefaces and afterwords from Hong Sheng's daughter and members of Banana Garden Seven, a women's poetry club in Hangzhou (see Chapter 6).

The long and meandering process behind the production of China's first published work of female literary criticism encapsulates the major themes of this book: the connectedness between male and female networks; the spread of companionate marriage; the forging of a women's culture in the context of domestic life, through the exchange of books, manuscripts, and mementos like shoes; the central role played by the production, appreciation, and propagation of literature in this women's culture; and the significance of women writing and publishing. It is also, for the purpose of this chapter, an eloquent statement of the degree to which female readers were enchanted by The Peony Pavilion and its vindication of love. Chen Tong, Tan Ze, and Xiaoqing, all readers who died in their teens, testified to the potency of both the creative genius and consumptive danger unleashed by the seemingly casual act of reading a book.

Dramatization of Love in The Peony Pavilion

The social effects of reading were magnified when books were not only read quietly but were also read aloud, recounted verbally, and performed on stage. The three women's enchantment by the vindication of love in
The Peony Pavilion testifies to the persuasive power of a cult of qing, hallmark of the seventeenth-century Jiangnan urban culture. The popularity of this and numerous other dramas—written to be both read and performed—was particularly important to the forging of the cult. As discussed in the preceding chapter, the personal sales pitches of commercial publishers and the flood of illustrated books contributed to a cult of truthful representations and personal communications and promoted the image of women as more natural, hence better, writers. Adding to these developments in the publishing world, I attempt here a fuller view of the cult of qing by taking into account the performance-related aspects of drama. Above all, through the examples of The Peony Pavilion and the Xiaojing plays, I explore the philosophical underpinnings of the cult, the crucial role played by women in its propagation, and the different perspectives that men and women brought to the reading of the meaning of qing.

The cult of qing was born of the sympathetic reading of fiction and appreciation of dramas on stage. Kang-i Sun Chang has aptly observed that “the blossoming of the cult of qing in the late Ming took place largely through readers’ imitation of the role types created in contemporary fiction and drama.”11 This is particularly true for the readers and audiences of Tang Xianzu’s Peony Pavilion. Soon after its first appearance in 1589, the drama was hailed as the embodiment of qing par excellence. The thriving publishing industry and the popularity of theater in seventeenth-century Jiangnan magnified its impact, creating a cult out of the drama itself.

The appeal of The Peony Pavilion had much to do with both Tang Xianzu’s literary innovations and the attraction of its heroine, Du Liniang, as the prototype of a new female. Many seventeenth-century critics recognized that artistically the play represented the height of Southern drama. A Japanese specialist on the play, Hirose Reiko, has shown that Tang perfected a dramatic gaze and language uniquely suited to the creation of an ethereal world of deep feelings. Emotions were elevated to the realm of aestheticism. Compared to The Western Chamber, a classic Yuan drama with a similar love theme, The Peony Pavilion appears “condensed and wet,” whereas the former feels “diluted and dry.” In its expert dramatization of the characters’ innermost thoughts and feelings, The Peony Pavilion is able to enchant as no other play can.12

The realistic disclosure of Du’s inner world accounts for its credibility, and hence the sympathy she wins for her course of action. Daughter of a magistrate, Du is well versed in both the Classics and the moral precepts for women but finds the rote memorization and moralism stifling. One day, instead of following her lessons with a tutor, Du falls asleep in the garden. In her dream she falls in love with a scholar, Liu Mengmei, and avidly pursues him. The image of Du Liniang that emerges is one of a strong-willed woman determined to live out her fantasies in defiance of social constraints.

The love-struck Du Liniang falls ill and dies at the age of fifteen, but takes care to leave a portrait of herself behind. The lover in her dream turns out to be a real person who chances upon her portrait and falls in love with her. Even in the other world, Du continues her search for Liu, and they eventually marry. In the end, Du is resurrected, Liu captures first place in the examinations, and Du’s perseverance is rewarded by her attainment of true love.

Du Liniang signifies an enchanting new woman completely at home in the urban culture of her day—educated but natural, sensuous yet respectable, persistent unto death in pursuing her life’s ambition. Although captivating male and female alike, she became the alter ego of her female audience.

The popularity of the drama among women reached legendary proportions. If Ming and Qing woman readers shared a common vocabulary, it was based on The Peony Pavilion. No other work of literature triggered such an outpouring of emotion from women. There was no lack of male devotees who rewrote the play, staged it, and wrote commentaries; almost all the better-known men of letters from Ming-Qing Jiangnan made remarks on the play in one form or another.13 The women’s response, however, was shocking in its novelty, intensity, and a certain consensus of sentiment, despite subtle differences in interpretation. True to the spirit of the cult of qing, women created communities transcending spatial and even temporal barriers through their shared appreciation of this play, as we have seen in the example of the Three Wives’ Commentary.

Although existing information is insufficient to glean the actual number of copies printed, there are over ten extant Ming and Qing editions of the play, some elaborately illustrated. Issued by both private presses and the leading commercial publishers of the day, the play was no doubt a best-seller.14 Chen Tong, the first wife of Wu Ren who initiated the Three Wives’ Commentary project, collated twelve different versions of the play, some by the same name; Wu later bought another copy for his second wife from a book merchant in Wuxing, one of the thriving Jiangnan book markets.15 Women also handcopied the play, and shared it among friends. Circumstantial evidence of women scribbling poems onto margins as they read suggests that many in fact owned a copy.

Written in a vernacular but refined prose, the dialogue of The Peony Pavilion was laced with classical allusions. Hence as a literary work, it was accessible only to the educated. However, although some dramas were intended to be read but not performed, Tang Xianzu was a practitioner.
who wrote for the stage. *The Peony Pavilion*, his most popular work, was adopted for regional theaters by at least five dramatists in the Ming dynasty alone. Tang supervised the production of many of these performances himself, which were at first staged by troupes in his native Jiangxi province. A measure of the popularity of these performances was provided by Tang, who estimated that there were over a thousand professional actors around his native place of Yihuang. By late Ming times, selected episodes from the play were immensely popular in Beijing and Jiangnan, both in literati homes and popular theaters. About one-quarter of the scenes remained a staple of the repertoire as late as the nineteenth century. With stage performances, the message of the play reached well beyond a circle of literate readers.

To understand the full impact of such plays as *The Peony Pavilion*, one has to appreciate the enormous popularity of the theater in seventeenth-century China and the visibility of women in it. The Yuan dynasty (1280–1368) saw the perfection of drama as a literary genre, but the Ming was the golden age of drama, more aptly called opera, as a performing art. With the proliferation of professional troupes, a vastly expanded repertoire, and increased venues for performance, the opera, in various local song styles, captivated men and women from all regions and social classes.

There were three kinds of drama troupes in Ming-Qing times—court-sponsored troupes, professional groups, and private companies kept by literati and merchant families. Since performances by the first were reserved for residents of the palace and visiting dignitaries, they will not be discussed here. Similar to the publishing industry, the private sector of the world of theater experienced phenomenal growth in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a result of commercialization. The social organization of both professional and family troupes was radically transformed by the spread of material and cultural affluence. Wang Anqi, a specialist on Ming Southern drama, has pointed out that private Yuan troupes were family-based, often made up of husband, wife, and their children. Groups of professional actors with no kin ties first appeared in the Ming. Many of these groups were all male, employing boys as female impersonators, but

*(Opposite)* Facsimile of self: The love-struck Du Linjiang leaves a legacy before her death by drawing her portrait from mirror reflections. The engraver explored the ambiguities in the Chinese phrase *xizhen* (sketching a likeness / sketching true self) by positioning the tip of the painting brush on Linjiang’s own face. His name, Mingqi, is visible in the upper left corner; he was a member of the famed Huang family from Huizhou (*Mudanshi*). First published 1617; reprinted — Chang Bide, p. 10.)
female actors became increasingly popular in the last decades of the sixteenth century. Contemporary accounts show that they performed with men, although we know nothing about their onstage living or traveling arrangements. Drama aficionados also wrote of all-female troupes. One of these woman actors, Zhu Chusheng, was studious about discussing matters of diction with expert scholars. She evidently regarded herself with the dignity of a professional artist.

Not only the composition of the troupes but also their repertoire and patrons diversified. Tanaka Issai distinguishes three ranks of professional troupes according to the training of the actors and the status of their patrons. The highest-ranking groups resided permanently in the local city and served wealthy lineages, local officials, and merchants. Technically most advanced, they reflected the moral preference of the local elite, staging dramas espousing loyalty and chastity. Next in rank were semi-itinerant groups based in the local city but occasionally touring the countryside. They, too, reflected the conservative taste of the village elders. Lowest in rank were itinerant troupes that performed in market towns and at temple fairs. Often with ties to secret societies, their repertoire was heavy on romance and weak on virtues. Although less trained, they were more innovative than the other two. Naturally, they also met the strongest resistance from local authorities. This third type was instrumental in shaping the Jiangnan urban culture in general and the cult of qing in particular.

Besides these professional groups for hire by the public, troupes kept by private families also existed. This practice first became popular in the late sixteenth century, especially among Jiangnan literati families. Supervised and funded by aficionados, these troupes served a variety of functions—experimentation with new tunes, private entertainment, social network building, and testimony to the family's erudition and wealth. Similar to family publishing, family troupes constituted a means of converting cultural capital into prestige and was indicative of the trend of privatization of Chinese gentry life. Besides actors, these companies often included trainers and musicians, with the size of the larger groups reaching 20 to 30 people. Some actors were recruited from professional troupes; others were maids and concubines who received special training. The popularity of family troupes attests to the degree to which the opera permeated the private and official lives of the literati class. By the eighteenth century, however, the custom had shifted from literati to merchant families.

(Opposite) The communicative power of qing: the lover in Du Liniang's dream turns out to be a real person, who falls in love with her likeness / true self (Mudang. First published 1617; reprinted—Chang lide, p. 13).
Although literati wives and daughters played no formal role in the organization of family troupes, they benefited from a daily immersion in music and literature. House parties often ended with a few arias; women sometimes enjoyed them from behind a screen.\textsuperscript{27} It is no accident that some families famous for their troupes—the Shen in Wujiang, the Qi in Shanyin, and the Yuan in Nanjing—also boasted an exceptional concentration of female literary talents. Yuan Dacheng’s daughter Lizhen (d. ca. 1652) was a playwright who drafted her father’s famous play, \textit{Swallow Letters}.\textsuperscript{28} Women from the Shen and Qi families formed poetry clubs (discussed in later chapters). One of the Shen daughters, Ye Xiaowen, also published a play.

Although commoners were usually not privy to the performances of private literati companies, their craze for opera could be satisfied through other venues. A famous drama aficionado, Zhang Dai (1597–ca. 1689), occasionally took his family troupe to perform in such public places as temples and pavilions, attracting thousands of local fans. The audience appeared to be familiar with the repertory, on one occasion chanting its disapproval of a certain character at his entrance.\textsuperscript{29} More often than these impromptu appearances by elite companies, however, were regular performances of professional itinerant troupes. These could take two forms—religious and secular festivals in temples and temporary venues, as well as regular shows in theaters.\textsuperscript{30} In addition, the public also enjoyed performances in inns, taverns, and brothels. Many of the better-known prostitutes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries relied on their operatic skills to attract clients.

Partly because of the association of prostitution with dramatics since ancient times, women played active roles in the theater in Ming and Qing China. To a certain degree, drama remained stigmatized; local authorities were incessant in outlawing plays they considered lewd, and household instructions repeatedly warned sons and daughters of the theater’s vice. But the popularity of shows in the living rooms of literati households and the promotion of leading literary figures accorded the theater a degree of respectability. Gentrywomen—as playwrights, readers, critics, and audience—took drama seriously both as a literary genre and as a performing art. Commoner daughters were just as mesmerized in their roles of actors and audience. In their eagerness to dramatize emotions, women were second to none.

\textbf{Male Vindication of Qing}

To the extent that female readers and audience were largely responding to literary images created by men, the cult of \textit{qing} is a collaboration of the two sexes with men taking the initiative. Although men and women shared common grounds in their recognition of the primacy of \textit{qing}, there were subtle differences between the male and female perspectives. Generally speaking, men’s discourse on \textit{qing} was couched in philosophical jargon that reflected the prevailing fusion of Neo-Confucian morality with Buddhism and Daoism. Although women were not immune to Buddhist jargon, they tended to focus on such matters of immediate personal relevance as marriage and happiness. They also incorporated the cult into their everyday lives by devising domestic rituals.

Most representative of the male proponents of the cult of \textit{qing} was Kang Xianzu. To Kang, the central tenet of the cult of \textit{qing} was, in literary scholar C. T. Hsia’s words, the postulation of “love as the primary and essential condition of life.” The playwright’s convictions were clearly stated in his preface to \textit{The Peony Pavilion}, an often-quoted manifesto of the cult:

\begin{quote}
Love is of source unknown, yet it grows ever deeper. The living may die of it, by its power the dead live again. Love is not love at its fullest if one who lives is unwilling to die for it, or if it cannot restore to life one who has so died. And must the love that comes in dream necessarily be unreal? For there is no lack of dream lovers in this world. Only for those whose love must be fulfilled on the pillow and for whom affection deepens only after retirement from office, is it entirely a corporeal matter.\textsuperscript{31}
\end{quote}

Hsia has pointed out that the three key words in this passage, “life” (\textit{sheng}), “love” (\textit{qing}), and “dream” (\textit{meng}), underscore the influence of the Neo-Confucian Taizhou school on Tang’s philosophy in general and his affirmation of \textit{qing} in particular.\textsuperscript{32}

Founded by Wang Gen (ca. 1483–1540), son of a salt maker, the Taizhou school is commonly considered the popular and radical wing of the Wang Yangming Neo-Confucian school. A commoner throughout his life, Wang preached Confucian virtues to the common folk with religious fervor. His famous motto, “The streets are full of sages,” encapsulates his commitment to the practical needs of the ordinary men and women. In affirming the moral and intellectual capacity of every individual to attain sagehood, Wang Gen also argued for his or her right to self-expression and self-fulfillment.\textsuperscript{33}

With adherents drawn from the gentry, merchants, and commoners, the Taizhou school, named after Wang’s native place in Yangzhou prefecture, was one of the most influential intellectual movements in mid- to late Ming Jiangnan. In membership and basic tenets, it epitomized the spirit of the emergent urban culture—a fluid status system, emphasis on the self, and celebration of the vitality of life. Many dramatists who championed
the cult of *qing*, editors who appreciated women’s poetry, and fathers who encouraged their daughters to be educated traced their intellectual heritage to this school.

Tang Xianzu, for example, was a student of Luo Rufang (1575–88), a third-generation disciple of Wang Gen. A charismatic speaker who often lectured to thousands of people, Luo had deep faith in the goodness of men, innate knowledge, and the “perpetual renewal of life.” Some scholars even argued that Luo elevated vitality of life (*sheng*) to a position equal with *ren*, the ultimate Confucian virtue of humanity.24 In writing *The Peony Pavilion*, according to C. T. Hsiia, Tang went further than Luo in affirming *qing* as the “distinguishing feature of human existence.” Yet Tang added a pessimistic note in introducing the time element: only in dreams can life and love find complete fulfillment.33

Tang Xianzu’s championing of *qing* was echoed in the works of Hong Sheng, a leading early *qing* playwright and a close friend of Wu Ren. In *The Palace of Eternal Youth* (*Changsheng dian*, finalized in 1668), a drama set against the fall of the Tang capital to a rebel general, Hong eulogized the love between Li Longji (Tang Xuanzong, r. 712–56), the toppled emperor, and his consort Yang Guifei. Following Tang Xianzu, Hong equated *qing* with basic human nature, suggesting that there are sincere (*zhen*) *qing* and insincere (*jia*) *qing* just as there are goodness and evil. In its manifold manifestations, *qing* is the key to the rise and fall of empires and other historical events.36 Those endowed with sincere *qing* can “move stones; change heaven and earth; shine as the sun; leave their names in history,” Hong wrote in Scene 1. “Ministers are loyal and sons filial only because their *qing* is sincere to the extreme.”37

Wu Ren described the central theme of *The Palace of Eternal Youth* as follows: “The fundamental nature of *qing* is principle [li], something we cannot do without; but if *qing* is given a free rein it overruns principle and becomes desire [yu], something we should avoid. This drama clearly points to a way out, those who are indulgent should take heed and repent.”38 Disagreeing with some critics that *qing* and the Neo-Confucian moral principle are always at odds, Wu Ren stated that “*qing* stems from nature; nature is none other than principle.” Defending the respectability of *qing*, he reiterated its distinction from desire: “Nature expresses itself as *qing*, but, in excess, *qing* becomes desire.”39 In distinguishing love and desire and in channeling love into the boundaries of moral principle, this notion of *qing* smacks of Confucian views of propriety.40

The vindication of *qing* was the central motif not only in dramas but also in short stories popular among the reading public in late Ming Jiangnan. The word *qing* itself became a cliché. Hence editor and publisher of popular literature Feng Menglong (1574-ca. 1645) issued a collection of over 800 stories on love entitled *Anatomy of Love* (*Qingshi*, literally “a history of *qing*”). In the preface, Feng wrote of love as a supreme principle that governs all human relationships:

If there were no *qing* under heaven and earth, no being could be born... With *qing*, even distant ones can be together; without *qing*, even close ones are rent asunder. Having *qing* [youqing] and not having *qing* [luqing] are worlds apart. I wish to establish a religion of *qing* (*qingshiao*) and teach all living beings: the son faces his father with *qing*; the minister faces the emperor with *qing*; the same holds true for all other relationships. Things in this world are like loose coins, *qing* is the cord. Just as loose coins are strung together by a cord, even those from far corners of the earth can become couples.41

Written in colloquial language in the form of a Buddhist *gatha*, Feng’s manifesto for a religion of *qing* appealed to the ordinary reader in its fusion of Confucian morality and Buddhist terminology. Feng recast the father-son and emperor-minister relationships, two pillars of Confucian ethics, in a new, gentler light. What marks these relationships is not the traditional virtues of loyalty and filial piety, but resonances from the heart. Human emotions, in other words, soften the edges of hierarchical obligations and sow the seeds for more egalitarian, reciprocal relationships. The same message is conveyed in the short stories that Feng compiled. Oki Yasushi, a Japanese specialist on Feng, argues that in selecting stories for his series of anthologies, *Sanyan*, Feng’s sole yardstick for evaluating a person’s worth was his or her “sincerity of heart” (*zhenqing*).42

Feng Menglong’s reduction of Confucian virtues to sincerity and Wu Ren’s apologies cited above are, as Patrick Hanan suggests, attempts to accommodate *qing* to Confucian morality.43 Yet this accommodation was fraught with subversive implications. In some seventeenth-century dramas and prose, love-crazed prostitutes who committed suicide were equated with chaste widows who threw themselves into wells, for both exemplified the Confucian dictum of “perseverance from beginning to end; not to serve two [masters] unto death” (*congyi erzhong, zhishi buer*). These women, in turn, were as exalted as loyal ministers who died for their country. United by an ultimate act of sincerity, a dead prostitute thus shared the fame of immortal officials and generals like Qu Yuan and Wen Tianxiang. This dilution of Confucian morality led one early nineteenth-century scholar to question the real motives of chaste widows whose names were enshrined in the gazetteers. These women, he suspected, actually died for love, not moral principles.44

Although Tang Xianzu, Hong Sheng, Wu Ren, and Feng Menglong sought to blend their belief in the primacy of *qing* with Neo-Confucian tenets on the one hand and with Buddhism on the other, the cult of *qing*
was not a philosophical abstraction. Its true meaning has to be appreciated in the lives of those galvanized by its promise of a freer and happier life. Young, educated women, above all, were frustrated by the lack of fulfillment in their lives beyond the limited repertoire of roles reserved for women. Armed with heightened sensitivities and literary skills, they sought solace from the world of love evoked in literature.

The Female World of Love and Ritual

The message of The Peony Pavilion—love as a natural impulse unencumbered by moral codes or even death—struck a sympathetic chord among woman readers in Ming-Qing times. Like Rousseau after publication of La Nouvelle Héloïse, who had to use a trapdoor to slip away from readers besieging his retreat on the Île Saint-Pierre, Tang Xianzu became an instant celebrity upon the production of his drama. The attraction of woman readers to the author was unprecedented. Some fell so madly in love with Tang that they offered themselves to him. Even more powerful was the reader's identification with the protagonist. One Yangzhou woman was said to have become so obsessed with the drama that she read it day and night and asked to be buried with it. An actress from Hangzhou who could not marry the man she loved became famous for her portrayal of Du Liniang. So strong was her identification with Du that she allegedly died on stage during one climactic act.

The appeal of the work was by no means limited to the frustrated in love. An early Qing gentry wife from Huizhou described how popular the play was in the inner chambers of respectable households: "Ladies in the boudoir all collect the latest embroidery patterns and keep them pressed between the leaves of a book. In between cutting patterns, all our eyes are fixed onto the pages of The Peony Pavilion." The result could be serious: "Once we read The Peony Pavilion, all of us are lured into the ocean of Classics and histories and are absorbed in poems and songs." A mere drama, in other words, initiated the embroidering housewife into a new world of literature and scholarship. The lure of these new horizons partly accounted for the drama's popularity in the inner quarters.

Even more alluring was Du Liniang herself. Young, talented women developed intimate bonds with Du as if she were a friend. Ye Xiaoluan (1616–32), a teenage poet from Wujiang, wrote three poems and dedicated them to the portrait of Du attached to her copy of The Peony Pavilion. In one of them, Ye imagined Du to be a fairy from the moon: "I fear that you will fly back to the palace of the Big Chill [the moon] before I can cast on you a long, tender gaze." Ye's tenderness toward Du is indicative of the world of qing into which young, educated women like her were initiated.

The behavior of devotees of The Peony Pavilion is most revealing of their romantic sensitivity. Taking the three key motifs of the play—life, love, and dreams—to the extreme, these women turned their own lives into a dreamworld permeated by love. For example, Qian Yi, Wu Ren's third wife, set up an altar in her garden after the work was published. On the altar she consecrated a portrait of Du Liniang together with a red plum branch to symbolize Du's lover, Liu Mengmei. Under torchlight, Qian made offerings of the commentary, wine, and fruits to Du. When Wu Ren chided his wife for taking fictional characters a little too seriously, Qian retorted: "If the spirit of god is manifested even in a piece of wood... how can you or I tell for sure whether Du Liniang is real or not?"

This conflation of fiction with reality stemmed from Qian's belief that qing could bridge the gap between the phenomenal world and the fantastic. The night after she worshipped at Du's altar, Qian dreamed that she walked into a garden with her husband, the setting of which recalled the famous scene "The Interrupted Dream" in the play, in which the heroine first meets her lover in a dream. Amid the dazzling colors of peony blossoms, Qian saw a beauty whom she took to be Du Liniang. When winds blinded her sight and interrupted her dream, Qian awoke her husband and told him about it. To her surprise, Wu Ren claimed that he just had the same dream. Too excited to go back to sleep, Qian and Wu called a maid to heat up some water for tea, washed up, and sat down the details of the dream on paper. Wu also asked Qian to draw a picture of Du as she saw her in her dream; it turned out to resemble the woman he saw. The two commemorated their unusual resonance of "sharing a dream" with rounds of poetry. Wu then admitted that he had been wrong in chiding Qian; Du Liniang was indeed a "real" person.

The fantastic world was as rich in religious meaning as in conjugal resonance. In winter 1693, one year before the publication of the commentary, Qian Yi and her husband were proofreading a handcopied manuscript against Tan Ze's original before sending it to the printers. While they were distracted by sounds of cracking bamboo from a gathering snowstorm, a draft tipped over a candle and set the original manuscript on fire. In an act that foretold the famous scene in the eighteenth-century novel Story of the Stone, when the maudlin protagonist Lin Daiyu buried flower petals, Qian and Wu ordered a servant to dig a hole by the garden wall, wrapped the ashes in raw silk, and buried them next to a plum tree. A burn mark was said to have appeared on the tree. Tan's manuscript was more than just a memento; it embodied her spirit.

The Peony Pavilion thus inspired a host of domestic rituals—worshipping at altars, painting portraits, burying manuscripts. Emulating Du Liniang's legacy, young women also painted and exchanged portraits of
Female Readings of the Cult of Qing

Devoted woman readers of *The Peony Pavilion* offered a range of interpretations of the play. It is difficult to deduce from them a single "female reading"—an interpretation shared by all women and distinct from men's. Yet these women show a consensus of sentiment in the prime of place they assigned to expositions of *qing*. Taken together, their words constitute a spectrum of women's views of the cult of *qing*.

At the heart of the *Three Wives' Commentary* is a conviction that *qing*—including romantic and sexual love—is a noble sentiment that gives meaning to human life. Chen Tong launched into what she took to be the major theme of the play at the outset. Against Yang Xianzu's line of "Daylong I polished verses for the bowls' torture / for the telling of 'love, in all life hardest to tell,'" Chen wrote: "*Qing* does not only mean love between a man and a woman, but the latter is indeed hardest to tell." Qian Yi added that romantic love and the feelings of such tragic heroes as Xiang Yu, a third century B.C. warlord, are both *qing*. Similar to Feng Menglong's reduction of loyalty and filial piety to sincerity of heart, these women affirmed that *qing* is an overarching principle governing all human relationships. As such, *qing* is not the prerogative of either sex alone.

Yet they agreed that Du Liniang was the greatest embodiment of *qing* that ever lived, calling her "love-crazed" (*qingchi*) and her love "the ultimate" (*qingshi*). To them the most telling episode of her devotion to love came when she, knowing that she would soon die from lovesickness, leaves a self-portrait for posterity. In the play, this scene depicts a sensuous delight that the fifteen-year-old (sixteen sui) Du takes in her own beauty, tinged by regret over the transience of youth. Weeping, Du sings:

> How can it be that Du [Liniang] must sketch with her own hand the grace of her sixteen years! Ah, that time should have etched—

> These peach-blossom cheeks of youth so swiftly with lines of care! Surely a happy lot is beyond my deserving.

Or why must 'fairest face be first to age'? . . .

Now to damp down the burning
of desire in the soul's brief resting place of flesh,
take brush and paper, ink and inkstones."

She then paints a self-portrait and is pleased with its sweet appeal and charm. Both the tenderness Du feels toward her beauty and her lament of its fleeting nature stirred Chen and Qian, who wrote around the same age as Du when they wrote their commentaries. Their comments on the above scene read: "That Liniang is the greatest love-crazed one in history is seen in this episode. Had she been without it, posterity would not have found [her love] credible." Love, embodied in Du's portrait and her ghost, is a vital life force unconstrained by the passing of time or corporeal death. In calling this *qing* the "eternal debt" (*wuisheng zhai*), Chen Tong alluded to the Buddhist view that *qing* is a kind of defilement (*chi, moha*) that causes ignorance of the true nature of existence (*wuining, avidya*). The use of Buddhist terms, however, was merely a fashionable convention. These devotes seemed untroubled by the essential incompatibility between idealization of *qing* and the original teaching of the Buddha.

This transcendent quality of *qing* induced these women to equate love and dreams in their commentary and, as we have seen, to believe that dreams and fictional characters constituted part of "real" life. Chen wrote: "Liniang did not know Liu had a dream; Liu did not know that Liniang had a dream. Both were filled with love, but each was dreaming his or her own dream. Since neither thought that he or she was dreaming, they both attained truth." The word "truth" (*zheng*) also means "reality," as Qian elaborated on Chen's words: "Liu changed his name because of his dream; Liu fell sick because of her dream. Both took their dreams to be real. As long as they did, their dreams indeed turned out to be real."

In the scene in which Du, having been resurrected, plans to elope with Liu, she calls her return to life "the reopening of a dream world." Tan commented: "When one lives day by day in the world of *qing*, one lives in dreams everyday." This line aptly describes the world of sentimentality and fantasy in which young women like Chen, Tan, and Qian lived.

Tan Ze elaborated on the theme of the supremacy of *qing* by equating it with talent (*cai*). In the play, Du declared her love for Liu Mengmei, the man of her dreams, as they met in the underworld: "I love your unsurpassed talent." Fearing that the reader would mistake Du's admiration for a vulgar longing for examination success and high position, Tan commented: "Her love of talent is by no means snobbish." Qian added: "When one's *qing* is fair, so is one's talent." Mencius argued that the one with talent is the one with *qing*. Hence those without *qing* cannot be called talented."
This pairing of love with talent denies the "man : talent / woman : love" convention in the popular genre of scholar-beauty romances. These woman critics asserted that neither love nor talent is the prerogative of one sex alone. This argument was developed on two fronts: their endorsement of Du's education and their view that Liu Mengmei is as great a devotee of love as Du. On Du's education, these women shared the playwright's delight in parodying her tutor Chen, an ossified Confucian moralist who failed to detect, let alone approve of, the budding sentiments of the pubescent Du. Yet they applauded the tutor's choice of curriculum and his decision to have Du recite poems from the Book of Songs, one of the Confucian Five Classics. To him, the moral of these didactic poems, chosen by Confucius himself, can be summed up in the phrase "to set aside evil thoughts." To Du, these were love songs, probably written by women, that echoed her romantic sensitivities, a view shared by the young woman critics as well: "It is indeed appropriate to speak of poetry from within the women's chambers. How else can one begin to understand the Songs?" In other words, men do not monopolize the reading of the Classics; a woman's talent is just as important, especially with regard to poetry. This view was shared by male editors who published anthologies of women's verse discussed in the preceding chapter, and, as we will see, supporters of women's education reiterated the same argument.

Nor is love a woman's monopoly. While celebrating Du Liniang as the quintessential embodiment of qing, the woman critics also acknowledged the devotion of her lover, Liu. Concerning the pains that Liu took to bring Du back to life and to seek the consent of her unbelieving father to their marriage, Tan wrote:

What is amazing about this story is not Liniang, but scholar Liu. There are many love-crazed women in this world like Du, who dreamed of love and died, but they do not return to life. [For they do not have] Liu, who laid out Du's portrait, called out to her, and worshipped her, who made love with her ghost and believed that it was her flesh and blood; who conspired with a nun to open her coffin and carried her corpse without fear; who traveled to Huaiyang to beg his father-in-law—he suffered it all with no regrets. This is truly amazing." The perfect love of Du would have been futile without Liu’s reciprocation. To emphasize this reciprocity of love is to dismiss the stereotypical identification of females with the inner world of emotions and males with the outer world of principles.

Sanctity of Love, Sex, and Marriage

The idea of the reciprocity of qing in part accounted for the growing incendence of companionate marriage in the seventeenth century (see Chapter 5). The currency of companionate marriage perhaps explains the young women’s high regard for the marriage institution itself. In the scene “Spectral Vows,” after Liu and Du’s ghost pledged their love and consummated it, Liu asks Du to reveal her identity. Du sighs: “This is my fear, sir scholar: ‘betrothal makes wife, elopement only concubine.’ I will tell my story when incense smoke has sealed our wedding pact.” The two then exchange marital vows. Tan Ze noted: “Du’s insistence on becoming a wife reveals the depth of her love. If she had been lax [about the vow], then their relationship would have been merely a brief love affair.” In applauding Du’s respect for the marriage institution, these women asserted that qing is a respectable and, indeed, noble sentiment. Love is not disruptive or scandalous, as some critics of The Peony Pavilion had charged. Instead, it is the heart of matrimony.

Not only are romantic sentiments compatible with marriage, so too is sexual love. The love between Du and Liu is passionate and erotic; the play contains explicit references to sexual intercourse. When her ghost visits Liu at night, Du declares, “This body, a thousand gold pieces, I offer you without hesitation. Do not disdain my love. My life’s desire is fulfilled if I may share your pillow night by night.” Comments on such scenes as this provide a rare glimpse into the views of young women on sex, a taboo subject normally discussed only covertly. On the scene “Union in the Shades” above, the young women wrote: “Theirs is purely a divine love, not carnal.” Yet this divine love does not preclude carnal pleasures. On Du’s earnest but shy and composed disposition as she enters Liu’s chamber, they remarked: “She still behaves like a lady.” The pursuit of love—including sexual love—is fitting for a respectable woman.

This insistence that sex between devoted lovers is not lewd is further supported by the woman critics’ defense of Tang Xianzu’s explicit references to the sexual act. One very provocative scene describes Liu’s foreplay with Du, before a knock at the door disrupts them and sends Du fleeing:

Sleep now, while I
cradle your swelling breast,
guarding with this kerchief
firm flesh now moist with sweat
and slender curve of waist
against the springtime’s chill.

Chen Tong remarked: “These words depict the pleasures of the two lovers and convey their inseparable love to the extreme. They foreshadow the pains of subsequent separation.” In other words, plot development and dramatic effect demand explicitness. The fact that Chen, an unmarried young woman when she wrote this commentary, chose to comment on
their approach is different. Whereas men engaged in philosophical arguments that sought to accommodate both Confucian and Buddhist views, women focused on the compatibility of love and marriage, and on the moral implications of these practices. Male scholars were at best critical of the Confucian ideal of love, but women were more likely to emphasize the undying nature of love and marriage than its social constraints. From this perspective, love and marriage were not seen as conflicting, but rather as integral to a harmonious life. The relationship of love and marriage was seen as a microcosm of the larger relationship between Confucian ideals and personal fulfillment. This perspective reflects the complex intertwining of Confucian moral codes and Buddhist views on love and marriage, as discussed in the text. The text also highlights the role of literature in shaping these ideas, with stories of love and marriage from ancient Chinese literature serving as a foundation for these philosophical debates.
schooldialer. Deeply shaken by her death, Wu called himself “the old widower” and wrote volumes in her memory. This passion and prolifigacy also marked their relationship in her lifetime. When Cheng fell sick and knew that she would die, she wrote a poem to bid Wu farewell:

Romance and happiness are seldom equally shared,  
But unusually close, our lives and hearts are joined as one.  
I regret that this piece of clay will soon be shattered,  
Who can create another Madame Guan?²⁵

Madame Guan refers to the Yuan calligrapher and painter Guan Dao-sheng (1262–1319). In a famous poem written for her husband, she compared a couple to two figures shaped from one piece of dough. The conjugal bond is analogous to pulverizing the two figures, mixing the clay with water and reshaping it into a new man and a new woman, so that “there is you in my clay, and me in yours.” In comparing herself to Guan, Cheng Qiong not only expressed her love for her husband but also conveyed her pride in her own talent.

Cheng’s celebration of qing was no philosophical abstraction; it was intimately related to her experience of it in her marital life. One day, when Wu complained that he was suffering from too much qing, Cheng consoled him with a line by Tang Xianzu: “In all times, there is a world of law [faj] and a world of qing.” She went on to argue that the latter is superior: “Talent is more lovable than riches; when it resonates with qing, our pleasure penetrates our soul.” This equation of talent and qing recalls the similar argument of Tan Ze and Qian Yi. Conversations like this suggest that the rapport between Cheng and Wu was built on an intellectual attraction. Their devotion to each other is in itself the best illustration of the mutual reinforcement of love and talent.

An enthusiast of The Peony Pavilion, Cheng Qiong watched it performed by the family troupe sponsored by a lineage elder and found the actress who played Du Linliang “the most seductive in the region.” She was familiar with the Three Wives’ Commentary, but found it lacking in explorations of hidden meanings and analogies. In her preface for an edition of the play that her husband annotated and published, Cheng did not divulge much of her interpretation.²⁷ She was said to have written a commentary of her own, entitled The Embroidered Peony (Xiu Mudan), in which she compared the different editions of the play and excised over 60 words from the original. Since this work was not published and is no longer extant, we have no access to the hidden meanings that she revealed. From fragments of it recorded by her husband’s close friend Shi Zhenlin (1693–ca. 1779), however, Cheng appeared to be obsessed with the problem of an unequal marriage.

Like her fellow readers, Cheng saw in Du Linliang a perfect woman:

“The looks most enchanting; her heart most tender; her vision most farsighted; her wisdom most sagacious; her will most steadfast.” These qualities were manifested in her insistence on a husband worthy of her beauty and talent. Referring to a line from the play “phoenix fated to follow crow,” Cheng compared Du to a phoenix who preferred to pursue her ideal man in dreams rather than to marry a crow in real life. “I wish every woman was like me,” Cheng was unabashed in identifying herself with Du, “and would rather die alongside the phoenix of my dream than to share a life with a mundane crow.” Cheng herself was fortunate enough to have a worthwhile mate, but she realized that for the beautiful and talented, finding a perfect match was next to impossible. Hence Du’s tenacity was all the more laudable.

Although Cheng’s celebration of love marriages echoes that of the Three Wives’ Commentary, her concerns go beyond the latter’s affirmation of the respectability of love and sanctity of marriage. In her sympathy for the phoenix who has to marry a crow, she was addressing a peculiar social problem that arose with the spread of woman’s education. A talented woman often found her husband in an arranged marriage an unworthy intellectual companion. The problem was either so common or so novel that it caught the attention of writers and readers of popular literature. One of its variants, that of henpecked husbands and jealous wives, became a stock theme in Ming and Qing short stories and plays, as we will see in the discussion of Xiaoying below. These stories were clearly inspired by real-life experiences. Several woman writers discussed in the later chapters married men so undistinguished that the latter’s only claim to fame was as Ms. So-and-so’s husband.

The dissatisfaction felt by such women was not couched in terms of an overt attack on the traditional marriage system. Instead, it propelled them to seek the company of other talented women, fostering the various types of networks that sprang from the inner chambers. At the same time, many mothers, all too aware of the unhappiness of overeducated daughters, became convinced that talent was a most unfortunate gift in a woman. The large number of female poets who died in their prime, discussed below, seemed to bear them out. The coming of age of the female reader was thus a mixed blessing to the women concerned: the sweet promises of nuptial bliss and female friendship were tinged with the dangers of disappointment, consumption, and fatality.

The Making of Xiaoying Lore

These less happy aspects of the cult of qing were embodied in the lore of Xiaoying (1595–1612), the most celebrated reader of The Peony Pavilion. Whereas talented young women—Chen Tong, Tan Ze, Qian Yi, Ye Xiao-
The life of Xiaoqing was a tragedy beyond belief. As told by her male biographers, Xiaoqing was one of the “thin horses”—girls sold as concubines—from Yangzhou. When she was fifteen, the son of a high official, Feng Yunjiang (1572–ca. 1661), bought her and brought her home to Hangzhou. Feng’s wife, a jealous woman, moved Xiaoqing to a villa on West Lake and forbade Feng to see her. Xiaoqing found solace in writing poetry, painting, and the occasional company of a friend, Madame Yang. Madame Yang sought to persuade Xiaoqing to leave Feng, but she refused. Later, after Madame Yang followed her husband to a posting away from Hangzhou, Xiaoqing, lonely and depressed, became emaciated but decked herself out in ornate clothing and fresh makeup every day. Before she died at the age of seventeen, she emulated the heroine of *The Peony Pavilion* by having her portrait drawn, then consecrating it by burning incense and offering a libation of wine. The jealous wife burned her manuscripts, but eleven poems and one letter to Madame Yang were saved.

Within a decade of Xiaoqing's supposed death in 1612, she had become enshrined in popular imagination as the quintessential suffering heroine. Her story was first popularized in the form of biography and then in dramas and tales. The author of a preface to one of the many plays eulogizing her life wrote, “soon after Xiaoqing died, the whole world knew about her [because of the plays].” Eventually, more than fifteen such plays appeared, reaching even an illiterate audience. The same publishing boom and theater culture that magnified the appeal of Du Liniang also perpetuated the Xiaoqing lore. As writers vied to discover new meaning in an old tale, Xiaoqing was made to carry more symbolic weight than her short life and career could justify.

The Xiaoqing legend not only took shape on the pages of books but also was embodied in a paraphernalia of personal artifacts and public monuments. Her poems were copied and circulated, at first privately and then in published works; different versions of her biography surfaced; dramatists reworked her story into plays with increasing imagination; her portrait became a collector’s item as painters vied to supply their own versions; a tombstone erected for her at West Lake inspired poetry from men and women as they visited the site or celebrated periodic renovations. The Xiaoqing lore could not only be read and seen but also cut up, possessed, and incorporated. The fascination with Xiaoqing was thus regener-ated on the borderlines between material and literary cultures from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century. By the nineteenth century, her story, now fiction-cum-history, had secured a place in West Lake lore.

The Xiaoqing legend was intertwined with that of Du Liniang from the start. To generations of reader-writers, male and female alike, the two shared a similar persona. This personal identification, one that conveniently glossed over the disparate statuses between wife and concubine, stemmed from one of Xiaoqing’s poems.

> The sound of cold rain is unbearable through the lonely window,  
> Light a lamp to leaf through *The Peony Pavilion*.  
> Some in this world are even more stubborn in love than I,  
> Xiaoqing is not the only heartbroken one.

The “some in this world” refers to Du Liniang. Cited by many women readers at the time, this poem is a pictorial depiction of the world of meanings evoked by a woman reading fiction. Xiaoqing, like many other readers, identified emotionally with Du, the aspirant of true love. The gap between her own unrequited love and Du’s fulfillment only served to make Du more enticing. To be sincere, to be “stubborn in love,” became the highest virtue regardless of outcome. In her emphasis on sincerity and in her identification with fictional characters through reading, Xiaoqing epitomized the tenets of the cult of *qing*.

Xiaoqing’s identification with Du Liniang was carried to an extreme in her obsession with her own portrait. According to two early biographies, Xiaoqing had her portrait drawn when she was ill. The artist had to try
The solitary Xiaoeqin: in her quarters by West Lake, the dejected concubine reads *The Peony Pavilion* by a lamp (Lai Jiahi, *Tiaoeng jiu*. First published 1627; reprinted—Zheng Zhenduo, *Zhongguo gudai sukebua xuanji*).
the beginning, her identity was shrouded in mystery. In fact, the identity of everyone involved in the Xiaoqing story was obscured in the biographies and plays. Scholars in the twentieth century have argued that Xiaoqing’s husband was the son of Feng Yunjiang, a lifelong friend of art collector Wang Ranning. Liu Ruishi (1618–64), a famous courtier whose career will be discussed in Chapter 7, visited Feng when she traveled to West Lake between 1638 and 1640. When Feng was 86 years old, Liu’s husband, the poet and scholar Qian Qianyi (1582–1664), referred to him as “an old friend of fifty years.” Feng also befriended the novelist Li Yu (1611–80), who discussed poetry with him.

These details, however, were not known to most readers of the Xiaoqing tale in Ming and Qing times. Her maiden name, Feng, coincidentally the same as her married name, was not given in Ming biographies; Feng Yunjiang was never identified in full.

Friends of Feng Yunjiang were the ones who most vehemently argued that Xiaoqing was a fictitious character. Qian Qianyi, for example, wrote that Xiaoqing’s biography and poetry had been made up by a certain scholar named Tan as a diversion. The name Xiaoqing, Qian added, was invented by taking apart the two radicals that formed the word qing. Qian’s theory was so popular in the seventeenth century that one scholar, Shu Yushan (1628–83), decided to investigate. A friend of Shi’s who lived in Hangzhou and knew Feng Yunjiang’s father verified that the story was true. A nineteenth-century scholar Cheng Qianyi had headed requests from the family of Feng’s wife to falsify records. The twenty-first-century scholar Cheng Yunke points out that taking a concubine with the same surname is taboo according to the Book of Rites, but Feng Yunjiang had done just that. Cheng argued that Qian was covering up for his friend’s breach of the rites.

Fictitious or not, the ready acceptance of Qian’s theory in the seventeenth century reveals a common mistrust among men toward the literary accomplishments of women. Although many men condoned or even encouraged the writing of an occasional poem as a harmless pastime for respectable women, they balked at the thought of submitting such works to print. Even when women’s words were published, they were often thought to be inferior to men’s. The scholar-official Zhou Lianggong (1622–72) admonished women not to publish their verse because “it is rare that women can write poetry at all. Taking into consideration that the poet is female, editors do not have very high expectations. Therefore, even unpolished works have found their way to the press.” There is, however, a curious inconsistency between Zhou’s words and deeds: his own concubine was a published song lyric poet.

Even editors who promoted women’s writings were not immune to this
mistrust of female talent. Wu Hao, a Qing editor who included the works of many women in his anthology of Hangzhou verse, stated plainly that "the works of women should be judged by lower standards; we cannot be too picky.""32 No matter how far the woman poet has departed from her prescribed domestic roles, the assumption that her abilities and callings in life are to be distinct from those of the public man persisted. Through the debate on the literary worth of women's words and the propriety of their publication, the use of male standards was never challenged. A condescending attitude toward female talent is thus one manifestation of an entrenched belief in separate and unequal male and female spheres.

The powerful grip of this belief is evinced by the insistence that there was no place for the woman's voice in the public arena. Wu Ren, who helped his wife Qian Yi publish the Three Wives' Commentary, was ridiculed by a male scholar as "a simpleton who was so eager to promote his wives that he lost sight of propriety." The critic's reasons: "Women's words should go no further than the inner quarters. Even if [his] women manage to write, the husband should appreciate these works privately. How dare he publish them as if to boast to the world? Not to mention that some verses and dialogues in dramas are unfit for respectable women. These, in particular, should be kept strictly private." This obsession with upholding the private/public or inner/outer boundary seemed almost wishful thinking, considering the extent to which the spread of women's cultural education had eroded such distinctions in real life.

These prevalent attitudes of condescension and disapproval help explain why as Xiaoqing's poems became critically acclaimed, doubts about their authenticity arose. Shi Yushan, the scholar who investigated the credibility of Qian Qianyi's theory, voiced concern that Xiaoqing's works might have been touched up by male writers. "Unfortunately," his friend in Hangzhou replied, "few poets around the West Lake are capable of such a job.""99

Women were thus subjected to a blatantly conflicting message: suspicion of female talent on the one hand, valorization of women's voice on the other. They embraced the tensions and sought to negotiate the boundaries between inner/outer in a variety of ways. Some opted to publish their works, albeit in a man's name. Many continued to have volumes of collected works published and attached their names with pride. Others appeared to have internalized men's views that a woman's word should not go beyond her inner chambers. Their weariness can be gleaned from the glut of remarks found in Ming and Qing records of a sister or a neighbor who wrote for diversion but burned the manuscript afterward, saying that poetry or writing was not a woman's calling.108 Although some of these women had absorbed such values from their parents, others had to ward off pressure from husbands who disapproved of woman poets. "Often, however, it was the mother-in-law who issued prohibitions, lest writing distract the bride from her household duties." Very often, women themselves internalized the restrictions imposed on their space and creativity.

Although many gifted women must have thus been silenced and many manuscripts burned, the claim of manuscript burnings was sometimes a literary trope—witness the large number of published works entitled "Scrath, Rescued from Fire" and the like. It is also important to stress that as common as the suspicion toward female talent was, it was by no means shared by all men. As noted earlier, many held a countervailing belief in the superiority of the female poetic voice. Tales of suppression and enforced silence, however potent they may be, do not detract from the fact that many daughters were nurtured in families supportive of their literary pursuits, where mothers, fathers, husbands, and/or mothers-in-law figured as teachers and companions in poetic adventures. The family dynamics in these households will be recounted in later chapters.

Male and female attitudes toward the spread of female literacy and its manifold public expressions were thus laden with contradictions. Yet it is important to emphasize that underneath the cacophony lies a common premise—the distinct constitution, hence the distinct poetic voice and literary purpose, of males and females. Those who argued that females should not publish, that their literature should be judged by separate (lower) standards, or that their verse serves as an exalted model for men were, in the final analysis, alike in perpetuating a belief that females and males are distinct in functions and abilities. All the contestations that surrounded the place of the female author and her authenticity, in the end, served to reinforce the cherished ideal of separate spheres.

The Fatality of Talent

A parallel process to the making of female readers into subjects of public lore is the apotheosis of young poets into domestic goddesses. Both processes were fed by the deep-seated doctrine of separate spheres and its relegation of females to an inner and serene realm. I discuss domestic goddesses, born posthumously of a fascination with female immortality, in Chapter 5; here I turn briefly to the morbid fascination with the death of teenage poets. Xiaoqing joined an array of teenage girls in seventeenth-century Jiangnan who became legendary after their untimely death, among them Chen Tong, Tan Ze, and Ye Xiaoluan. Other examples abound, as gleaned from mourning poems published by their parents. There is inconclusive evidence that some girls may have committed suicide
to escape marriage, but others are said to have died of illness. I will speculate on the causes of several untimely deaths in Chapter 5.

For its part, the public fascination with these deaths contributed to a prevalent superstition that talented women were doomed. This belief in the fatality of talent thrived on the fertile soil of enhanced opportunities for women's education in real life, serving as yet another reminder of the gap between social realities and beliefs. Yet just as fictional characters had the power to influence life by shaping the reader's expectations, the belief in fatality of talent may have been realized as self-fulfilling prophecy. It was at the junction of fiction, belief, and reality that the Xianqin tale joined those of Ye Xiaoluan and Yu Erniang, two other ill-fated readers of The Peony Pavilion who exhibited the pathos of unfinished genius.

Although Ye Xiaoluan is a historical personage and the authenticity of Xianqin is mired in controversy, some aspects of Ye's life are curiously parallel to Xianqin's. Both devotees of The Peony Pavilion, for example, were apostrophized after their untimely deaths.103 In the early nineteenth century, Ye Xiaoluan's poetry appeared in a collection of poetry by women associated with West Lake.104 Since Ye was a native of Wujiang and had never been to Hangzhou, her appearance in the collection can only be explained by the fact that her persona had posthumously merged with Xianqin's. Furthermore, in a collection of works that commemorated the rebuilding of Xianqin's tomb, a female poet wrote, "The two posthumous works, Manuscripts Saved from Fire and Fragrance Reborn [of Xianqin and Ye Xiaoluan, respectively], might well be called heart-rending."105 The coupling indicates that the two lives had taken on the same symbolic meaning. Since much of Xianqin's suffering stemmed from her marriage, whereas Ye Xiaoluan died without consuming her, the only common symbol they could have shared was that of the female writer whose talent aroused the jealousy of heaven.

Similarly, the persona of Xianqin became conflated with that of another teenage girl, Yu Erniang, discussed above as author of a commentary on The Peony Pavilion. Much like the Xianqin lore but on a smaller scale, the story of Yu Erniang was told and retold by scores of writers. Eventually, the persona of the two avid readers of The Peony Pavilion fused into one in the Xianqin plays. In a scene in Shadows on Spring Waves (Chunbo ying), for example, an old woman tells Xianqin about Yu Erniang. Xiaoluan, then sick in bed, emphasizes: "A heartbroken one seeing a heartbroken one; perhaps we shall walk the road to the underworld together." Xianqin even suggests that Yu's story be written for songs performed by blind women so that more can hear it.106 In another play, The Garden of Romance (Fenghui yuan), Xianqin and Yu appear as immortals in a heavenly garden, ruled by none other than Tang Xianzu.

Du Liniang and her lover Liu Mengmei are custodians of the garden register.107 The fusions of Xianqin and Ye Xiaoluan and of Xianqin and Yu Erniang underscore the popular paths of talented people who die before reaching their full potential. Although indicative of a certain suspicion toward women's talent, this belief was often expressed by the same people who promoted women's education and published their writings. For example, after editing the posthumous manuscripts of his wife and two daughters for publication, Ye Shaoyuan (1589–1648), the father of Ye Xiaoluan, was so overcome by loneliness and grief that he wrote: "Talent brings affliction. If only [my wife] and my two daughters had not been so talented, and if only their talent had not been so polished, they would not have provoked the jealousy of heaven."108 These bitter comments should not be taken at face value. They appeared, after all, in the preface of a volume published to immortalize the poetic legacy of his wife and daughters. Reference to the fatality of talent could thus be interpreted as a thinly veiled disguise for the exact opposite—a celebration of female talent.

Whether female talent is a blessing or a curse is hardly the real issue at stake in the popularity of the Xianqin lore. In the eyes of male readers, Xianqin was the latest in a long line of literary reincarnations of Qu Yuan (340–ca. 278 B.C.), a loyal minister of Chu and reputed author of the famous Songs of Chu. The poignancy of Xianqin–Ye Xiaoluan–Yu Erniang stemmed in large part from their incorporation into the Qu Yuan lore, an age-old forum for political discourses on loyalty and dissent.

The identification of Xianqin with Qu Yuan belonged to a long tradition of viewing the ruler-minister relationship in the allegorical terms of a marriage between husband and wife.109 One biography has Xianqin comparing herself to the minister of Chu. To the biographer, her refusal to remarry was analogous to Qu's refusal to serve another ruler.110 The author of a later biography went further in presenting Xianqin as a mouthpiece for both Qu's and her own predicament. In words that are clearly the voice of the author himself, Xianqin cries out, "Heaven will surely find use for the talent it endowed me with." Furthermore, Xianqin's literary endeavors are tinged with the promise of salvation and even immortality: "Heaven can destroy my body, but not my writings."111 Xianqin was Qu Yuan in both her talent and her banishment.

In a later story of Xianqin that appeared in a popular collection of stories on wise and resourceful women, The Book of Female Talents (Nü caizi shu), the author made the identification of Xianqin with Qu Yuan even more explicit. Xianqin must have been Qu in her previous life, he wrote. Similarly, her husband Feng was the king of Chu who failed to appreciate Qu's talents and loyalty; the jealous wife was Minister Shang-
The Enchantment of Love

The talented Xiaoqing, the tragic heroine, appears as Qu Yuan, the loyal minister of Chu, in The Book of Female Talents. Unable to find a true friend in this world, she looks in vain to her shadow in the water (first published ca. 1644–61; reprinted—Fu Xihua, Zhongguo gudian wenxue, p. 905).

guan, Qu Yuan’s antithesis. The tragedy of Xiaoqing and Qu Yuan was that they tried, in vain, to find a true friend in this world. Unrequited loyalty coupled with the futility of talent accounted for the poignancy of Xiaoqing—as—Qu Yuan, not the fatality of talent.

These authors empathized with Xiaoqing not because she was a woman victimized by an unfortunate marriage over which she had no control but because of her wasted talent and its lack of appreciation by those in power. To the extent that this identification of Xiaoqing with the banished minister resonated with the concerns of men in the public sphere, her story was divorced of its specific gendered meanings. What mattered to her male readers was not her predicament as a woman, but the tragedy she shared with certain men. This bias is particularly evident in men’s identification with Xiaoqing not only as a victim of an inept ruler but also as a victim of a jealous and spiteful wife.

Whereas the male and female expositions of qing in The Peony Pavilion differ only in emphasis, not in substance, readings of the Xiaoqing story are unmistakably gender specific. Women saw Xiaoqing primarily as a fellow reader of The Peony Pavilion and another alter ego of Du Liniang. Men, however, latched onto her image as a victim of the jealous wife, an image absent in The Peony Pavilion. In reading Xiaoqing as a metaphor for their own frustrations, male readers betrayed their anxieties over the fluid status system and the increasingly difficult ladder of success in Ming-Qing Jiangnan.

Xiaoqing as Victim of Jealous Wife

Jealous wives abound in Chinese history, yet they seem particularly potent in the urban culture of seventeenth-century Jiangnan, where the issue of female jealousy fascinated both popular writers and serious thinkers. Yenna Wu has shown that the theme of marital strife between shrewish wives and henpecked husbands reached the peak of its popularity in the seventeenth century, when it “developed from a stock situation in jokes and anecdotes into full-blown comedy and satire.” My contention is that this interest in female jealousy, of which the appeal of Xiaoqing as a hapless concubine is one facet, is indicative of a heightened concern with a larger issue—women’s rightful place in family and society. “Jealous wife” was often a derogatory substitution for “assertive woman,” and the popularity of Xiaoqing’s image as the victim of jealousy signified mounting concern with strong and aggressive women in and out of the inner chambers.

In the Xiaoqing dramas, the portrayal of the heroine as a victim of jealousy was accompanied by two transformations not found in the earlier biographies. First, the wife appears not only as jealous but also spiteful, and
the husband is transformed from a timid scholar to a stupid and vulgar man— the stereotypic henpecked husband. Second, as a victim of jealousy, Xiaqoq is rewarded with various forms of life after death.

The coupling of female jealousy with spite was expressed most succinctly by the author of *Jealousy-Curing Soup* (Liaodu ying): “Only those [women] who are spiteful are jealous; only those who are jealous are spiteful.” In *The Garden of Romance*, the husband is made to unwrap the wife’s foot-bindings and fetch water to wash her feet, the ultimate symbol of subjugation and humiliation. The wife boasts of her ability to “strike him and curse him whenever I want.” In *Shadows on Spring Waves*, the wife takes comfort in the thought that even “men as strong as iron and stone are no match for women as wicked as snakes and scorpions.” In *Jealousy-Curing Soup*, the analogy is highlighted by the jealous wife sending poison to Xiaqoq’s sickbed in the guise of medicine.

Xiaoqoq’s benevolent friend, Madame Yang, is a contrast to the jealous wife and personifies the traditional notion of ideal womanhood. She is kind, an efficient household manager, and, most important, tolerant. She tells the jealous wife in *The Garden of Romance*: “The taking of concubines is natural to human nature. You should accept her to show the generosity of your spirit.” In *Jealousy-Curing Soup*, Madame Yang herself is eager to find a decent concubine for her husband, because the couple is childless. In the end, Madame Yang arranges to make Xiaoqoq her husband’s concubine. As a result, both bear children to the son; the jealous wife repents and everybody praises Madame Yang’s virtue.

As it to compensate for Xiaoqoq’s suffering in real life, all the Xiaoqoq dramas reward her with miraculous happy endings. In *Shadows on Spring Waves*, she escapes the wheel of karma and becomes the disciple of a divine nun, the same nun who met Xiaoqoq when she was nine and recommended illiteracy as her salvation. Other dramatists portrayed Xiaoqoq as an aspirant of true love. In matches preordained in heaven, she finally marries deserving men. Here, the Xiaoqoq dramas merge with the genre of the “scholar-beauty romances.” Still other dramatists portrayed her as a fairy from heaven, who returns there after an interlude of earthly suffering.

In all these dramas, the male author’s sympathy clearly lies with Xiaoqoq, and his condemnation of the jealous wife is unequivocal and total. To be sure, the stark contrast between the jealous wife and the henpecked husband on one hand and the benevolent Madame Yang and Xiaoqoq on the other may be overdrawn for dramatic effect. Moreover, depictions in drama do not necessarily represent the authors’ views, let alone reality. They do, however, serve as indicators of common fears and shared stereo-

The ethereal Xiaoqoq: in the fantastic ending of *Shadows on Spring Waves*, Xiaoqoq attains eternal happiness. The divine nun comments: “People think that Xiaoqoq is anguishing in the underworld; little do they know that you are wandering freely in the three mystical islands” (Xu Yejun, Chunbo ying, frontispiece).
types; they illuminate as well the lines of cleavage in a debate on the position of women in and out of the family. Enacted in the form of essays, jottings, vernacular stories, and dramas, this discourse on jealousy and concubinage is indicative of a sense of malaise felt by those who saw the gender hierarchy and familial order eroding. Disorder in the boudoir spelled disaster for harmony in the political realm. An overdose of yin power spilling out from the inner chambers was about to turn the world upside down.

Man, Wife, and Concubine: Discourse on Female Jealousy

The very visibility of women in the culture and society of Jiangnan struck many contemporary observers as menacing. Joanna Handlin-Smith argues that scholar-officials like Lu Kun were at once impressed and troubled by the strength of women participants in rebellions and cult movements in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They thus became conscious of the growing power of women and sought ways to cope with it. Most indicative of this recognition is a plan of militia mobilization drawn up by the Huizhou literatus Jin Sheng (1598–1643) in which he recommended that women and girls be instructed in street fighting to defend themselves and their native place. Although this plan, formulated in 1636, was never fully executed, it bespeaks the disarray in gender roles and social order. In this atmosphere of impending doom, the jealous wife stood as a metaphor for the powerful and assertive woman who threatened public order even as she was being called upon to defend it. Signs of trouble were found at the core of family relations. The writer Li Yu made similar observations about women's power in the domestic realm. Li, who had many concubines and thus showed no sympathy for female jealousy, lamented:

In the past, the most that a jealous wife would do to subdue her husband was to force him to kneel, to forbid him to sleep, to have him hold the lamp or fetch water, or to strike him. But recently, there are jealous and ill-tempered women who lock themselves up and go on hunger strikes. Trying to shift their anger onto others, they make their family feel guilty by having them watch their dying acts. There is another type of jealous wife who no longer resorts to force or traps. She is tolerant and generous. Her husband, subdued by the power of her evenhandedness, volunteers to send the concubines away. Isn't it true that even within the inner chambers, there is always something new under the sun?

The behavior of such “jealous and ill-tempered women” resembles the portrayal of the wife in the Xiaoqing dramas, suggesting that the coupling of jealousy and spite in these dramas was rooted in observations of actual behavior.

Another indication of increasingly aggressive female behavior lies in the flood of teachings against it. Didactic literature for women in Ming and Qing times was vehement in its condemnation of jealousy. The Book of Filial Piety for Women (Nü xiaoqìng), for example, taught that “there is no greater sin than jealousy” and reiterated the warning that jealousy was the first of seven reasons for a divorce. Similarly, the Instructions for the Inner Chambers devoted one chapter to admonishing the wife to be kind to all her husband's concubines. “For female behavior is distinguished by its tolerance and discredited by its jealousy.” If the wife did not suppress her jealousy, she endangered her place in the family hierarchy. It is clear to us that such teachings, in pitting wife against concubines, were intended to serve the interest of the husband.

From the wife's perspective, the behavior men branded as "jealous" was often the last resort in a struggle to keep a wayward husband in check and to maintain control over household management. The legal system offered wives little protection from the intrusion of concubines. Nominally, the Ming statutes stipulated that commoner men could take a concubine only if they were over 40 and had no son. Offenders were to be punished by 40 lashes. This was, however, seldom enforced.

In the statutes, concubines were conditioned as potential bearers of sons who could rescue a dying family line. The same view was reflected in the compilation of genealogies. Some clans or lineages allowed concubines to be entered in the genealogy only if they bore children; some included them if they were brought in because the first wife was barren. The character of Madame Yang, the ideal wife, in Jealousy-Curing Soup, personifies this position. Not being able to produce a son, she volunteers to travel to Yangzhou to procure a concubine for her husband.

Some men supported strict regulation of concubinage as specified in the legal codes to uphold harmony in the household. Their argument was that “if the number of concubines and maids is not regulated, sons and daughters would be born without proper order. Each woman would favor her own, resulting in differences [in treatment]. If not regulated by the rites, estrangement will arise. Many will neglect their filial duties; the unfilial will stir up dissension.” In other words, they saw controlled concubinage as essential to the maintenance of hierarchy in the family. This, like the condemnation of jealousy in the moral instruction books, reflects the interest of the male head of household.

However, such regulations were by and large ignored by men themselves in the seventeenth century, when concubinage was rampant in scholar-official and merchant families. Procreation had little to do with it. Concubines like Xiaoqing were bought as objects of pleasure or companions for male devotees of qing. The words of Li Yu are more useful than legal stipulations in explaining men's behavior in this regard:
Marrying a wife is like investing in an estate. Only the five grains should be planted in its fields, and only ramie and mulberry should be planted as trees. Any growth that simply looks good should be weeded and discarded, because one has to depend on it for subsistence, and the resources from the land are limited. Buying a concubine, however, is like nurturing a garden. Flowers that bear seeds and those that do not can be planted just the same. Trees that give shade and those that do not are just as good. For they are intended for pleasure. What is planted is for the ear and the eye, not for the mouth and belly.132

Against husbands who bought concubines for pleasure, wives had little recourse but their own wits. The increasingly assertive female behavior observed by writers like Li Yu was in part a reaction to rampant concubinage. Xie Zhaozhe, author of a sixteenth-century compendium of social customs, Five Miscellanies (Wuzaozi), observed: "It is hard to meet even one beautiful woman these days, but households are flooded with jealous women. By the same token, gentlemen are few but mean people are many. In Jiangnan [female jealousy] is particularly severe in Xin'an; in Fujian it is worst in Pucheng. For [jealousy] is practiced in the household."133 The author was a native of Fujian and had visited Xin'an and recounted tales of jealous women there.

Observers who reported the conspicuous presence of jealous wives in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries alluded to larger historical circumstances, notably the social and moral upheavals engendered by the monetary economy, to account for this upsurge. This awareness that jealousy resulted from forces larger than the female psyche was often expressed in terms of a comparison between Ming-Qing society and that of the Southern and Northern Dynasties (A.D. 215–587), a period known as the heyday of jealous wives.134 In both periods, these writers charged, assertive wives lured it over their husband to advance the interests of their powerful natal family. The jealous wife was thus at once cause and symptom of social disorder and moral degeneracy.

The discussion of female jealousy in the Ming-Qing period, in fact, was couched in terms of an ancient lexicon codified in the Southern and Northern Dynasties period. For example, the title of the popular Xiaqing play, Jealousy-Curing Soup, refers to a soup concocted from oriole meat for an empress of Southern Liang dynasty who was sick from jealousy. The potion reduced her jealousy by half but left spots on her face.135

The similarities between the debates on jealousy in the Northern and Southern Dynasties and Ming-Qing times are highlighted in a petition by an official in the Northern Wei court for the establishment of state-sanctioned concubinage. One passage adumbrates the arguments of Ming supporters of regulated concubinage: "People today have lost their sense of propriety. When fathers and mothers marry off their daughters, they teach them jealousy. When mothers-in-law and sisters meet, they encourage each other in envy. The subjugation of husbands becomes a female virtue; the ability to be jealous becomes women's work." The official saw jealousy as disrupting the rites governing the husband's relationship with his wife and concubines. The disruption, he feared, would lead to adultery and lewdness. To combat jealousy, he recommended a system of assigning a fixed number of concubines according to the husband's official rank.136 This petition clearly saw jealousy as a weapon with which a wife could subdue her husband and protect her own family's interest.

In the Northern Wei as in Ming-Qing times, the jealous wife often acted in concert with her natal family. Strife between the husband and wife could thus spill out of the boudoir and become mired in family rivalries. The early Qing writer Chen Yuanlong (1632–1736) thus described the jealous wife: "In times of strife, she could always marital her influential clan against the husband; by plotting incessantly against him at home, she thwarted his amatory adventures and made for him a bed of thorns" (italics added).137 As families became locked into competition for limited resources and prestige, women—as daughters and wives—were often powerful players despite their marginal positions in the official kinship system.

A twentieth-century scholar argues that two factors accounted for the widespread jealousy in the Northern and Southern Dynasties: a breakdown of the moral fabric due to political chaos and the system of ranking families according to their wealth and power. Daughters from wealthy families could lord it over their husbands.138 Both conditions were also present in the commercialized areas in the seventeenth century. The author of Five Miscellanies affirmed the correlation between the degree of moral control in society and female assertiveness: "There were few jealous women in the Song, for both moral teachings and family instructions were strict then. In our [Ming] dynasty jealous women are too many to be counted."139 The strife inherent in the man-wife-concubine triangle is thus symptomatic of the social transgressions at large that ensued from a monetarized economy.

In short, attitudes toward female jealousy were gender-specific. Male authors and readers sympathetic to Xiaqing as a victim of a jealous wife were motivated by the same set of values upheld by men who bought concubines as objects of pleasure. Their condemnation of female jealousy converged with their defense of the power of the patriarch, often in the name of the "traditional moral order." It is therefore not surprising that male scholars who championed greater freedom for women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries took the side of jealous wives. For example, Yu Zhengxie (1775–1840), who also condemned footbinding, female
infanticide, and widow suicide, argued that jealousy was merely the natural response of wives to husbands who took concubines.148

Women's sympathy for the jealous wife, in turn, accounts for the cold shoulder they turned to the Xiaoqing plays. Although many delighted in reading Xiaoqing's verse and wrote poems in her memory, they did not share men's condemnation of the jealous wife. Women failed to be moved by the Xiaoqing plays because these works reflect the public concerns and private fears of men. The dearth of women's comments on the plays contrasts sharply with their enthusiasm for Xiaoqing's poetry and their craze for Du Liniang.

Whereas devotees to Du Liniang modeled their lives after hers, readers of the Xiaoqing story used her as a negative example. A fourteen-year-old peasant girl from the countryside west of Yangzhou city, for example, was a maid in a wealthy household. She was taught how to read and write poetry and gained a reputation as a talented woman in her neighborhood. A rich merchant wanted to take her as a concubine. She refused, saying: "I don't want to be another Xiaoqing." Her master then proposed to marry her to a peasant. She refused as well, saying: "I can't be another Shuangqing." He Shuangqing allegedly was a peasant girl, and poems attributed to her were circulated by literati men as a curiosity. The double burden of working in the fields and writing proved too taxing, however, and she died young from overwork. In the end, this Yangzhou peasant girl stayed single and devoted her time to poetry until her death at the age of seventeen.149

Female readers of the Xiaoqing legend saw her as the really was—a concubine bought and sold as property. They responded to her literary image as a successor to Du Liniang, an aspirant of true love, only against the stark reality of her marriage, one over which she had little control. Male writers, on the other hand, transformed Xiaoqing's image as a proponent of true love into a purely romantic one. Furthermore, when they portrayed her as a victim of female jealousy, they defended the system of concubinage that was the root of Xiaoqing's misfortune.

The Cult of Qing and Gender Relations

In this chapter, I have analyzed the cult of qing in both its romantic and its stark aspects and distinguished between the male and female readings of the cult. I conclude with some general observations on the implications of the cult for the gender system. Similar to the spread of moral precepts and anthologies of women's verse, the cult of qing carried ambivalent implications for gender relations and the lot of women. The rise of women who read and wrote, and the cult of qing they helped perpetuate, created a new space in which some women enjoyed augmented freedom and fulfillment. These changes, however, did not challenge the basic premise of the gender system in the seventeenth century—the male/female distinction as a descriptive and prescriptive doctrine.

It is tempting to exaggerate the potential of the cult of qing as a gender equalizer. Narrowly focusing on romantic love, scholars have usually rendered qing as "love" and suggested that the idea of reciprocal love heralded a more symmetrical relationship between men and women. Although concrete examples of such golden couples abound, the overall impact of the cult on gender relations is not so straightforward. This ambiguity is partly due to the fact that the meaning of qing to a seventeenth-century reader was much broader than romantic love, encompassing friendship between people of the same sex and other human relationships.143 Another difficulty is that the cult of qing was not a unified body of doctrine. Some writers upheld qing as an equalizer between the sexes; others celebrated it as the marker of more distinct male and female domains.

Emphasis on matters of the heart brought the concerns of men closer to the traditional prerogatives of women. As such catchwords as qing and resonance gained currency, more men came to value women as emotional companions, either inside or outside the bounds of arranged marriage. Hence the seventeenth century witnessed both a rising incidence of companionate marriages and an elevation of courtesans, brothel culture, and concubinage. Both were results of men's search for intimacy and emotional fulfillment. In this sense, the cult of qing enabled some women to lead fuller lives and was conducive to a new perception of women as intelligent beings and natural writers. In itself, however, it did not challenge gender stereotypes—woman as an emotional and temperamentally sexual. In fact, the cult of qing often reinforced the traditional identification of women with nature and the domestic, although these attributes were valued more highly than before.

The very definition of womanhood was debated and the existing understanding of sexual differences reconsidered, but the results were often new gender stereotypes or a reaffirmation of old ones. For example, Shi Chengjin (1659–ca. 1740), a prolific Yangzhou vernacular writer, opened one story with a popular saying: "Although man and woman are different, in love and desire they are the same" (nannü sìyu, aiyu zetong). That is, the search for emotional and physical gratification is basic human nature. Qing, in this sense, is a leveler between the two sexes. Shi, however, by no means implied that men and women are equal or identical. He went on to note: "Women are born with a nature like flowing water. Even when a young woman pairs up with a young man, her heart can still be seized by the seduction of someone romantic and handsome, let alone a young..."
woman marrying an old man. He would not be able to please her, nor to satisfy her sexual desire.\textsuperscript{143} The term flowing water refers to a woman’s changeable nature, especially in sexual matters. Here, Shi echoed a popular view of women as insatiable, hence dangerous for the weak-willed man. Unlike many writers, however, Shi implied that a wife’s sexual needs should be satisfied as much as possible.

The moral of this story is that an old man should never take young concubines, even if he enjoys the pleasure or wants a son. In a separate essay, Shi lectured on the evils of concubinage in general, calling it a “major, unforgivable sin.” He reasoned that many wives are by nature jealous and have no stomach for sharing a husband with other women. Such wives, he observed, often starved and tortured the concubine, their henpecked husbands too meek to intervene. Shi reluctantly conceded that only if a man is without a son and his wife consents to it could he take a concubine.\textsuperscript{144}

Shi’s stance on marriage and concubinage appears to be more sympathetic to women than that upheld by male authors of the Xiaoging lore examined above. In acknowledging that women are entitled to sexual fulfillment as much as men, Shi introduced an element of symmetry in gender relations. His argument against concubinage, too, was conducive to a more equal relationship between husband and wife. Yet ultimately, his view of women being intrinsically lustful served to reinforce gender stereotypes instead of challenging them. In spite of, or because of, a new emphasis on qing, the age-old persona of the femme fatale was all the more vivid in the eyes of some men—overly sentimental and oversexed, women still posed a constant threat to men of weak will.

Against this familiar image of the femme fatale, the image of Du Liniang is suggestive of new opportunities for women in the urban culture of seventeenth-century Jiangnan. The educated, sensuous, and truthful heroine of The Peony Pavilion personified the cult of qing fanned by the publishing industry and theater culture. She became the model and inspiration for countless women who saw in her hopes for their own futures. To them, love, talent, and virtue were all noble pursuits, perfectly compatible with a woman’s conventional role as custodian of domesticity. Even the tragedy of Xiaoqing served to enhance the appeal of the romantic ideal of a love match, attractive exactly because of its unlikely attainability, in the young readers’ eyes.