Polygamy and Sublime Passion

Sexuality in China on the Verge of Modernity

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University of Hawai'i Press
Honolulu
Introduction

The Male Consort of the Remarkable Woman

The Regimes of Polygamy and Prostitution

Until the early twentieth century in China, the prominent man was someone who deserved multiple women. This privilege mainly took the form of polygamous marriage and the patronage of prostitutes, two closely linked practices that legitimized the man who consorted with multiple women. The ideal example of such a man handled himself well in both the household and the brothel, and then likewise in the social and political world outside these two realms. For a man to have multiple women, however, was not a simple given, but always had to be justified. The order or lack of it in sexual relations could never be solely in his hands, and he could never assume that his authority was automatically acceptable to his women and other men. Even under the constraints of the polygamous order, women knew how to exert control and create status for themselves, while men on their part had elaborate fantasies about the power of women. Polygamy and prostitution were collective social formations that, in spite of their strict hierarchies, were shot through and through with struggle and interdependence and that addressed fundamental antagonisms of the sexual relation in serious and constructive ways.¹

The central historical question of this book is how the dominant sexual regime of polygamy met its first stages of paradigmatic change in the nineteenth century, decades before the legal abolition of polygamy in the next century. No single word stands for both polygamy and prostitution, but I let polygamy sometimes stand for both, and I coin polygamist-phalanderer to name the prominent man who had a main wife and one or more concubines and who also associated with expensive prostitutes. During the late Qing, China was just entering the scene of global modernity and beginning to define itself as a new nation among nations. Polygamy played a substantial role in this transition, although it has been drastically overlooked because of its marginalization in modern times as a backward and feudal practice. It was, however, a core feature of the master male's identity. It was a repository of cultural essence that at the end of the imperial era faced impend-
ing doom, for the decline of dynastic China was also tantamount to the decline of the polygami-st Philanderer. It matters little that relatively few men ever had concubines (probably never more than about 10 percent of men could afford to do so) or patronized high-class prostitutes. Polygamy was nevertheless the super-
ior goal toward which the successful man tended, while monogamy was for the rest—except the large numbers of poor men whose prospect was no marriage at all. What the privileged few desired constituted the supreme model by virtue of its prominence through millennia of history and by virtue of the socially productive effects of that prominence. Those effects included the market in women, who were bought and sold as maids, concubines, and prostitutes according to economic and aesthetic standards that determined the hierarchy among them. As it had been for millennia, among the relatively small group of polygamists was always the emperor, who as we see today was buried in the same tomb, sometimes the same chamber, alongside his empress ⟨hou⟩, that is, his main wife, and consorts ⟨fei⟩, his concubines. Just that one man is enough, I insist, to name polygamy as the domin-
ant sexual regime.

Fictional, historical, and biographical literature projects an image of the mas-
terful polygamist who wins the loyalty and harmonious service of multiple women. My approach to the fantasies of this literature, fiction in particular, is to empha-
size not the masterful male, however, but the persistent theme of female agency, which I will examine in terms of a figure I generalize as the "remarkable woman." She defines female agency both within and outside the context of polygamy and prostitution. The temporal focus will be on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which I call the verge of modernity. Female agency is especially clear in an age-old motif that emerges in the late Ming and again in the late Qing: female heroism in times of male failure, weakness, and despair. In dire times like these the man depends on the heroic woman for direction and self-definition, and they become involved in a love affair between just the two of them, which I label with the term "sublime passion." The man in this instance is what I will call the male consort of the remarkable woman, the paradoxical obverse of the master polyga-
mist and his main wife, concubine, or prostitute. The accurate outline of polygamy and prostitution only emerges in subcurrents like this one, in which some form of female agency takes shape, or like the recurring scenario that I will call "passive polygamy," in which the polygamist is a passive and deferential husband whose remarkable women create and manage his polygamy for him. In this instance, the man and his multiple women act as if polygamy is as much for the women's ben-
et as the man's, if not more so. As if to apologize for and justify the existence of polygamy, passive polygamy is a contradictory compromise between polygamous mastery and the themes of sublime passion and the remarkable woman. It assumes male centrality while paradoxically fantasizing that the woman is not only a will-
ning participant but also an active agent. Passive polygamy permeates Qing fiction and is a fundamental sign of the fact that polygamy was never a simple given but always incorporated behavior that compensated in direct and indirect ways for male privilege and its inequalities.

Numerous recent studies have revised blanket notions about a core set of Chi-
inese phenomena that had previously been vilified as signs of traditional Chinese decadence and degradation, including opium smoking, footbinding, the connais-
sseurship of courtesans and boy female impersonators, and polygamy and concubini-
age. As the modern Chinese nation began to take shape, these signs of backward-
ness were supposed to disappear. In each case, however, we can go back and read them alternatively as signifiers of a type of cultural identity faced with extinction. Each in its own way embodied a precious essence that would soon be lost forever. The opium smoker was the last loose-robed, reclining Chinese in contrast to the tight-fitted, fast-paced Westerner. The peaceful addict was the last contemplator of human history as it hurtled toward industrialized modernity. The bound-footed woman stood for China's purity and sovereignty in an age of turbulence. She was an ideal woman in contrast to the grotesquely masculine Western one. It was likewise with the polygamist-Philanderer and his multiple women, who in cer-
tain works of late-Qing literature embodied the highest values of romantic love in an empire in crisis. To reexamine these supposedly backward characters is not to promote a kind of antimodernism, but to put them back into a dynamic whole in which they cannot easily be made obsolete or outmoded. The roles of the polyga-
mist-Philanderer and the main wife, concubine, and prostitute had a formative effect upon the entire field of sexual relations as China approached the verge of modernity. Whatever was on the verge did not simply disappear afterwards. It is especially revealing to consider how women exercised agency on their own and as partners of men, hence the emphasis on the remarkable woman as a model of feminine subjectivity that applies to both women and men. Agency, however, must be understood in a special sense that comes across in sources overwhel-mingly written by men (the contrast with female-authored works will be saved for my conclusion) and that I will begin to discuss after first defining the concept of Chinese polygamy that will apply throughout this book.

Chinese Polygamy

It is necessary to examine the basic terminology of Chinese polygamy and briefly place this social formation within the broader context of marriage in general in China and in the context of polygamy worldwide. The word polygyny (one man, many wives) is more accurate than polygamy (one individual, many spouses), though both imply that the multiple spouses are equal in status, which was not
the case in China; I will nevertheless use both terms interchangeably. Concubinage is useful because it takes into account the critical distinction between a wife and a concubine, who could be acquired and expelled far more easily than a wife. The word "philanderer" is also useful because it names the man—in this book in particular, the patron of the elite prostitute—who is not necessarily married to the woman he has sex with. Terms for polygyny and concubinage in modern Chinese include yifu duogi, "one husband, many wives," which like polygyny is technically incorrect since the central model in China was to have only one wife, qi. Another term is qigie zhidu, the "institution of wife and concubines," which comprehends the strictly lower status of concubines, called qi (among numerous other terms). Standard marriage was between one man and woman of roughly the same social status who ideally stayed together until death; polygamy built on top of that by adding concubines. In this book polygamy or polygyny often stand in a broad sense for both marital and nonmarital relations, even including in chapter 3 the man who has sex with boys. The idea of potential polygamist or prepolygamist is also relevant, since adolescent males of elite families were expected to be polygamists as adults, hence the fact that elders supplied the young Jia Baoyu with a maid as a possible sexual partner in the famous eighteenth-century novel Dream of the Red Chamber (Hong Lou Meng).

Calling polygamous marriage a dominant regime must further address the fact that it was mainly available only to elite and wealthy men, who were a small minority of the total Qing population. Monogamy was the practice of the vast majority of people, while the large surplus of single men, as I have said, meant that marriage of any sort was unattainable to them. Studies of Qing China have revealed a "skewed sex ratio" between men and women by the mid-eighteenth century, which meant that there was a shortage of women available as wives for poor rural men. One solution to this imbalance was polyandry, which Matthew Sommer has argued was more widespread than polygyny. Although it was likewise a minority practice, polyandry occurred in many forms, its two main categories being that in which a husband and wife of poor means arranged for the wife to sleep with other men for income, thus engaging in a form of prostitution, and that in which a poor, invalid husband or a poor husband with no sons contracted with a single outside man who moved into the household, shared the husband's wife, and supplied the family with his labor, income, and offspring. Although population numbers for single men and people engaged in monogamy and polyandry threaten to trivialize the topic of polygyny, the phenomenon of polyandry in fact helps clarify the pyramid-like structure of sexuality in late-Qing China. The key feature of polyandry versus polygyny is their lack of symmetry in that polyandry was not a sort of fair and just rebalancing of the phenomenon of polygyny. Polyandry was a strategy of survival driven by downward mobility and, though widely practiced and accepted, was never an exemplary model. A man did not enhance his masculinity by allowing another man to share his wife, and in the cases Sommer cites, women did not initiate or welcome the second husband. Polyandry grew out of a husband's economic and physical weakness, and to the Qing authorities was an "evil custom" that was strictly illegal and that those engaged in it always sought to hide from official eyes. Even though polygyny often gave rise to moral disapproval, and was met with resistance from women, it was a sign of prestige and was fully sanctioned by law and ritual custom.

The practice of patronizing courtesans was closely linked with polygamy. Men bought concubines from the brothel and associated with courtesans on a long-term basis, treating them like temporary concubines. Courtesans and concubines were similar in status in that normally neither could become a main wife (even if a man's main wife died). Courtesans nevertheless acquired an aura of otherworldliness that distinguished them from the women of the polygamous household, a topic to be discussed in chapter 3. The theme of the male consort of the remarkable woman plays itself out elaborately in important late-Qing works in which the polygamist-philanderer seeks self-definition through his affair with the courtesan-prostitute. I use the words courtesan and prostitute interchangeably, where courtesan connotes the elevated status of the patron and the brothel, while prostitute, the lower-class word, persistently recalls the sexual relation and the financial transactions and calculations that occur between the customer, the seller, and her managers. No one word covers the man who is both polygamist and patron of prostitutes, thus the combined term polygamist-philanderer. Furthermore, polygamists did not necessarily frequent brothels, nor were patrons of courtesans necessarily polygamists. The most important factors joining the two practices of polygamy and patronage of prostitutes were the overlap in social status between concubines and prostitutes and the fact that both were bought and sold in the service of polygamy and prostitution.

I need also to note that my use of the term polygyny is a far cry from the sense used by anthropologists and sociologists who primarily study polygyny in the agricultural or hunting and fishing societies of sub-Saharan Africa, the Islamic world, and elsewhere. They conduct cross-cultural investigations of past and current societies to discover what factors "predict" or go strongly together with polygyny. These factors include such things as the economic value of women, the relative educational level and social rank of both men and women, and their occupations or modes of subsistence. Two broad types appear frequently in this research: polygyny with co-wife autonomy and separate habitations for the man and his wives, and polygyny in which the husband and kin-related wives cohabit. There are numerous other factors and variations. Co-wife autonomy is related to the phenomenon of female participation in subsistence activities, to the point that
wives increase the man’s wealth or at least do not deplete it, unlike the model of cohabitation in which polygyny is costly to the man, as in the Chinese case.6

The polygynists I study roughly correspond to the model of polygynous cohabitation. They are prominent men in the form of prestigious merchants and literati, which vernacular fiction portrays prolifically.7 According to prescriptive norm, Chinese men should take a concubine only to produce a male heir, thus valuing the woman by paying the appropriate price for her childbearing capacities. But although producing sons is a kind of subsistence activity, polygyny in Ming and Qing sources is in general vastly different both structurally and spiritually from the type of peasant polygyny primarily studied by sociologists and anthropologists. It mainly has to do with a man exercising privilege and prestige and, if possible, enjoying the sexual pleasures of having many women. My use of the term not only leaves peasant polygyny entirely behind, but also bends the conventional anthropological meaning by including the behavior of the man who seeks relationships with prostitutes. My definition, in short, is that a man is a polygynist simply because he is expected and allowed to have multiple sexual partners, regardless of whether he necessarily marries those with whom he has sex.

Female Agency in Polygamy

As for the topic of female agency in polygamy, “agency” as I use it must be divorced from the meaning that implies notions such as “empowerment” or “self-determination.” The agency I am talking about takes place within the framework of a forced choice. Simply put, women have no choice but to submit to the order of polygamy. But within that order they exert influence and engage in struggle, while men on their part are not uniformly masterful and lead lives based on elaborate fantasies of female power. Women channel men’s decisions and emotions, prop up or defuse men’s self-image, and exercise control over selection of concubines and maids. The emphasis on female agency means that the construct of women as objects of male desire, however basic it may be, should not lead to the presumption that women are somehow tricked into the male fantasy as if they have no will of their own or as if the man is somehow purely, knowingly, and consciously in charge. Both men and women are caught in these fantasies, in which they play both subjective and objective roles and which they sometimes reverse, remold, and escape. The social formation of polygamy is ultimately bigger than the individuals involved. My focus is on the reality of such sexual fantasy mainly as transmitted in fictional texts written by men but in a few cases by women, whose characters, plots, motifs, vocabulary, and other thematic elements are my central materials. Even in the case of the biographical and autobiographical sources, whether by men or women, my emphasis is on sexuality as structure of fantasy. Shared by all subjects, the fantasy is something in which the sheer recurrence of patterns and themes, norms and exceptions is of prime importance. These are my numbers and case studies, from which I read the conscious and especially unconscious structure of sexuality in China up to the verge of modernity in the late Qing.

My method for analyzing polygamy as a collective social formation is to contrast what I call the classic polygamous love story with two main counter-narratives that depart from the portrayal of the potent polygamous philanderer. The master story is about a man who has sexual liaisons with a series of prostitutes and good women, most of whom he marries in the end in a grand polygynous marriage. This type of narrative, the classic polygamous love story, began to appear in fictional works in literary language in about the mid-Ming.7 Of the two counter-narratives, one is that of sublime love in which there is a tortured affair between two people. The other counter-narrative is the story of passive polygamy mentioned above. Both are subordinate and secondary to the main, classic narrative, and bow to the central notion that pleasure is primarily defined in terms of the male claim to polygamy. Sublime love resides in the realm defined by the term qing, which I translate as sublime passion and which embodies a form of feminine subjectivity that shuns the world of promiscuous male sexual drive. Passive polygamy, as I have said, is a compromise formation that in contradictory fashion combines elements of both master polygamy and the aesthetics of sublime passion. That is, it continues to enforce polygamy while appropriating elements of the qing aesthetic such as the gentle, feminized man who never initiates concubinage and around whom remarkable women voluntarily gather.

Later chapters will further describe female agency in polygamy, but suffice for now to say that such agency is also apparent in situations that occur completely outside or at the edge of polygamy in the figure of the remarkable woman. In quintessential form, she is the woman of the late-seventeenth-century Pu Songling’s tales of the supernatural, the subject of the next chapter, whose model of female subjectivity will be an analytic tool for the entire book. This woman decides whether and when to have a relationship with the man and is the definier of the relation of love between two individuals, which I roughly label as egalitarian love. Sublime passion can only take place between two people. It is the marginal, the extraordinary, and the heavily idealized, especially in the sense that love between two is by rule sublime and transcendent. As recurrently portrayed, it occurs in missed moments, it is ephemeral, it hardly happens, it doesn’t even happen, but it is profound and earthshaking. When it takes place in times of social and political turmoil, it defines lovers who experience the utmost willingness to die for each other and for loyalty to ultimate causes such as the threatened or falling dynasty.
The Psychoanalysis of Polygamy

Let me now engage in a temporarily deeper and theoretical consideration of Chinese polygamy, beginning with the example of the love story between man and prostitute in the last two decades of the Qing empire, the 1890s up to 1911. These stories culminate in a series of novels about prostitutes and their patrons in the flashy and bustling city of Shanghai. Accounts of street-smart Shanghai prostitutes fleecing gullible male patrons appear alongside accounts of anarchist-assassin-prostitutes who kill male leaders and force polygynists to liberate their concubines. What do these stories carry from earlier times as men and women become inhabitants of a new and foreign-run city like Shanghai, in an era flooded with ideas and disciplines from radically foreign sources, all of this taking place in a time of fundamental economic and cultural dislocation? This question is another version of the central topic of this book, how the regime of polygamous sexuality met its first stages of paradigmatic change at the end of the imperial era. The language of the rest of this chapter will be denser than usual, and signals an experimental use of Lacanian psychoanalysis to discuss sexuality in the late Qing. Although I will for the most part use psychoanalytic terms only here and in the conclusion, they will lurk beneath the surface and especially motivate the discussion of feminine subjectivity and the remarkable woman. Readers can, if they prefer, pass over this section and continue with the last three paragraphs of the chapter.

The answer to the above question about what these stories carry from earlier times begins with the polygynist who says that he is the master of all women, but one of whose women is always having an affair with another man—hence the late-Ming novel Golden Lotus (Jin Ping Mei), whose Pan Jinlian is the proof, as it were, of the uncontainable nature of the woman. This example crystallizes the way this book defines sexual difference in general, which on the female side has to do with the failure of any set of rules or terms to fully contain the woman. This failure in turn indicates her exclusion from the universal rule to which the man must submit in order to qualify as a man among men under the rule of the ultimate and exceptional man, the polygynist emperor. If calling the emperor a polygynist seems to exaggerate a mere aspect of his special status as son of heaven, then my response again is to insist on the centrality of that feature in the entire scheme of sexuality in this society and to insist on its contribution to the understanding of the transition to modernity. I define sexuality in a particular way that Lacanians refer to as the “radical antagonism between sex and sense.” Sex is never a simple case of biological or natural fact, nor is it simply a case of culturally constructed discourse, that is, “sense.” There is no sex apart from talking about sex, but sex nevertheless exists in the gaps where talking about it either can’t make sense of it or forces it to make sense. Forcing it to make sense means doing things like regulating social roles and sexual boundaries. “Gap” in this use of the word is best understood in terms of the basic notion of subjective gap or split, as in the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s notion of the “split subject.” This is a notion long in use and frequently defined and discussed, but hardly ever in reference to premodern China. Since it is fundamental to the thinking underlying this book, a brief review is necessary in order to establish its usefulness in this context. To say that the subject is fundamentally split is a way of referring to the impossibility of full and present self-consciousness of self-understanding. In simplest terms, there will always be a gap between what subjects think they know of themselves and what is hidden from them. The subject can only fantasize that “I am what I say I am.” The split or divided subject functions in the many ways in which people fail to grasp or coincide with themselves. This situation is often illustrated in terms of the gap between the “I” who speaks and the contents of the statement that is spoken, which in Lacanian terminology is the distinction between the subject of enunciation—the I who speaks—and the subject of the enunciated, that is, the statement. There is the empty I that is the subject of enunciation and there is the self of the statement that is part of concrete reality. Lacan and others use as example the statement of Descartes, “Cogito ergo sum,” “I think therefore I am,” where in Cartesian terms “I think” designates a pure transcendental point of self-consciousness apart from the real world. But there is in fact no way to say “I think” without attachment to the whole of concrete reality. Such a transcendental “I” is inherently inaccessible, and is only purely possible, never concretely real. The I is a pure void, an empty frame only knowable through the predicates that make up the contents of what the I thinks. I cannot acquire consciousness of myself except through the endless series of predicates and statements that fill out what the I thinks.

Sexuality is the effect upon the sexual subject of the gaps and impedes that define the split subject and that point in general to the failure of the social order as an order of universal inclusion. Sexuality is the “sign of a certain structural faultiness,” the effect of which is that it can never “find satisfaction in itself, because it never attains it goal.” The inherent faultiness of any social structure refers to the basic impossibility that any system—whether political, economic, religious, or kinship oriented—can shape order in a fully consistent way. No subject can be wholly spoken for by any social symbolic order, though some are always more at home than others. The fantasy of the harmonious polarity of yin and yang is the prime example of such an idealized sense of inclusion in terms of Chinese cosmology. The beauty-scholar romances (jiaren xiuzi xiaoshuo) of the seventeenth century portray this goal-attaining harmony through their fantasized ideal of symmetrical, conjugal love. Man and woman mirror each other in looks and attributes by having, for example, the same character in their names; or the man’s father is dead, as
is the woman's mother; or they exchange verse with matching rhymes. In what I am calling its most sublime form, however, love in terms of qing cannot entrust itself to such harmony. Instead, the central scene of sublime passion is one in which the perfect moment of love is always missed, as in Dream of the Red Chamber, Precious Mirror of Boy Actresses (Pinhua baqian), or Traces of the Flowery Moon (Huayue hen). The important point is that love is missed not merely because of external contingencies (the rules of arranged marriage, the pressure of social hierarchy, or bad karma), but because of the inherent nature of sexuality, which also means the inherently divided nature of the subject. The master philanderer is a good example of the split subject who denies that he is so, since he likes to be master of all women, like Ximen Qing in Golden Lotus. Although he likes to be master of all women, to repeat what I said above, one of his women is always having an affair with another man. The male consort of the remarkable woman embodies an alternate state of split subjectivity, especially as he identifies himself through the image of the talented woman, his romantic counterpart. Divided between his two cousins, Lin Daiyu and Xue Baochai, the young Jia Baoyu enacts another key scenario exposing the unconscious split that is inherent to polygynous mastery. He cannot marry the woman he loves, to whom he cannot even declare his love, nor can he marry both her and the woman his elders arrange for him to marry—though, as we will see in chapter 2, the idealizing sequels to Dream of the Red Chamber have him do so. Instead, he commits social suicide by becoming a monk because of the traumatic split he experiences between the two women.

If the example of the adulterous woman is the sign of the failure of universal, polygynist containment, then I define the man in turn as merely the concept or the thought of the totality of containment. That is, the totality or universe of men is a conceptual reality only. Any attempt to tie concept to reality—as in marrying one man to multiple women—involves the artificial construction of a set of master laws, which in this case amount to the symbolic order of polygamous sexuality. That order is inherently contingent and provisional, even if it held sway for thousands of years in China. It is inherently arbitrary and artificial because any attempt to tie concept to reality runs into the problem of the limitless and ungraspable series of particulars, just as happens in the case of the philandering man's affair with woman after woman, many but never all of whom he can ultimately contain. Another key notion of manhood as conceptual totality rests on the idea of the exceptional subject who observes the social whole from an external, universal position. Such an exception—the son of heaven, the polygnist, but also the ascetic monk or the polygynist warrior—in turn rests on the idea of an inherent, inaccessible essence that, as it were, magically constitutes the universal male master. In other words, the man is master because of a magical essence that he supposedly harbors that separates him from all others, especially women, but also inferior men (including, for example, the men who must resort to polyandry or who can never marry at all). The universe that he governs, moreover, is one that he gains by either possessing all women or by severing himself from them. The polygynist possesses all women; the ascetic monk and the misogynist warrior sever themselves from all women.

The male master as universal exception is an idea I borrow from Lacanian theory. To be "Lacanian," as I interpret it, is to occupy the position of the analyst, the fourth of his four discourses of subjectivity, which are also crucial to this discussion and are as follows: Master and University (which comprise the masculine pole), Hysterical and Analyst (which comprise the feminine pole). In particular, the analyst is one who, like a Zhuangzian Daoist, engages in the continuous exposure of the arbitrary and self-enclosed nature of the Confucian master's discourse. Lacan points out that in the paradigm-shifting passage from one discourse or social formation to another, the discourse of the analyst always emerges for a brief moment. He is referring to the moments in history in which one master regime gives way to another, during which the inherently arbitrary and contingent nature of any regime is at least briefly revealed. The aim of the analyst is to expose the master-signifier, that is, to make visible the "produced, artificial, contingent character" of every master signifier at any time. This moment of transition is especially apparent in the novels of the 1890s that take place in the international city of Shanghai and that feature the savvy prostitute who flees the gullible male patron.

As with split subject, many descriptions of the four discourses of subjectivity already exist, but it is necessary to describe them here in their bare minimum. Discourse in this sense is a structure that subsists in every speech act and human relation, and is fundamentally constitutive of the social order. It captures the subject both as speaking being and as object of the desire of others. The best example of the individual as object of the desire of the other is that of the child, who from birth is the object of the desire of parents and larger family, then society as a whole, including educational, religious, and legal and political forces. The position the subject occupies in relation to the desire of the other determines the way he or she experiences himself or herself and the surrounding world. As to Lacan's four discourses of subjectivity, the first is the discourse of the master, which assumes an autonomous and self-identical ego. The master acts as if there were no such thing as split subjectivity. He speaks from the position of a universalizing authority that at its ultimate expects unconditional obedience. His Law is the law because it is so, not because there have to be good reasons for it to be so. His followers—the "crowd"—are the ones who engage in the master's pedagogy, that is, the formulation and teaching of the master's rules. Lacan calls the crowd's discourse the University, which besides the educational system also includes such things as religion
and bureaucracy. The analyst illuminates what has been left out or excluded from the Master and University discourses. Contradiction, gaps in meaning, signs of anxiety and slippage, resentment, sense of alienation, and feelings of meaninglessness—all such things indicate what is left out and excluded. These signs are quintessentially apparent in the discourse of the hysterically. As a core model of the human subject in general, the hysterically is the inherently divided or split subject, the one who is fundamentally unable to grasp herself and to coincide with the way she is supposed to be—that is, the way the master tells her she should be. The hysterically is the protesting subject, the complaining subject, the resentful subject, or the one who feels guilt and shame and who is forever and inexplicably unable to conform and measure up. The hysterically both fails to satisfy the master and fails to be satisfied by the master’s demands. She doubts the master but, unless successful in overthrowing him, remains bound and beholden to the master’s rule. Hysteria is a feminine position, especially as found in a character like Lin Daiyu in Dream of the Red Chamber. But men also commonly occupy this position, thus the blank male in Pu Songling’s tales, Jia Baoyu in Dream of the Red Chamber, or the literatus-philanderer in Traces of the Flowery Moon of chapter 4 who, during the catastrophe of the Taiping rebellion, dies a loyalist love-death together with the heroic courtesan.

The advantage of Lacanian theory is that it compels us to focus on the dominant elements of a discourse, whichever mode may happen to dominate at a given moment, and to distinguish between the senders and receivers of the discourse (that is, the active and passive factors) and between the overt and covert (or latent, unconscious) factors. Any discourse contains repressed and unnamable elements and produces predictable and unpredictable expectations in the receiver. The hysterically, for example, addresses the master and demands an answer to a basic question: why do you expect me to be a certain way, and to play a certain role? Psychoanalysis is interested in the irrational, the paradoxical, the contradictory, the arbitrary nature of signification, and in general the unconscious effects that frame every conscious moment and structure. Psychoanalysis aims to “reduce[e] the privileges of the consciousness,” which it “regards . . . as irremediably limited.” The disadvantage of psychoanalytic terminology is that it can be heavy and hard going, and if narrowly used, it tends to reduce all phenomena to a single, static level. Another objection to psychoanalytic theory is its basis in modern European culture and the supposed violence of applying it not only to premodern cultures but non-Western ones. To this I reply that “master” orders and “hysterical” reactions to them, as well as “analytical” exposures of the master’s arbitrariness occur everywhere and in all ages. Nevertheless, terms like these become unwieldy and awkward-sounding when used in other social and cultural contexts, and synonyms can easily be found. For this reason, as I have said, I will indicate my indebtedness to psychoanalytic theory mainly in this chapter and my conclusion, and let the ideas that I am now discussing serve as the basic scheme that I will otherwise describe in terms closer to both the Chinese texts and the more widely used language of literary criticism in general.

This book’s focus on the role of the master polygynist is thus an example of the underlying influence of Lacanian theory without its being referred to each step of the way. The above statement about manhood as a conceptual totality rests on the basic idea of the masculine exception and upon the notion of the exception as that which constitutes totality from an external, universal position. The occupation of such a position only succeeds by an arbitrary act of exclusion and demarcation. It is normally socially prohibited to refer to the arbitrary nature of that exclusion, under which restraint and deprivation prevail for the rest of the men and women who lack the special quality of the master. Lacan never speaks about the master polygynist, but as a reference to the dominant male figure in the Chinese love story, it is as good a term as the Lacanian ones that stand for the same subject of the master discourse in other social and historical contexts. In a symbolic sense as played out in story after story in Ming and Qing China, both the remarkable woman—whether chaste-heroic or wanton-shrewish—and her male consort, the blank, feminized man, stand for the persistent questioning of the position of the master. The protesting woman in particular is as if to say that if there is one exception, that is, the male master, then his exceptionality should extend to her as well. She is as if to say that there is no one who is not exceptional, a key idea of the Lacanian theory of sexual difference. In other words, the man is a polygynist only because he is an accidentally successful impostor. But since the woman can’t effect a change in the social order by, for example, abolishing polygyny (though some female characters in Ming and Qing fiction imagine doing so), she can take the approach of appropriating the man’s exceptionality to herself. She does so, for example, by affirming his exceptionality as if she were the one who granted it to him. She chooses his concubines for him. Or, like Pan Jinlian, after discovering Ximen Qing’s secret affair with Li Ping’er, she will “allow” it, so to speak, if Ximen Qing promises to tell her about his visits with Li Ping’er and the nature of their sexual acts.

The man, however, may also occupy a feminine position whereby he strongly identifies with the woman. In Ming and Qing literature the woman he identifies with is the remarkable woman, whose counterpart I call the male consort. When the man consorts with the remarkable woman, he especially identifies with her sense of the impossibility of fitting into the social whole. He shares her “hysteria,” in other words. It is also the case, however, that the man may twist the fantasy of the remarkable woman in order to enhance his position as polygynist. As we will see in works like Courtesan Chambers (Qinglou meng) in chapter 5, he fosters
and enjoys the woman's weakness and softness, which still translate into her malplacement in the social order, but it is a mal-placement that contributes to her dependence upon the man. One of the most concrete illustrations of female dependence can be seen in the image of the bound-footed woman. Bound feet must in this case be seen in a special sense as a metaphor of the woman's need for the man. In this sense, the bound foot is the implantation in her body of the need for succor and fulfillment that only the man can deliver. It is as if the heroic man guarantees that the woman needs him by creating a deformity that only he can appreciate and repair. Deformity and deficiency in the woman but not the man are the reasons for which woman after woman needs him—hence the story of the polygamous and philandering man and his easy liaisons with woman after woman, the bevy of whom he gathers into a final marriage in which no woman is jealous and all sex is enjoyable. Polygamy is as much for the benefit of the women as the man. In the scenario of passive polygamy as perfected by the last century of the Qing, it is even the women who arrange and manage the marriage, not the man.

In general, talking about polygyny must take into account the fact that both men and women accepted it. It came to them from the distant past. It had an erotic tradition in the form of the art of the bedchamber. Women could play major and decisive roles in it even though they could hardly enjoy the social privileges of men. Egalitarian love in the form of sublime passion, as I have said, was a concurrent though subordinate trope that at times was appropriated by polygyny, and in general existed as a romantic fantasy with ghostly effects that persistently haunted polygyny. Polygyny also coexisted and drew sustenance from the sexuality of the brothel. When domestic polygyny was lackluster or too restrictive, or when the man was far from home, he went to the brothel, the women of which, he might hope, were the only ones truly to understand him.

The book begins with two chapters dealing with seventeenth- and eighteenth-century precedents of the late-Qing love story, especially concentrating on the notion of *qing* in the sense of sublime passion. The precedents constitute a sort of mythical foundation for the literary manifestations of polygamous sexuality in the last century of the Qing, which takes up the rest of the book. I divide my study into three phases: the late Ming—early Qing (chapter 1), the mid-Qing period just before the Qing decline becomes obvious (chapter 2), and the nineteenth century from the era of the Opium War (1839–1842) to the end of the Qing (chapters 3–9). At the end of the Qing in the third phase I present two contrasting portraits. One is about the love affair of the polygynist-philanderer and his remarkable women as a trope of cultural essence faced with extinction. The other is of polygyny in a reformist mode that is outrageously dismissive of *qing* egalitarianism and that insists that philandering polygyny is still the right path for the modern Chinese man.
Polygyny as a Structure of Feeling

When cultural reformists of the early 1900s declared fiction the ideal format for portraying models of China's new men and women, they did not have in mind the extremely popular *Nine-times Cuckold* (*jiuwei gui*, 1906–1910), by Zhang Chunfan (1873–1935). As in numerous other novels of the time, the focus was on men and prostitutes, as if to say that they constituted one of the chief arenas for witnessing what the new Chinese man and woman would look like. Since *Nine-times Cuckold* was a publishing success for decades to come, it must have struck a deep chord. Its fame is evidence of the continuing influence of polygyny as a social and cultural formation, in spite of the resistance of reformist politics. The 192-chapter novel twists reformism to its own purposes by portraying a polygynist-philanderer who fully answers the call of the times by insisting on the legitimacy of his form of sexual and romantic pleasure. The egalitarian man and woman sung of elsewhere at the time are absent. The hero's polygynous politics is both a correction of an old and faltering regime and a defiant demonstration against egalitarianism, which he implies can only worsen the already wanton and untamable Shanghai prostitute.

Since Qing fiction long linked successful polygyny with the reestablishment of mastery over chaotic reality, it is not surprising that *Nine-times Cuckold* identifies the success of the polygynist-philanderer as a nodal point in the transition to the new modern man in the form of its hero Zhang Qiugu (whose name is homophonous with "modeling after the ancient"). Nevertheless, by the early 1900s the blatant promotion of the philandering man should amount to a literary scandal. As already pronounced in fiction, essay, school textbooks, journalism, and public speeches, the true reformist mottoes of the day were monogamous marriage and equality between the sexes. Although legal measures to abolish polygamy were still decades away, abolitionism was in the air in the form of new models of women and men who married monogamously or, even more rebelliously in the case of new women, did not marry at all. Zhang Qiugu's self-confidence was scandalous because it carried no sense of obligation to the new-style women establishing themselves at the very same time. Zhang Chunfan serialized his novel during the same years in which the first cohort of girls and women of good family took relatively unsequestered life for granted. These were the years in which the Qing government first sanctioned schools for girls (1907), in which women had their first opportunity to study abroad under government sponsorship in Japan (1905) and the United States (1907), in which women gave public speeches and worked for newspapers promoting their very formation as new women, and in which biographies, translations, textbooks, and journalistic and fictional accounts apprised readers of the possibility of female independence. The correspondingly new man, both real and ideal, not only no longer took concubines, but actually admired and in some cases extolled the newly independent women who went to women's schools, studied abroad, worked for newspapers, became doctors, and entered politics as reformists, anarchists, and even assassins—all famous prototypes of the new woman in the early 1900s.

Of what relevance then is a novel like *Nine-times Cuckold*, which is not only devoid of these new women and men, but promotes what they would see as their domineeringly retrograde other? My point is that the shameless prostitute of *Flowers of Shanghai, Shanghai Splendor, Nine-tailed Fox* (*jiuwei hua*), and *Nine-times Cuckold*, among many others, coexisted with the new independent woman just as polygyny, concubinage, and prostitution were inextricably bound with the egalitarian formation that emerged at the same time. If we were to take the egalitarian man and woman as the representatives of new China to the exclusion of the polygynist-philanderer and the concubine-prostitute, we would be dismissing what continued to be productive forces in the formation of the supposedly liberated types. Productive in this sense refers to a structure of feeling that continued to form and influence the categories and roles of sexual behavior, including destructive and self-destructive behavior. It means the continuing effect of Zhang Qiugu the master philanderer's belief that women are always seducing men unless men acquire the skills of the master philanderer. The hierarchic principles of polygyny and concubinage, in other words, still dominated the late Qing in spite of the egalitarian ethic trying to prove them wrong. Although more study has to be done in order to better understand the gradual disintegration of polygyny after the end of imperial China, to acknowledge its dominance is to affirm the relevance of the roles of main wife, concubine, and prostitute—especially the wanton and savvy one from Shanghai—to the late-Qing discourse of modern femininity. Similarly, the scandalous and retrograde polygynist-philanderer still exerted an affective influence alongside the man struggling with egalitarianism. In short, any observation of the progress of egalitarianism and the independence of women
must inevitably take into account the process of remolding that the new man and woman had to undergo given the effects of the polygynous formation. Nine-times Cuckold demonstrates the stubborn appeal of the brazen polygynist, brandishing the notion that even he can turn into a modern Chinese man. If in fact the Chinese man doesn't make the switch to being a modern polygynist, the novel asserts, he will turn into his pathetic underside in the form of the dispirited man who loses in the Shanghai brothels because of the overwhelming power of the wanton prostitute. Han Bangzhe's Flowers of Shanghai and Li Boyuan’s 1899 Tracks of the Snowgoose (Haitian hongxue ji), both far less commercially successful, portrayed this man's profound failure, against which a novel like Nine-times Cuckold was so popular.

Whoring Aptitude and the Reformist Man

The unmelancholy man is the one who has a special aptitude for whoring, which Nine-times Cuckold proceeds to define at luxurious length, and who understands the psychology of the modern metropolitan prostitute, who according to Zhang Qiugu has sadly turned into an incorrigibly wanton woman. I will deal first with how we must precisely define the man’s aptitude and then, equally precisely, with how that man understands the psychology of the wanton woman, the word psychology having actually entered late-Qing parlance and even appearing in the novel itself (22.169).³

The novel’s general proposition is that Shanghai is where the best of Chinese men learn how to deal with the world as it has now become. The actual statement of this proposition, also found in Li Boyuan’s Tracks of the Snowgoose, is that Shanghai’s “world of whoring” (piaofie) is the equivalent to both the political “world of officialdom” (jinti de guanchang, 16.123) and the world in which the Chinese man must master “the tactics of foreign diplomacy” (waixiao shouduan).⁴ Zhang’s key word for capturing the qualities the man must have is gongjia, “skill and aptitude” (9.70). Such a man is a true “love genius” (fengliu cazai), a traditional label that now connotes a sense of maturity that distinguishes him from those still behaving in old-fashioned, grotesque, and boorish ways. He is a man with savoir faire, warm and understanding, with a wry sense of humor, who is never mean or unreasonable. He understands what the modern Shanghai woman wants, which means he has outgrown the old-fashioned man who expects the woman to understand him like a mother who naturally cleans up after his mess and cats to his slightest upset. Nor is he like the old-fashioned man who cav es in to the slightest upset of the petulant and overdemanding woman whom the man can never satisfy. If the savvy prostitute’s ultimate weapon is her persistent dissatisfaction with the man at all possible times, then the reformed man sees through her tricks and pro-
nounces his freedom. He replaces the out-of-favor patron who fails to realize that others are laughing at him, even when they do so to his face.

Zhang Qiugu thus declares the end of the male consort of the domineering woman. He subtly parallels that end with the end of the man who, like the one in another popular novel of the time, Flower in a Sea of Karma (Nietai hua, 1905–1907), fails to tame unruly foreign powers.⁵ In contrast to Flower in a Sea of Karma, however, Zhang Chunfan switches the battleground from that between imperial officials and foreigners to that between patron and prostitute. Victory is won not with weapons and diplomacy, but with the polygynous man’s masculine self-possession. Thus it is that we should view Zhang Qiugu’s supremacy over women and all other men. It is a supremacy that so overwhelms the woman that when she draws close to him, she loses her sense of self-possession, feeling “as if she had nowhere to put herself” (haoxiang yi ge shenti meiyou fangshou yiban, 27.205).⁶ A man who can accomplish this is a model for the China that needs to recover its true source of national strength.

The political message of the novel is thus a sexually political one that asserts two things: China needs men like Zhang Qiugu; and for there to be men like him, the first move must be to contain the unruly Shanghai prostitute. Accomplishing this goal relies on reasserting the notion that the woman needs to be strictly enclosed, even when she has achieved the unprecedented freedom to be seen in public. The sense of enclosure is apparent in the relation between Shanghai and the hinterland, especially cities like Suzhou, one of several in the lower Yangzi region legendarily known for providing men with beautiful prostitutes and concubines. Prostitutes in Nine-times Cuckold and other novels since the 1890s in fact speak primarily in Suzhou dialect, which at the time was perceived as enhancing a woman’s charm. The prostitute who finally proves virtuous is Chen Wenxian, whose wishes Zhang fulfills by marrying her and installing her in his Changshu home (not far from Suzhou) with his not-so-good-looking but loyal main wife. At this point Chen converts to speaking Mandarin, abandoning the seductive language she spoke as a prostitute.⁷ Zhang then returns from Changshu to Shanghai to resume his life of engaging beauty after beauty, each affair amounting to the containment of another woman. The state of being that Zhang’s aptitude finally represents is one of permanently floating from one woman to the next, maintaining a condition of geniulike readiness to enjoy himself at all times. Such readiness proves that he can prevail in the world as it has become at present (he becomes an official at the end of the novel, suggesting that he eventually has more to offer than being a master of the brothels). If he were transferred to Flower in a Sea of Karma, his containment of the wanton Shanghai prostitute would take the form of taming the wanton Fu Caiyun, whose affairs with multiple lovers was a female travesty of polygyny (I will return to her shortly).
Polygyny as structure of feeling thus centers on the man's larger-than-life insistence on enjoying himself in his state of permanent fluidity and readiness for romantic involvement. When Lu Xun calls this character a "genius plus hooligan" (caizi jia liumang) or when Hu Shi sums up *Nine-times Cuckold* by calling it a mere "guidebook to the brothels" (piaoqie shiman), they put their fingers on what they view as this man's shamelessness. But in dismissing the novel, they also emphasize the contrary message, namely, that Zhang's brazenness overflows in such a way as to constitute a countermannifesto to the program of the civilized, egalitarian new man. When *Nine-times Cuckold* equates the "world of whoring" with the "world of officialdom" and "foreign relations," it needs to be seen in light of the portrait of the Shanghai prostitute as recorded since at least 1892 in *Flowers of Shanghai*. The Shanghai prostitute now has become an ultimate decidcr of a man's worth in the new world represented by the great modern city. *Nine-times Cuckold* confirms this message, but instead of opting for the view that women have evolved beyond men, now supplies the reading public with an example of a man who finally overwhelms all savvy women and supersedes all foolish men. The novel's political message in brothel form, then, is that, while other men buy time with a prostitute who hardly if ever lets them in bed with her, Zhang Qiugu relies on innate genius to attract any woman he wants, spending a modest but not too little sum of money and in general always expanding upon his "canon of whoring" (piaoqinge). The main theme of that canon should always have been obvious, but in an age of turmoil it now needs urgent reiteration, namely, that the most masterful man is still the one who enjoys the most women.

The author nevertheless softens these brazen-sounding claims with a layer of qing decorum that makes Zhang Qiugu infinitely appealing and forgivable, hence, for example, his ability to enjoy ephemeral moments with women, even missed moments, as expressed in the allusion to a Tang poet evoking the "regret of missing the peach-blossom face" (renmian taohua zhi hen), from Cui Hu's (7~831) poem about a woman he once met and returned to look for but didn't find (22.164). Zhang's lightness of being amounts to a principle dictating limited duration with any one woman, a whole night or at most several weeks being as long as ephemeral eternity should last. In terms of descriptive detail, the ephemeral outweighs by far any reference to actual sexual activity, which finally occurs in the highly admurable passage in chapter 179 when Zhang sums up his version of the ancient philosophy of "Peng Zu's art of riding women." The man should be like a general who has to make a deep foray into enemy territory. The woman is like an immovable fastness, calm and easygoing, while the man is nervous and unsure. The man must have twice as much "power of attack" (gongzhandu) in order to win. But if he lacks that or if the woman is especially fierce, then he must use "special forces" (qiben), which amount to "teasing" (tiaodou) the woman until she burns with ardor and begs for battle (179.1164~1166). Zhang proves his mastery by attracting the most formidable prostitutes in Shanghai, the most formidable of all being the legendary Sai Jinhua, with whom he spends a stupendous night, after which he delivers the above discourse on the art of riding women.

As a historical person, Sai Jinhua was one of the most focal signifiers of the symbolic overlap between whoring and politics in the late Qing and early Republican. She already starred in *Flower in a Sea of Karma* in the form of Pu Caiyun, the prostitute-concubine who excelled her zhuangyuan (first in the imperial examinations) husband in mastering foreign languages and customs, thus becoming another symbol of the Chinese man's endemic failure to understand China's need to adapt. The legend of her intervention in affairs of state (especially her supposed romantic involvement with an influential German general) had it that she did more for China than the efforts of all its inept men. Appearing shortly after *Flower in a Sea of Karma*, *Nine-times Cuckold* engages in a provocation of the earlier novel's portrayal of Sai Jinhua by portraying her when she is past her prime, long after her legendary splash in the national and international realm. Now one of Zhang's most famous conquests, she appears in retrospect to have been a short-lived aberration.

In general, the same man who reinvents whoring aptitude is the one who exposes the foolishness of not only the old-fashioned Chinese man but the new student radicals who belong to the "new party" (xindang), which allies with foreigners to overthrow the Manchus (7.56). Zhang detests the pretenders of the party who return from study abroad in Western clothing spouting revolution, independence, and freedom. They criticize Chinese men for wasting their time with prostitutes instead of solving national problems, treating women like toys, and forcing women to bind their feet. When one of them pulls a gun on Zhang Qiugu, he simply invokes the foreign laws of Shanghai, which prohibit the brandishing of firearms, after which the student scurries off in shame (70.507~511). The same rational coolness emerges in another exemplary scene, when a rickshaw coolie callously knocks down an old man on the street. Zhang's friends see the coolie as an illustration of how the Chinese people mistreat their own "compatriots" (tonghao), like the imperial ministers who give in to foreign powers. Such actions, the friends say, prove the inherent "slavishness" (nuli xingshi) of the Chinese people and their lack of a "sense of national citizenship" (gaojun xingshi), a theme that also appears on the first page of *Flower in a Sea of Karma*. No wonder that foreigners compare the Chinese to the blacks of Africa. How will our country ever "reform its political system and strengthen itself," they ask in the language of the day (bianfa ziqiang, 43.313~315)? Zhang replies that they have drawn too wild a comparison in applying the notion of "sense of citizenship" to "a man who has the consciousness of a beast" (juwewu yishide chusheng, 43.315~316). Ruckus in the street is a violation
of the laws of the Shanghai concessions, which he will invoke if they continue. In short, a reliable legal system is more efficient than grand theories of revolution. Spouting nationalism and revolution is like the student pulling a gun to challenge someone who is merely pointing out that he is a fool. These scenes confirm the master of the brothel as an enlightened and rational master of politics and international relations, superior to the failed diplomat-polygynist of Flower in a Sea of Karma.

The Psychology of the “Incorrigibly Wanton” Prostitute
If knowing how to enjoy himself is Zhang’s way of proving the truth of his polygynous aptitude, then that truth contains a clear statement about the state of being of the prostitute, his centrally defined Chinese woman. Getting worse even as the novel progresses, she has turned into a brazen and shameless wastrel and parasite whom it is Zhang’s duty to expose and, if possible, transform into what she should be, the perfect partner of the moment. The difficulty of that task has to do with the fact, as Zhang Qigu constantly asserts, that she is always deceptive, hence his tenet that since a prostitute can never be trusted, she can never be married. As for the meaning of marriage, Zhang Qigu begins the novel as a man dissatisfied with his average-looking wife by arranged marriage and thus a man in need of sojourns in brothels to find other women. The man unhappy with his arranged marriage is in fact a steady motif in the reformist era of the early 1900s and for many decades to come. The motif symbolizes the difficult transition from arranged marriage to so-called free marriage. The implicit point of Nine-times Cuckold is that a wife by arranged marriage is hardly a call for independence in the form of free marriage, that is, free monogamous marriage. Instead, the inherently unsatisfying arranged marriage is merely the reestablished excuse for the reformed man to continue the rule of the polygynist philanderer who has always left home to form liaisons with other women.

Brilliance in male and female psychology constitutes the core of Zhang Qigu’s reformism. The word “psychology” (xinlixue), a neologism of the time, appears in Nine-times Cuckold when Zhang states that the prostitute Lin Daiyu fails with men because she fails to understand that science well enough (22.169). Being a detective of the human heart like the “new scientists” (xinfa gezhi jia) of psychology allows Zhang Qigu to outwit an indomitable prostitute like Lin Daiyu, one of four famous prostitutes called the “four Shanghai door gods” (Shanghai sida jinggang). The prime feature of a woman like her is that she is fangdang guanle (2.13), “incorrigibly wanton,” so used to being wanton that she knows no other way of being. This is the same knowledge conveyed in Flowers of Shanghai a decade earlier and in Seductive Dreams of 1830s Yangzhou, before the era of grand Shanghai. She is rude to customers, has her own lovers, and cares only about profit. It used to be that the prostitute “catered to” and “flattered” the patron (hajie, fengcheng, 9.68). Now she selects him; he doesn’t select her. She accumulates debts, spending her money however she pleases, because she knows that there is always a fool she can marry who will pay off her debts, after which she can leave him and return to her adventures in Shanghai (a process that in Shanghai dialect goes by the name “taking a bath,” huayu). If he wants to prevail over such a woman, the man must always counter “falsey with falsity,” never be completely serious, and “wait quietly for her to exhaust herself” (wei yi bi lao, 9.70), a reference to the fourth of the “thirty-six strategies” of war.

Mastering the psychology of women and other men means seeing through the woman’s machinations and the man’s self-blinding fantasies. Han Bangqing portrays the same mastery in the brothel facilitator Hong Shangqing, but without the self-certainty of Zhang Qigu. In Nine-times Cuckold, reading other people’s minds takes the form we saw in Courtesan Chambers of the movements of the knowing eye, of which Zhang’s eye is the keenest. The knowing eye takes quintessential form in the glance that is cast between him and another understanding party. Sometimes he loses control of his eyes, such as when he is “captivated” by the beauty of a woman. Then he “looks on in frozen wonder,” as if awestruck (daidai kanzhe, 1.3). But staring helplessly at one woman also serves an intentional purpose, which is both to call that woman’s attention to himself and to be seen doing so by a second woman. He thus makes the two women he stares at in the first pages of the book compete for his attention. When he has one of them sit down beside him, she “lowers her head knowingly with a smile,” while the other woman “stares at him, but though Qigu notices her stare he ignores it.” When one of the women pulls on him to keep him from going, he says, “Why do you insist on plying me with your tricks of doing business?” (1.8–9). In another scene, he exchanges an understanding glance with a woman who is overcome with appreciation at his understanding of women. Zhang detects Chen Wexian, his soon-to-be concubine, noticing the exchange of glances, which elicits Chen’s admiration as well (16.127). In general, the look that Zhang directs is one that controls and prohibits jealousy, which he knows is the “thing that the prostitute most fears being accused of” (guanren zui fanjide shi shuo ta chi cu, 44.319). The “taboo” (ji) against jealousy gives Zhang the license to be open with one woman about the other woman he just visited or is about to visit. The lucidity that he generates through his knowing eyes dispels the aura of the dominant prostitute and replaces it with his own.

The Woman Too Free and the Man Too Afraid of His Wife
The shameless lack of self-doubt is what led Lu Xun to call characters like Zhang a “genius plus hooligan,” a type that Lu Xun said flooded the movies of his times with stars for whom “sleight and cheekiness” (youtou huanao) denoted proud
ways of being. This is the man for whom “living in Shanghai and knowing all its ways” (zhuquanshe Shanghái) meant knowing how to flirt with Shanghai prostitutes. Lu Xun thereby sums up the entire last two decades of Qing literature about prostitutes in Shanghai, at the same time affirming the enduring popularity of the master of the brothels into the 1920s and 1930s. That hero has two foils, the forward-looking egalitarian monogamist like Lu Xun, and the backward brothel fool. *Nine-times Cuckold* portrays only the fool. But the master of the brothel needs the backward fool in order to have someone he can constantly outdo. Many of the novel’s most interesting and sensational portraits are of this weaker man, commonly called the “plagued fool” (*wensheng*), that is, the gullible brothel patron, who also includes the “learned idiot” (*shuodai*), that is, the successful exam candidate and imperial official like Pu Caiyun’s learned but idiotic husband Jin Wenqing in *Flower in a Sea of Karma*. The ultimate fool, as the title of the novel signals, is the man whose wife and concubines cuckold him while he is away in Shanghai trying to succeed with prostitutes. Hence the character Kang Jisheng, former provincial governor, whose five concubines, two daughters-in-law, and two unmarried daughters, nine wanton women in all, combine to make Kang the most cuckolded man in Shanghai.

Polygynous aptitude amounts to never becoming infatuated (*milian*, 16. 126) with one woman, infatuation being the main defect of the plagued fool. In displaying the patron’s worst traits, “penny pinching,” “pawing the woman whenever he can,” and “making an obnoxious nuisance of himself,” the fool naturally invites the woman’s mockery and abuse.17 Zhang most detests the ungenerous and miserly patron who aspires to spend as little as possible on the prostitute, thinking that she is always cheating him or imagining that she will like him for himself rather than his money. The fool wants to believe that he is dealing with a “real” woman, that is, a woman who really likes and needs him, often called a *renjiaren*, “another person’s woman,” an emblematic term with profound meaning in the Shanghai world of prostitutes and patrons. *Renjiaren*, a good woman of decent family, supposed likes the man for who he is, and is untainted and less mercenary because she is supposedly not a true prostitute. In some cases, she is an exciting catch because she is someone else’s wife, though the term is also used with unmarried women.18 In reality she is a lure who concocts stories about her desperate straits, such as an abusive husband or severe indebtedness. In the eyes of the plagued fool she represents an escape from the complex and high-cost world of the fashionable prostitutes with whom he is a clumsy failure. Even if he patronsizes a true prostitute, the fool wants to believe she likes him as if he were “one of the family” (*zijia-ren*), as Jin Hanliang, the opium-addicted, adopted son of a cuckold, insists. Only others notice that the prostitute he visits treats him with brazen contempt (40. 291; Zhang finally explodes and tells Jin that she is cheating him, but Jin resents him for it). His foolishness includes other typical gaffes, such as visiting prostitutes too early in the day; asking to take a ride in the prostitute’s sedan chair, not knowing that a patron never rides in such a vehicle; and returning from his ride to ask how much he should pay, not knowing that payment should take place more discreetly (13–15).

Zhang Chunfan’s learned idiot is hard not to see as a mirror of the foolish hero of *Flower in a Sea of Karma*, Jin Wenqing, who in turn stands for the stereotypical imperial official who doesn’t even know the proper geographical coordinates of China on the world map. The older Hanlin scholar, Wang Boshen, is someone who “haunts his seniority” (*yi luo mai luo*, 69. 498) by always insisting on having the last pedantic word. As a learned idiot, he spends his life doing what it takes to achieve the highest examination status, curbing sexual pleasure until finally after age fifty he decides that he may have missed something by never visiting a Shanghai brothel. In spite of spending a large sum on his favorite prostitute, Wang cares in to her anger, assuming that a bad temper is part of what he is paying for. Disgusted by Wang’s ineptness and hypocrisy, Zhang Qigu “stuff his mouth” (*sale tade kouer*) by saying to his face that the “learning of the brothels” gives a man more skills than a lifetime of reading “dead books” (69. 498–500). Satirizing the learned idiot is an old motif in Ming and Qing fiction, but “stuffing the mouth” of a high-placed elder, the type who is supposed to have the last word, is the sign of the new stage of radical dismissal in novels like *Shanghai Dust, Nine-times Cuckold*, and *Flower in a Sea of Karma*. Zeng Pu, the author of *Flower in a Sea of Karma*, likewise treats the zhuangyuan Jin Wenqing as if he were so beyond hope that his mouth finally had to be stuffed. At the same time, dismissing the scholar-official who represents centuries of accepted tradition stops short of revolutionary radicalism. In both *Flower in a Sea of Karma* and *Nine-times Cuckold*, the superelevation of the old-style scholar-official takes place because of his tediousness and stupidity, but doesn’t necessitate violent overthrow.19 Zhang Qigu’s reform is a case of sexual revitalization by which the originally good polygynist-philanderer restores his mandate by valiantly proving that he can never be cuckolded.

The seamless effect of such self-confidence is apparent in the fact that *Nine-times Cuckold* never treats the plagued fool from the inside, as if his feelings represented a significant, epochal sort of melancholy. Li Boyuan’s 1899 *Tracks of the Snowgoose* takes this approach, suffusing itself with an atmosphere of male disaffection from beginning to end. The patron Yan Huasheng is full of frustration because he can never achieve “results” (*jiugua*) (6. 33) in the brothel. Fang Bosun, a Zhang Qigu–like man of the world, steals a woman Yan has just begun to court, thereby sending Yan into a permanent state of embarrassment and creating a sensational item in the gossip columns. As a dignified patron, Yan can’t display jealousy or try to prevent Fang from stealing his prostitute (a move that in the parlance of
the time is called "cutting from the edge," *jian bian*, 3.15). Everyone including Yan himself can see what is going on, but in this case exchanging knowing looks as the cuckoldng process begins is all that can be done (3.14, 16). Other fools include a man who is ecstatic when a prostitute agrees to marry him. If a famous courtesan (*mingji*) loves him, that must mean that he is a "famous scholar" (*mingshu*) after all, he concludes (13.74–75). The patron Jiang Youchun has a jealous wife and a loving concubine whose discord makes it impossible for him to stay at home. He befriends the fashionable Gao Xianglan, who likes to spend all night telling him about her life. Her "methods of diplomacy" (*waijiao shouduan*, 16.92) are so sophisticated that she doesn’t need to "do business" or "go out on call." If a man wrongs her, she embarrasses him by getting a scandalous story written about him in the newspaper. If she doesn’t like a rival prostitute, she has her driver squeeze the other woman’s carriage off the road (20). He is full of respect for Gao Xianglan, who he sees is more than just a heartless Shanghai prostitute. In *Tracks of the Snowgoose*, the prostitute is the master of psychology. She would like to escape the brothel but can’t, however, since as she says she can only do so by "leaning on the arm of a man" (*kao nanren yizhang paizi*, 18.105). The final scene of the novel has Jiang and Gao lying together talking all night without becoming lovers. She is too wanton and free; he is too afraid of his wife. These two present a crystallizing portrait of man and woman out of synch in the late-Qing moment of transition.

## Conclusion

### The Postpolygynous Future

**Goddess Nüwa Repairs Heaven**

The man’s ruin because of his affair with a wanton woman is an ancient motif in times of dynastic decline. The vilification of the Shanghai prostitute in works like *Nine-times Cuckold* is a sign of the same motif, as is Zhang Qiugu’s victory over wanton women, which is a metaphor of dynastic renewal. He is a sexual adept and master of the brothel, as if to say that these features represent a fundamental inheritance of the modern, internationally adept Chinese man. Who are his modern female counterparts? If we conjure an image of such a woman based on the new standards established in the early 1900s, then she is absent from *Nine-times Cuckold* since she cannot be the main wife, concubine, or prostitute anymore. The man whom the modern woman marries, if she marries at all, has to be the sexually chastened monogamist who forsakes polygamy and prostitution.

A form of modern liberated women can be found in a novel like the 1905 *The Stone of Goddess Nüwa* (*Nüwa shi*), which promotes the grand notion that "if women change, so will the whole nation" and which in grand fashion then shows how the prostitute-heroines of the story will change and what they will do to save the world. First they will stop binding their feet, and then they will assassinate male leaders and force polygynists to liberate their concubines.1 Such acts indicate that in order to be politically active in the new China, women must subvert the regime in which sex is inherently the polygynist-philanderer’s sex. According to the old logic, a woman in public is either an improperly exposed main wife or concubine or else a prostitute. By way of transcending this sexual structure, the prostitute-heroines in *The Stone of Goddess Nüwa* utterly disavow marriage and sexual intercourse, and will conceive children only by newly invented scientific methods. They still in fact do what women resisting the polygamous sexual regime have always done, that is, divorce themselves from sexual activity with men.

This book has shown that the polygynist-philanderer and his main wives,
concubines, and prostitutes were the dominant characters in the portrait of sexuality that China presented to itself and the world at the verge of modernity. At that time, the decline of the Qing dynasty also meant the decline of the polygynist philanderer, for China as a social and symbolic whole was so deeply formed by this sexual practice that when one was in decline, so was the other. This statement does not mean that a plan was already forming to abolish polygyny or that polygynists necessarily thought their days were coming to an end. China did legally end polygyny in the 1930s (that remnants of it continued to exist for decades, and that forms of it continue to exist today, is a story for another study). Why and how China did so is still a question that needs careful examination, as is how men and women remolded themselves in order to become postpolygynist subjects. Suffice to say for now that the rationale for the abolition of polygyny was similar to that for ending such things as footbinding and the sequestration of women, namely, that in the face of what came to be defined as modernity, these customs were to be defined as relics of the past. So were the practices of patronizing boy female impersonators and associating with “famous courtesans.” A key factor in these changes—though again one that needs careful examination—had to do with the fact that the Judeo-Christian West was monogamous and antihomosexualist and that it succeeded in imposing the standards of monogamy and antihomosexuality upon China and other non-Western cultures. The late-Qing sources studied in this book bear no imprint of the imposition of monogamy from the West. But they do bear marks of paradigmatic changes that I want to examine in this conclusion both by looking back in overview and by taking a forward glance at what the weight of the polygynous past must have had on its future. In ending at a point that I call the verge of modernity, this book emphasizes both the continuity and the break between the verge and what comes after in terms of polygynous sexuality, including the status of the qing aesthetic. Simply put, what changes, what stays the same, and what goes underground but still exerts residual and shadowy influence?

I first answer the question about continuity and break in terms of what female-authored texts did or did not share with male-authored texts, which have been the main sources thus far. In particular, how did female authors live with and portray polygyny, and is the notion of passive polygyny relevant in their literature as well? This question belongs to the proposition introduced at the beginning of this book that polygyny always had to be justified, was never a simple given, and forever met with resistance. It was a collective social formation that was shot through and through with struggle and interdependence and that had built-in mechanisms for female agency. In terms of the question of continuity and break, the point is that resistance to polygamy was not simply or finally discovered at the end of the Qing. The polygamous regime was not a purely dark past that suddenly received light, nor was it suddenly and easily abandoned. Then I will address the qing aesthetic at the end of the Qing dynasty in terms of the formation of China the modern nation, especially in terms of the leveling effects shared by both the qing aesthetic and the ethos of modernity. Do the egalitarian ethic of the notion of qing and the image of the remarkable woman have any relevance in the formation of China as a nation among nations? Do the remarkable woman and her wanton counterparts have anything in common with the image of the modern woman? This will be followed by a reconsideration of Lacanian ideas discussed in the introduction, now using the evidence gathered thus far to make new and retrospective statements about late-Qing narrative as a historical and socially symbolic act. How does the notion of modes of enjoyment facilitate the understanding of the polygynous fantasy, the qing aesthetic, and the portrayal of historical destiny in late-Qing China? How do the concepts of the master, the university, the hysteric, and the analyst describe paradigmatic change at this time? Finally, I will end with some observations about the afterlife of polygyny and the qing aesthetic following the end of the Qing, finishing with the question, how are current and emergent sexualities still inscribed or forced into older sexual formations?

Polygyny and Women Writers

Since I have mainly discussed works written by men, we are left wondering what women writers have to say about the same topics men address, and also whether women even address those topics. Women writers of the Ming and Qing provide considerable evidence about resistance to male gender bias in general and also vast amounts of fantasy material in which women speak and act as if under no compulsion to remain hidden in the inner chambers or to act as if they must always yield to men. They also confirm the existence of something like the passive polygyny that male authors idealize and force us again to realize that polygyny, like foot-binding, is more than a one-sided affair of a monolithically male fantasy. Tanci rhyme-narratives by women offer especially revealing glimpses of polygamy as something the woman wishes she could escape or actually does escape, but also as something in which she takes active part as if she can do so with little or no compromise to her integrity and talent. The following summary combines what I have learned from male-authored sources with what other scholars have noted in their references to polygyny in female-authored tanci.

One of the most common features of tanci is the presence of cross-dressing heroines who leave the home and accomplish heroic tasks in politics and war. A split between cross-dressers who never return to female dress and those who not only do so but also marry as co-wives occurs in a handful of cases. The women who join polygamous marriages in general resemble the women in male-authored texts who put the virtue and excellence of the household above the pettiness of real-
ousy and scheming rivalry. One of the most famous *tanci* heroines is Meng Lijun of *Bonds of Karmic Reincarnation* (*Zhaideng yuan*, ca. 1770), who, when forced to leave her family before marriage, disguises herself as a man and decides never to dress as a woman again, even when her parents plead with her. The female author Chen Duansheng (1751–1796?) left the story unfinished at this critical point, but in 1821 the female poet Liang Desheng (1771–1847) supplied an ending in which Meng Lijun resumes female attire and returns to the man she was originally meant to marry, who by then has two concubines, one of whom, to her resentment, is the daughter of their archenemy. But it turns out that there is a reason for the presence of the daughter of the archenemy. She is the reincarnation of a jealous concubine in an earlier *tanci* (*Yuexian yuan*) and is punished for her jealousy by being reincarnated in *Zhaideng yuan*. Another female author, Hou Zhi (1764–1829), who disliked Meng Lijun’s cross-dressing excesses, further polished *Zhaideng yuan* by removing the jealousy and insecurity of the daughter of the archenemy. The same split between cross-dressers occurs in Qiu Xinzhi’s (1805–1873?) *tanci*, in which the one who returns to female dress becomes the manager of a well-run polygamous household in which she tolerates no jealousy (Jiang Dehuai’s *Bi sheng hua*, first published in 1857), and in Sun Deying’s (after 1841–?) *tanci*, in which one cross-dresser never wears women’s clothes again and—like the author herself—vows never to marry, while the other two cross-dressers marry the same man, one becoming one of three concubines, the other the main wife and capable manager of the household (*Jin yu yuan*, 1860).4

One of the chief characteristics of the *tanci* and women’s writing in general, it is important to remember, is the pride in being a woman—thus, for example, the female author’s extravagant portrayal of heroic women. If in Hou Zhi’s and Qiu Xinzhi’s eyes Meng Lijun was too extravagant, it was because she verged on what male and even female authors would call the shrew. When Hou Zhi created a daughter for Meng Lijun in her 1821 *tanci*, she came up with Feilong (Flying Dragon in *Zaituo tian*), whose outrageous behavior reads like the negative extreme of her mother’s excesses. Modeling herself after the Tang empress Wu Zetian, Feilong reduces her husband the emperor to a puppet and supersets all other women until finally put in her place by her maternal aunt and mother-in-law, the empress dowager and exemplar of female moral authority. Although women writers also use shrews and other misbehaving women to voice resentment against male gender bias, their central model of womanhood nevertheless embodies the same voice of female moral authority as Feilong’s dowager mother-in-law.5 Hence the good woman, even if she is a member of a polygamous marriage, rises above jealousy and scheming rivalry, which are the traits of the female versions of the wastrel man, that is, shrews and wanton women. Hou Zhi’s vision of social order is like that of other male and female writers of the last century of the Qing, for whom social morals and political harmony override the petty concerns of wastrels, shrews, and wanton women.

**Passive Polygamy and a Concubine Author**

Passive polygamy is a fantasy that I have reconstructed based on its recurrence in Qing texts by men. What about passive polygamy from the perspective of female agency, by which I mean the literary exercise of agency by female authors and both fictional and real historical situations in which women arrange or at least substantially contribute to the taking of concubines. The central question is, under the conditions of polygamy as a social given, what in passive polygamy is a matter of joint agency, or the partial yielding of male agency to women, or even of the primacy of the woman’s role in the form of the dominant main wife? The *tanci* already provides examples of the strength of women in polygyny and the corresponding weakness or secondariness of men. Although the *tanci* is a case of fictional fantasy, its correlation with male-authored texts affirms the existence of a kind of accord between the sexes whereby everyone joins on a grander level, as it were, to enforce both domestic and civilizational harmony. The critical difference between male- and female-authored texts is that the *tanci* lacks the male fantasy’s focus on the sexual availability of women and the women’s eager support of his polygamous ambition.

For an example of mutual accord in the case of a nonfictional female member of a polygamous family, let us consider the concubine and poet Shen Cai, born in 1732. Famous concubine poets in Ming and Qing history include women who had been courtesans and as such had been trained to entertain literati clients. Such women succeeded in escaping the brothel, marrying into a literati family, and even continuing their artistic or poetic activities. Shen Cai differed in that she was never a courtesan but became a concubine at age twelve to a scholar and bibliophile named Lu Xuan, whose main wife, Peng Zhenyin, was a poet and who took on the role of maternal mentor to the girl. As soon as Shen entered the home, the wife became her teacher, and they had a close relationship. The occasion of Shen Cai’s first intercourse with Lu Xuan in 1766 at age fifteen was marked by a ritual exchange between main wife and concubine, who recorded the occasion in a respectful address to the main wife.6

Evidence from male- and female-authored fiction would compel us to read the ritual exchange between main wife and concubine as a case of replacing jealousy and mistrust by what I have called female arrangement and cooperation. A form of mutual acknowledgment occurred between main wife, husband, and concubine when they knew that the time had come for Shen Cai to "pin up her hair," thus their three-way cooperation. Female arrangement took the form of the
alliance the women cultivated between themselves and sanctified in this instance through an exchange of literary gifts. They thus avoided the potential of jealousy and rivalry on the women's part and callous favoritism on the man's. As a kind of two-wife polygyny, the triangular relationship took the form of a sublimated incest, in which husband and wife adopted a daughter who later served as secondary wife. As Grace Fong writes, Shen Cai treated Peng Zhenyin "more like a teacher and mentor than a competitor for her husband's affection," even though Shen Cai's poetry included pieces about a night spent with Lu Yuan and sensuous poems about herself. Shen Cai's harmonious membership in the polygamous family recalls the passive polygyny seen in male-authored fiction, in which the gentleman forgoes taking a concubine regardless of whether his wife might like her and the wife oversees and bonds with someone she knows will be a sexual partner to her husband. The situation receives a kind of public blessing in the form of Shen Cai's literary production and publication, which besides gaining appreciative readers also verifies in the observers' minds both the harmony of the polygamous family and the talent and worthiness of the nevertheless subordinate partner. Many copies of Shen's work circulated, and seven poems were included in a major anthology of women's poetry. Her writing is full of the minutiae of daily life in the "side room" (ceshi), the term for the concubine's, not main wife's, chamber. Absent are the tears, melancholy, and anxiety of waiting in isolation that are common to boudoir poetry. Instead, she turned her environment into an "energized, productive space," as Fong puts it, in which she avidly pursued her own interests.

Another example of a wife's managing role in polygamy is that of Wang Duanshu (1621–before 1685), a professional female writer and anthologist, who used her own money to help purchase a concubine, Chen Yuan, for her husband, Ding Shengzhao (1621–ca. 1700), later adopting the couple's daughter as her own. She was the dominant figure in that she earned the most and was the most learned, as her husband acknowledged. The main wife's arrangement of polygyny in this case was a practical matter in that Wang Duanshu (author of a major anthology of women's poetry) desired more time on her own for her work but, we imagine, did not wish to flout the sexual and romantic interests of her husband and wanted to exert some control over his choice of concubine. A third case is Shen Fu's wife Yun in Six Records of a Floating Life (Fusheng liujii), who requested that her husband take as concubine a young prostitute she herself loved. Although purporting to be pure autobiography, Fusheng liujii probably portrays parts of the relationship as Shen Fu nostalgically wishes it had been, thus staging passive polygyny from the perspective of the man creating his own self-image. In desiring a concubine for her husband, Yun was reportedly reacting to a friend of Shen Fu's who was proud of his new concubine, whom Yun thought lacked charm, thus Yun's "obsession" (chixin), in Shen's words, with finding a better concubine for her and her husband. The effort failed, to Yun's great chagrin. Their attempt to recruit a concubine contrasts starkly with Shen Fu's father's attempt to find one without telling Shen Fu's mother. Because Yun helped in this attempt, misunderstandings developed between her and the mother-in-law. For this and other reasons, the young couple suffered ostracism from the family, after which Yun never recovered and finally died (a friend later presented Shen Fu with a concubine).

For Shen Fu and Yun, adopting a concubine was an open affair involving no deceit. It was a matter of producing a son, since they already had one, but supposedly of Yun's securing herself a female companion to join her and her husband in their companionate marriage. Shen Fu fulfills the definition of the blank and unlustful polygynist in that he is a polygynist because he can be and is expected to be so, even by his wife, but he does not initiate finding a concubine. His behavior in a Cantonese brothel on a trip away from home confirms the picture of him as a gentle philanderer. While a friend of his goes from one prostitute to another, sometimes taking two in one night, Shen Fu stays with only one, choosing her because she looks like his wife and later being moved when he learns that she deeply lamented his departure.

In the above examples female agency takes the form of the woman's active contribution and even initiation. There is an accord between husband and main wife. The examples recall the cases of two-wife polygyny that I examined a few chapters ago where the limitation to two women was especially important. As was suggested, two-wife polygyny—whether involving two women of the same status or a main wife and a concubine—acted as a kind of relay between the polygynous hierarchy of multiple wives (three or more) and the qing egalitarianism, as if to locate a compromise between multiple wives and just one. For the man to desire polygyny, he must in general be unlustful or even asexual. For the woman to be willing to join such a marriage, she must play a managerial role. Stopping at two is as if to mark the limit of temperament or the limit up to which the participants can still adhere relatively well to the spirit of the qing aesthetic. Adhering "relatively well" means being fair to two women who marry the same humble man. Meanwhile, the pressure of equivalence exerts a tempering effect on the centrality of the man, who as a member of a triad, as I have said, is more like one of three rather than one over many.

China the Nation and the Qing Aesthetic at the End of the Imperial Era

How and why polygamy ended inevitably poses the question, was change in this regard defined as paradigmatic only if there was influence because of Western intrusion? The loudest and easiest answer is yes, but in fact a critique of polygamy
already existed before the time of intrusion. A novel like *Shanghai Dust* proves the natural link between the modern notion of equality, on the one hand, and the long-existing link between the theme of the remarkable woman and the egalitarianism of the *qing* aesthetic, on the other. What had also already long been around included stories of cross-dressing women and gender fluidity, stories in which the male consort of the remarkable woman experienced the life-shattering effect of their love, and stories in which there was an implied message that “we are all women.” The authors of such fantasies include Cao Xueqin, Wei Xiuren, Chen Sen, and Zou Tao. As a writer living in a period of unprecedented cultural dislocation, Wei Xiuren turned the shattering effect of love between two people into a de facto form of sublime monogamy: He inherited the radical *qing* aesthetic of the late Ming and used it to elevate the love of the loyalist couple. After the loyalists Wei and Liu die, other loyalist couples conquer the Taiping enemy, thereby diverging from fictional endings common elsewhere in which the reestablishment of social harmony is one and the same with the reaffirmation of polygamous harmony.

Let us at this point note the link between the *qing* aesthetic of radical subjectivity, with its ethics of egalitarianism, and the formation of China as a new modern nation in line with the sentence from *The Stone of Goddess Niwa*, “If women change, so will the whole nation.” At first glance the link appears improbable in that, by the end of the Qing, the formation of China the modern nation had little use for the feminine aspects of the *qing* aesthetic. If anything, the spirit of turning China into a strong nation had more to draw from *qing* fiction's valiant and martial heroes and heroines than from the characters in Pu Songling's stories, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, and nineteenth-century works like *Precious Mirror of Boy Actresses*, *Traces of the Flowery Moon*, Wang Tao's imitations of Pu Songling's stories, and *Shanghai Dust*. In the eyes of the proponents of strong national character, the latter group of works illustrated refuge from rather than adjustment to the advent of overwhelming change. For this reason, by the end of the Qing, the *qing* aesthetic was thrown together with the traditional regimes of polygamy and patronage of prostitutes, all of which were to be abandoned in light of the encounter with the European intrusion and the advent of modernity.

Yet *qing* and the remarkable woman, whether chaste or wanton, are still relevant to the dynamics of China and modern nation-forming, especially if we consider the leveling effects inherent in the notions of both *qing* universality and modern nationhood in one of its most fundamental senses, namely, the merging of a particular culture like China into the global, universal assemblage of other nations and cultures. Let us consider, for example, the phenomenon in the midto late-nineteenth century of the gradual sense of the loss of Chinese civilizational centrality. This began around the Opium War of 1839–1842 with the perception of a categorically different kind of enemy in the form of the British and other Western powers. Later we see things like the Chinese government's reaction to discrimination against Chinese immigrants in the United States and elsewhere, which led to an increasing recognition from the 1860s to the 1890s of the legal and political status of the Chinese subject in an international setting. There was also the reaction to the rapid Westernization of Japan, which at first appeared in Chinese eyes to be a case of abandonment of “the universal order known as Civilization,” but eventually led to the recognition of the inevitability of that trend. By the end of the Qing we then witness the self-conscious framing of China as a modern nation among nations and the general notion both of China's place in Asia and “China in the world,” that is, no longer China as the center of the world. The fundamental implication of China in the world was the advent of a universal global subject that as such, in the core abstract sense, was shorn of all cultural particulars. To be shorn of cultural particulars gets at the notion I am driving at about the link between *qing* universality and modernity. Wang Tao evoked a similar image when he extended the meaning of the Chinese *dao* to the level of a neutral universal and claimed that the Chinese *dao* was everyone's *dao*, with no exclusive claim to a particular chosen people. Such a leveling effect demonstrates, in Terry Cochrane's words, that the “ethos of modernity was born of a clash with the other.” Such a clash shatters the enclosure of the traditional cultural sphere. There is no alternative but the breaching of that wall of enclosure, with the result that all subjects are suddenly and permanently transported out of the time and space of their particular cultural past.

In spite of the difference in tenor between the “ethos of modernity” and the aesthetics of *qing*, the two notions nevertheless share a similar sense of the individual subject's radical dislocation. The displacement of the polygynist male in literature from the late Ming to the late Qing likewise involves the master figure in a “clash with the other.” The remarkable woman plays a central role in this displacement by serving as the figurative representative of both spatial and temporal transition. She is able to do so because of the universalizing and egalitarian features already present in the *qing* aesthetic and its motif of the male consort of the remarkable woman. Hence the instinctive link between the *qing* aesthetic and the newly introduced ideas of sexual egalitarianism in *Shanghai Dust* or the overlap between the old theme of female heroism in times of male decline and the female revolutionaries in *The Stone of Goddess Niwa*. The link is likewise present in the form of the vilified Shanghai prostitute, who is an alternate version of the late-Qing female revolutionary. The self-certain master philanderer understands women, who he believes recognize in him the rare instance among men of the truly deserving polygamist. He registers the women's line of sight infallibly. The Shanghai prostitute, however, reads the man infallibly. As a new remarkable woman, she enforces a new concept of equality that, although condemned in literature about patrons and prostitutes,
stipulates that she marries a man only under the condition that she stay in the Shanghai concessions; she will never return with the man to the home of his wife and mother, to whom she would have to kowtow; and she can leave the man if she wants, even absconding with his money and valuables.17

What, however, happened to the sexual agency of the wanton woman in the transition to modern nationhood? More generally, what happened to the agency of sexual pleasure? The answer in brief is that the polygynist-phalanderer did not easily surrender his sexual primacy; and the prostitute-concubine did not pass her sexual incorrigibility to the modern woman. Gao Xianglan of Tracks of the Snowgoose, Fu Caiyun of Flower in a Sea of Karma, and Lin Daiyu or Sai Jinhua of Nintimes Cuckold are roughly the same incorrigibly free and self-indulgent woman portrayed in these and other novels, guidebooks, pictorials, and journalistic accounts.18 As girls and women of “good families” (liang gia fum) appeared on the streets alongside them in the early 1900s, the good women suffered from the slip-page that occurred between them and the wanton prostitute. The good woman, as noted, struggled to free herself from the perception that the woman who appeared in public was by definition loose. The new egalitarian woman had in general to rise above the sexual, therefore, where sexual was still defined according to the roles of the polygynist-phalanderer and the prostitute-concubine. The trajectory of the new woman pointed to female separatism, that is, exclusion of sexual relationships with men. Hence the anarchist assassin in Heroines of Eastern Europe (Dongou nihuo jie), the woman who murders her husband in Flower in a Woman’s Prison (Ni bai xia), and the inhabitants of a brothel in The Stone of Goddess Niwa that turns out to be a scientific utopia ruled by women who vilify sex and relations with men.19

Why can’t we add one more radical to this group, the prostitute-concubine who cuckolds the patron-husband? If she was not considered a radical like the others, it is because of her pollution by what was still considered the base sexuality of the prostitute-concubine. When Jin Wening catches Fu Caiyun committing adultery, she replies that she is a concubine, not a main wife, and that because she is a plaything, she follows no rules. “This is the way I am, and I can’t be changed” (benxing nan yì).20 Given the supreme value placed upon female chastity in the Qing dynasty and after, this is an extremely outrageous statement. Given the context of Shanghai and the new possibilities it offers women like Fu Caiyun, her ability to say such things could potentially be read as a sign of a radically new kind of female subjectivity. Nevertheless, the words “this is the way I am” never become what a woman like her is honored for. The new man’s equal is the superior woman who compels the man to forget about polygyny and patronizing prostitutes. Nintimes Cuckold denigrates such an egalitarianism by simply not mentioning it. The only type of egalitarianism that occurs in Nintimes Cuckold takes minor form in the secret love affair between the prostitute and the actor, that is, a man of the prostitute’s same social level who pays her nothing and whom she loves more than her elite paying patrons. In the discourse of polygyny, monogamy and egalitarianism amount to no more than the relationship between the base male actor and the base prostitute. By the same logic, a man who is monogamous is such because he is a fool who lacks the aptitude for phalading. Egalitarianism is thus the unsatisfactory compromise between the sophisticate’s self-confidence and the fool’s melancholy and resentment.

Fantasy and the Battle of Modes of Enjoyment

This book has been a study of narrative as historical and socially symbolic act, mainly focusing on fictional but also some biographical sources. The terms and tools of psychoanalytic theory discussed in the introduction have been lurking under the surface and need to be openly engaged once again both to prove their relevance and to provide an alternate type of clarity to what has been said so far. The courtesan’s or boy actress’s depression because of their entrapment in the brothel or opera troupe, for example, recalls the position of the Lacanian hysteric. Hong Shaosheng, the brothel facilitator, speaks in the discourse of the analyst. Zhang Qiugu’s brothel mastery, especially as embodied in his knowing eye, is a case of the master’s denial of the fundamental state of split subjectivity. The mental turn that occurs in the brothel patron when he decides upon a certain prostitute has to do with the university discourse, the producers of which emulate the example of the man with the most women, carry out his laws, and build their reputations among each other by means of the particular choices of women they make. All these instances of subjective discourse presume a specific understanding of the function of fantasy in framing and supplying consistency to narrative reality. Fantasy in this particular sense has to be understood as a general word standing for all narratives, from myth to dream and including fiction as well as history. It is a question of the fundamental organizing function of fantasy and its framing and construction of desire, which Traces of the Flowery Moon and Shanghai Dust particularly exemplified in their crystallizations of one cultural order against another and Tale of Filial Heroes showed in its portrayal of modes of enjoyment, as in Deng Jiugong’s disgust with boy actresses.

The notion of modes of enjoyment is key in illustrating fantasy’s organizing function. To recapitulate the definition given above, modes of enjoyment have to do with a character’s or a group’s preferences and habits of sexual and marital custom, eating and hygiene, also including music, clothing, and other areas of art, pleasure, and physical well-being. The word “enjoyment” in this special sense needs to be understood to include more than pleasure, but also other modes of
sensation such as sorrow and loss, and courage and dedication, even if painful. The *ernü* kind of *qing* is the utter abstinence from opium smoking among the star characters of *Tale of Filial Heroes*, and opera about military heroes are all examples of modes of enjoyment organized by the fantasy narrative of not only the novel but also the ideological discourse it represents. Opera about military heroes opposes opera about sentimental beauties and scholars, where the former is loved by those who embody the energy that will maintain China in its supposedly original wholesomeness and the latter is loved by decadent and depraved people who represent China in a state of decay. Nevertheless, *Precious Mirror of Boy Actresses* and *Traces of the Flowery Moon*, as opposed as they are to *Tale of Filial Heroes* in terms of the interpretation of *qing*, resemble *Tale of Filial Heroes* in their portrayal of heroes who never smoke opium. In the late *qing*, abstinence from opium was in general the sign of an ideological fantasy of a purified China, opposed both to the foreigners who imposed opium upon China from the outside and to the Chinese who smoked it and ruined the empire from within. Though neither *Tale of Filial Heroes* nor *Precious Mirror of Boy Actresses* self-consciously engages the historical realities of the opium trade and China's interactions with Europe, opium in itself carries the weight of that historical meaning. *Traces of the Flowery Moon* engages those realities explicitly. Opium as a pregnant signifier in this period, plus juxtaposition with *Traces of the Flowery Moon*, thus allows us to say that the mere portrayal in *Precious Mirror of Boy Actresses* of the contrast between the vulgar, rapacious, and opium-smoking Xi Shiyi, on the one hand, and the chaste, opium-abstaining heroes of sublime love, on the other, in itself enunciates the same highly charged moral position of *Traces of the Flowery Moon* and the later *Shanghai Dust*. *Tale of Filial Heroes* takes an equally charged moral stance, but in the mode of the remarkable warrior woman who does not even smoke tobacco, much less opium, and who saves the world by restoring it to proper Confucian values.  

*Qing* plays a role similar to opium. As a mode of enjoyment, *qing* in these novels is a signifier of Chinese civilizational purity. In their various declensions of the *qing* aesthetic, the sublime lover of the boy actress, the polygynous man and his final courtesan lover, and the passive polygynist and his protective co-wives all take the same side in the battle taking place throughout nineteenth-century literature between China as a civilizational center and the invading forces of the West. Although only *Traces of the Flowery Moon*, *Later Tales of Liaozaizhai*, and *Shanghai Dust* actually describe this battle, the others participate in the same structure of the fantasy of the polygynist-philanderer and his female counterparts who stand for the essence of Chinese cultural character. Wang Tao's portrayals of the philanderer's inalienable pursuit of pleasure among Chinese courtesans, not Japanese or Swiss, aligns his characters with the heroic lovers of *Traces of the Flowery Moon* in their battle against the Taipings and their monstrous states of sexual being.  

The central motif in such battles, regardless of cultural setting or historical era, is the theft of pleasure. The vile enemy steals too much pleasure and even replaces our mode of enjoyment with theirs. The opium smoker is again an example. He or she exemplifies obscene enjoyment, replacing even sex with the ecstasy of the opium high. They enjoy themselves more than pleasure should properly be enjoyed, and thereby take more than their allotment. As I have shown elsewhere, opium the cultural signifier always carried within it the notion that it was from the "West" (as in the widely used terms for opium, "Western smoke," yangyan, and "Western medicine," yangyao, even though most opium in the late *qing* was grown in China).  

As such, it could never be accepted ornormalized in the symbolic universe of late-*qing* China and was always an inherent sign of degrading and obscene desire. *Qing* lovers never smoked opium, or, if they did, as in *Seductive Dreams*, they represented eroded forms of love destined for dire and inglorious endings.  

*Qing* plays a central role in the battles of modes of enjoyment because of its sense of radical subjectivity. The prostitute and boy actress who hate the role they are forced to play exemplify the Lacanian discourse of the hysteric, that is, the subject who occupies a fundamentally impossible social position. Their core question is, "Why am I what you are saying I am?" Qiuian, the most famous boy actress, hates being a *dan* and hates the men he attracts, hence his sublime state of depression and illness, which his true lover Mei Ziyu shares as they suffer together in a world in which they lead a fractured existence. It is not far from the hysteria of their roles to that of Wei Chizhu and Liu Qiwen in *Traces of the Flowery Moon*, Wang Tao's patrons and courtesans in *Later Tales of Liaozaizhai*, or Gu Lansheng and Han Qiue in *Shanghai Dust*. The feminine subjectivity of these men and women is not just part of a sublime love affair; it is also part of a larger fantasy of China as a social and cultural whole in a state of fundamental social and political crisis.  

The deradicalized forms of *qing* in *Tale of Filial Heroes* and *Nine-times Cockold* recall the function of Lacan's master discourse, which represses the inherent state of split subjectivity, the hysteric's in particular. The Master is comfortable in his enforcement of social law and, like Zhang Qiugu in *Nine-times Cockold*, possesses a knowing eye, which is the most telling feature of the master figure. The Lacanian notion of gaze best describes the function of the knowing eye. Gaze refers to the fact that people never look at me from where I expect them to. No one is seen in the way she wants to be seen. The important distinction here is between the *look* and the gaze, where the gaze comes from the perspective of what is looked at, which never coincides with the subject's look. The split between the look of the eye (the subject's) and the gaze (the object's, that is, other people's) is the visual form of the split of split subjectivity. The knowing eye looks at an object but disrecognizes how that object is looking back at him. The three women who swear sisterhood in *Flowers of Shanghai* enact the gaze when they comment on the
horrible appearance of the half-open eyes of the napping Grand Master of Love, Qi Yunson, and how he can never know what is truly in their hearts. The look back is particularly missing in the novels portraying the most brazen and knavish polygynist-philanderers, Revisiting the Silken Chambers, Courtesan Chambers, and Nine-times Cuckold. Thus, in Courtesan Chambers we see one of the most farcical examples of the absence of the gaze in nineteenth-century fiction when Lin Yixiang's disembodied soul looks at his own corpse as his wife weeps over him. It is a case of the knowing eye that sees himself without others returning his look, as if he sees all, but they see nothing.

Flowers of Shanghai stands out among all the novels I have examined because of the way in which it crystallizes the moment of historical transition in which one master begins to pass away as another inevitably arrives. The in-between moment, as Lacan says, exposes the arbitrariness of all masters, the past one especially, and hence this novel's stark difference from others about patrons and prostitutes in Shanghai, especially Nine-times Cuckold. The gaze is omnipresent in Flowers of Shanghai, especially in the form of the brothel facilitator, Hong Shanqing. This is not to say that he qualifies as a kind of psychoanalyst, an anachronistic notion, not to mention that Hong Shanqing himself is also caught up in the discourse of the master and is never purely in the position of the analyst. Nevertheless, as the facilitator of brothel affairs, he and his prostitute-mistress repeatedly examine the love fantasy of the others surrounding them, doing so in a way that exposes it as something artificial and contingent. They expose people to their entrapment in the fantasy, which amounts to exposing them to the fantasy/contagion of the world of Shanghai. Although he serves the supposed master philanderers frequenting the brothels, he never emulates them or strives to be one like them, but instead stands for a new type of man who adapts to the new world of Shanghai without missing the old China or resenting what Zhang Qiugu calls the "incorrigibly wanton" prostitute.

After the Verge of Modernity

The final question of this book is, what form will sexuality take after the late Qing in terms of sexual agency and pleasure? This can be addressed on two levels, one that of the future of the qing aesthetic after the end of the Qing, the other that of the residual and shadowy effects of polygamous sexuality.

Versions of the qing aesthetic continued in the sentimental Mandarin Duck and Butterfly fiction that followed the Qing. One of the most famous examples is Jade Pear Spirit (Yuli Han), the novel inspired by Traces of the Flowerly Moon. As Rey Chow puts it, love in this and other Butterfly fiction is no longer a "cherished state of being." Instead, it is a sign of disaster that must be hidden completely from sight—hence the lovers in Jade Pear Spirit never even hold hands. May Fourth intellectuals condemned this fiction, seeing the authors as anachronistic in their placement of the impossibility of love within the framework of the Confucian virtue that their stories elevate.23 In Butterfly fiction, the radical nature of sublime passion gets subsumed under the backward-looking vision of Confucian chastity. Or, instead of backward looking, we should say frozen, as the lovers in their arrested state display their inability to enter the modern era. The excess of the feminine that is prized by the qing aesthetic goes against the flow of the new modern subject advocated by late-Qing ideologues, and thus the necessary death of that aesthetic.

But there is another way of looking at their affair in that the qing lovers were in fact uncomfortable both before and after modernity. The same dubious relation between qing in its most radical forms and the centrist force of Confucian values continued in the love stories of Butterfly fiction, where modernity takes the place of Confucian values. In other words, modernity shares the same hegemonic effect as patriarchal Confucianism with respect to the intricately intimate world of the qing aesthetic. So, for example, if the lovers in Jade Pear Spirit and other early-Republican sentimental fiction can only enjoy sad and unfulfilled love, this is not simply a case of anachronistic sexual repression. Instead, as I have said, the lovers in their arrested state display their inability to enter the modern era, but that inability represents heroic defiance and refusal. In their arrested state, deliberately refusing to consummate, they signal their refusal to choose between village and metropolis, or Chinese qing and foreign love. They are like loyalist lovers who reject the forced choice, even if to many they seemed impossibly maudlin. Their nostalgia and excess of emotion—for which May Fourth intellectuals rejected them—concealed a radical effect recalling that of the late-Ming notion of qing.

As for the after effects of polygamous sexuality, in recent work Ding Nai-fei considers the positionalities of the polygynist-philanderer and the main wife, concubine, and prostitute in vestigial and recombinant forms in contemporary Taiwan. She refers to the Taipei prostitutes who took to the streets in 1997 to protest the city's proposal to revoke their licenses, while feminists in Taiwan at the time opposed licensed prostitution.24 In her critique of the feminist position, Ding writes of the "affective power of a hierarchic principle that although no longer at work as dominant ideology nonetheless functions in the manner of a shadow force." In other words, even if no longer dominant, the sexual regime of the polygynist-philanderer still exerts a shadowy force on the logic of banning prostitution. The baseness of the wanton woman, which is a fundamental feature of the regime that scripts the roles of main wife versus concubine and prostitute, still functions in the contemporary Taiwanese feminist who calls for the suppression of prostitution. The contemporary intellectual-professional feminist makes "universalist
liberatory claims" for the bondmaid-concubine and the prostitute, and thereby assumes the unself-critical stance of the traditional "good woman" (liangjia funi), meanwhile denying rights of protection and livelihood to the concubine and the prostitute. In short, the modern feminist uncritically occupies the position of the good woman/main wife. Ding's points can be clarified by furthering the question asked above about the possible parallels between the Shanghai prostitute and the female separatists of the early 1900s. In the terms of the wanton woman of Ming and Qing fiction, how is "a sexually opportunistic and incidentally murderous veneful succubus of the concubine-bondmaid denomination [like Pan Jinlian in Jin Ping Mei] to become 'useful' for present day feminists in Taiwan?" In other words, can the sex worker who demonstrates on the streets for her rights in 1990s Taipei also be "recognized as feminist?"

My final point is a hypothesis about the future of a polygynous discourse like that found in late-Qing novels. In what forms will the insistence on the primacy of polygynous pleasure persist after the end of the Qing? This question applies not only to men who carry on with various echoes of so-called past behavior but also to women who continue as their "base" polygamous counterparts as well as women who in their antipolygamy still follow the mode of the chaste "good woman." Let us speculate about how chastity continued to be a dominant virtue after the fall of the Qing by going back to a common lament of late-Qing and Republican period intellectuals, the backwardness of the Chinese national character. In literary and nonliterary contexts alike, the Chinese man and woman were generalized as slavish, selfish, ignorant, and utterly lacking in self-consciousness. They had no sense of individualism and moral autonomy, the basic elements for forming a new and democratic nation. To forge a modern sense of Chinese national identity, the major motifs became the healthy reproduction of the race and the strengthening of the population. Modern morality would liberate people from feudal practices and mentalities like footbinding and polygamy, while medicine and the science of hygiene would liberate the people from poor health and disease. In all this, the question of sexual pleasure was in general marginalized, especially, as Rey Chow emphasizes, that of the woman. The erotic tradition known until then was dismissed, along with the polygamist and brothel patron on the one hand and the concubine and prostitute on the other. My point is that the cost of dismissing the polygamist-philanderer and his female counterparts was never adequately paid. They were condemned too easily and unquestioningly. A step was skipped in the transition to a new paradigm of citizenship in terms of unanswered questions: What was salvageable and what was resistant to change in the traditions of polygamy, the patronage of prostitution, and their definitions of sexual pleasure? How was one to separate the question of the sexual pleasure of women from its identification with wanton baseness or from its centuries-long portrayal in the art of the bedchamber? The problematic nature of sexual pleasure had to do with the profound influence of polygamy upon sexuality in general, making the same theorem apply in late-Qing China that applied before: namely, the equation of the transcendence of polygamous sexuality and the transcendence of sexual pleasure.

In regard to the residual forms of concubinage and primary wifehood in Taiwan, Ding writes, "Sexuality, that is, all non-reproductive pleasurable sexuality, seems an all-male domain that is either bad polygamous consumption (preying upon the weak and innocent), or good procreative sex in marriage." She points, in other words, to a troublesome dichotomy that still persists between the stigmatized zone of polygamous sexuality and the exalted zone of heterosexual marriage, with little room left for other sexualities to emerge—hence the fact that gays and lesbians accompanied prostitutes on the streets of Taipei in 1997, all demonstrating against the banning of licensed prostitution. Taiwan may differ from mainland China, Hong Kong, Singapore, and concentrated Chinese communities elsewhere, but consideration of these other areas must still keep in mind the continually productive forces of polygyny and prostitution as residually dominant regimes. The new and the old "jostle and struggle in and between different space-times," surprising us with remnants, renewals, and recombinations of what we may have thought was abandoned long ago. Just as polygamy and the patronage of courtesans were about to be abandoned as relics of the past, in other words, they had already begun to exert shadowy and residual effects on sexuality afterwards.
Notes

Introduction. The Male Consort of the Remarkable Woman


3. The Chinese sources I use also refer to it as *qiqie chengqun* (droves of wires and concubines) or *yi qi shuqie* (one wife and several concubines), for example. The term *fengliu caizi* also exists, which resembles philanderer or libertine, but too narrowly connotes a man who is “dashing and talented.”

4. See Matthew Sommer, "Making Sex Work: Polyandry as Survival Strategy in Qing Dynasty China," in Bryna Goodman and Wendy Larson, eds., *Gender in Motion: Divisions of Labor and Cultural Change in Late Imperial and Modern China* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), pp. 29–54; see pp. 31–33. The practice stretched from Taiwan to Gansu, and it often involved actual written contracts.


6. In the first type, bridewealth is also a prominent factor. Women are valued for their labor and hence the exchange based on a bridewealth payment. This type
of polygyny occurs mainly in sub-Saharan Africa. White calls it "wealth-increasing polygyny," but other scholars disagree with this term, saying that it is better thought of as an inexpensive form of polygyny (White, "Rethinking Polygyny").


8. See Chen Yiyuan's study, Yuan Ming zhongjian chuanqi xiao xiao yunji (Hong Kong: Xuefeng wenhua shiye gongsi, 1997), especially concerning Ming novelists like Zhong qing liji, Huashen sunmiao zhuang, Xun fang yajia, Wu jin yu zhuance, and especially Tianyi yuanyan and Li Sheng liuyi Shiyuwan. It is out of works like these that grew the polygynist fantasies of vernacular fiction such as Xinghua yuan, Tao hua ying, and Nao hua cong. The theme of the man's encounters with a series of women was called yan yu or yan yu, "encounters with beauties" or "tour of beauties."


16. On the uses and advantages of Lacan's four discourses, see ibid., pp. 126–128. In

Lacanian terms, the hysteric is the ultimate model of subjectivity. This gets back to the idea of split subject: no one escapes the condition of being split. The master is oblivious to this fact but is nevertheless just as split as anyone else. If anyone, the hystericized subject is the most aware that the emperor wears no clothes, that is, that the master is equally split. Still, the hysteric is not necessarily able to act on that awareness, but remains subject to the discourse of the master.


19. The best exposition of these ideas is in Ding, Obscene Things.

20. This is but one way to look at bound feet. See McMahon review of Dorothy Ko, Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding, Nan Nii: Men, Women and Gender in Early and Imperial China 9.2 (2007): 395–400.

Chapter 1. Sublime Passion and the Remarkable Woman


2. Li Wai-ye observes that the late Ming was "the age that discovered radical subjectivity" (Enchantment and Disenchantment, pp. 45–46).

3. As noted by Martin Huang, the reverence toward chaste women was extreme in the Ming; women were regarded as "natural exemplars of... loyalty and chastity" (original emphasis). See Huang, Negotiating Masculinities in Late Imperial China (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), pp. 6, 72.
Chapter 7. Cultural Destiny and Polygynous Love in Zou Tao's Shanghai Dust

1. This chapter is a modified version of a journal article, "Cultural Destiny and Polygynous Love in Zou Tao's Shanghai Dust," Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, and Reviews 27 (2005): 117–135. The edition I use is Zou Tao, Haishang chentian ying (Nanchang: Biaihuazhou wenyi chubanshe, 1993). Zou Tao was a well-known reformist thinker who wrote on the customs and political principles of foreign nations in Wangguo jinzhang kao (Modern Governments Abroad), Wangguo fenggu kao (Customs of the World's Nations), and Diqu fangyu kao (World Geography). In his later years he taught at a Catholic girls' school in Shanghai. The earliest known edition dates from 1904, but Wang Tao's 1896 preface indicates that the book existed in manuscript form at that time already.

2. Su Yunlan is the name of the courtesan Zou Tao supposedly failed to marry; she wrote a critique of his novel, which Zou Tao appends at the beginning. Wang Tao's preface details her life. Numerous features of the brothel recall earlier Ming and Qing scenarios in which men and women drop the formalities of hierarchical appellations. They socialize, write poetry, and conduct their love affairs there, though some of the women never have sex with their patrons. One of them knows martial arts, as she demonstrates when she subdues an unruly customer (24). The women tolerate no insults from men (32). A new element is the brothel's protection by Shanghai's foreign laws, which are "precise and objective" (shi shi qiu shi, 22.357–358).

3. The Boxers had been active since the early 1800s, but they became especially anti-foreign in the 1890s. They are still called yihe quan here, not yihe tuan, the name they received in 1899, when members of the imperial government began to enlist them in anti-foreign activities.

4. In one case it is a matter of implying to her mother that she would rather have married Han instead of the warrel (11.154–155); in another case, she implies that she would willingly have become his concubine (31.509); and, finally, in speaking to Han she almost utters the words, "if we were husband and..., but then she cut herself off" (49.851).


Chapter 8. The Polygynous Politics of the Modern Chinese Man in Nine-times Cuckold

1. Prominent critics dismissed Nine-times Cuckold as a mere guidebook for rakish brothel patrons, but it remained popular from its first appearance up to at least the 1920s. Zhang Chunfan serialized it in newspapers from 1906 to 1910. He was by then already writing short stories for newspapers and was also an educational and provincial-level official in both the late-Qing and early-Republic governments. The edition used is Jiuwei gui (Nanchang: Biaihuazhou wenyi chubanshe, 1993).

2. Thus the examples of women such as Kang Aide (1873–1931), Li Bicheng (1883–1943), and Zhang Zhiyuan (1871–?) on Kang and Zhang, see Hu Ying, Tales of Translation: Composing the New Woman in China, 1899–1918 (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000); on Li Bicheng, see Grace Gong, "Alternative Modernities, or a Classical Woman of Modern China: The Challenging Trajectory of Li Bicheng's (1883–1943) Life and Song Lyrics," Nan Nü: Men, Women, and Gender in China 6.1 (2004): 12–59. On the legal deconstruction of polygamy in the early-Republican period, see Lisa Tran, "Concubines under Modern Chinese Law" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2005).


4. Modern feminism first gathered momentum in the mid-1890s and found a regular voice in journals before the mid-1900s. See, for example, Liang Qichao's biographies of Madame Roland (1902) and Kang Aide (1897) as discussed in Hu Ying's Tales of Translation, pp. 3, 123–126, and pp. 172–179; on the new man, see pp. 150–151. On anarcho-feminism in this period, see Peter Zarrow, "He Zhen and Anarcho-Feminism in China," Journal of Asian Studies 47.4 (1988): 796–813.


6. In Nine-times Cuckold, see 23,172–173; and in Li Boyuan's Tracks of the Snowgoose, see Li Boyuan quanjji (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1997), vol. 3, 16.92, referring to a prostitute's waijiao shouchan.

7. Zeng Pu's (1872–1935) Flower in a Sea of Karma was likewise popular, selling tens of thousands of copies in the several years after 1905 and continuing in popularity for the next several decades. Jin Tianhe (1873–1947) was the author of the first six chapters, but Zeng took over the novel after Jin abandoned it.

8. These are the words used in his seduction of the prostitute Lin Daiyu, after they watch the opera performance of the seduction scene of Pan Jinlian and Ximen Qing.

9. Another example of language switching can be found in the passage in which Chen Wenxian is angry at Zhang Qiugou, who—proving his sensitivity and savoir
fair—then turns from masculine Mandarin to feminine Suzhou dialect and softens her by simply telling her, "Don't get mad now" (34.257). In another scene, when a prostitute asks him where he is going, he responds in Suzhou dialect that he is going to "do" her and another woman at the same time (against the prostitute's usual insistence that the patron patronize one woman at a time, 44.320).

10. See Lu Xun, "Shanghai wenyi zhi yibie," in Erxin ji (Shanghai: Hezhong shudian, 1932), pp. 124, 126, and Hu Shi's preface in Han Bangqing, Haishanghua liezhuan, p. 17. David Wang translates Lu Xun's words as "tainted young man plus rascal" (Fin-de-siécle Splendor, p. 88).

11. To someone who challenges him, he insists that he is above the actor who becomes the prostitute's secret lover without spending any money on her, even taking money from her (31.231). Zhang Qigu maintains the bearing of a patron who actually spends money, misery being one of the traits he most detests, "Canons of whoring" occurs in the title to chapter 31 (31.229).

12. David Wang refers to Nine-times Cuckold as not a "sequel" to Flower in a Sea of Karma, but nevertheless as consciously taking up where the earlier novel left off (Fin-de-siécle Splendor, pp. 109–110).

13. Which forms the title of another well-known novel of the time, the 1898 Haishang mingji sida jingang gishu (The Four Courtesans Door-gods of Shanghai).

14. The term, which describes Lin Daiyu in the scene just referred to, was in use from the late Qing through the first several decades of the Republic. For a definition with illustration, see Wang Zhongxian, Shanghai suoyu tushuo (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 1999, original edition 1935), pp. 139–141.

15. The original formula is yi yi dai lao. See the brilliant French translation and commentary by Francois Kircher (pseudonym of Francois Wildt), Les trente-six stratagèmes: traité secret de stratégie chinoise (Paris: Editions du Rocher, 2001), pp. 50–53, which has "Attendre tranquillment un ennemi qui dépouille" (to wait quietly as the enemy exhausts himself; p. 50).


17. That is, xiaoqi, dong shou dong jiao, and yiwei waichan (9.70).

18. The unmarried Zhao Erbao was a renjiaren (ningenjin) in Flowers of Shanghai before becoming a full-fledged prostitute. In her case, she was lured by a man who took advantage of her gullibility.

19. On the point that Zeng Pu is less radical than the original author of Flower in a Sea of Karma, see Ouyang Jian's discussion of the novel in Wanqing xiaoshuo shi (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 1997), pp. 187–224.

Conclusion. The Postpolygynous Future

1. Niwa shi, by Haitian duxiaozi, can be found with other novels in Lingnan yu yi nishi et al., Dongou niushaojie etc. (Nanchang: Biahuazhou wenyi chubanshe, 1991); for this quote, see p. 441.

2. On the evolution of the actor-patron relationship during the Republican period, see Kang Wenqing, Obsession: Male Same-Sex Relations in China, 1900–1950 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009).

3. Both Hu Shaochen and Bao Zhenpeii discuss women and polygamy specifically: in Hu, Cai ni cheye weimiian; in Bao, Qingdai niuwojia tanci xiaoshuo lungao, which contains three subsections on polygamy and concubinage (pp. 123–126).

4. On Sun Deying, see Hu Shaochen, Cai ni cheye weimiian, pp. 181, 207–210. Once her mother died, Sun divorced marriage and from 1863 to 1868 devoted herself to writing Jin yu yuans, never leaving the inner chambers during that time. In Liu hua meng (1841), the heroine refuses to return to female dress until the emperor orders her to join a polygynous household. She still involves herself in political affairs until she fulfills her ambitions and in Pu Songling—style becomes an immortal. Mengying yuans (1843) author profoundly regrets being a woman. Ten of her twelve heroines never marry; all of them and the two who do marry die before the end. Zixiu ji (1865) cross-dressing heroine commits suicide rather than go back to being a woman.


6. My information on Shen Cai relies on Grace Fong's scholarship in Herself as Author: Gender, Agency, and Writing in Late Imperial China (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), pp. 69–83. As Fong translates, Shen Cai wrote that it was in 1766 "when I first had my hair pinned up and paid my respects to Madam. Madam gave me this calligraphy as a token of her friendship in return" (p. 76). There is also the suggestion that Shen Cai's younger sister became a concubine in the household (p. 70). The sisters came from a good family that suffered decline; as Fong reports, it is impossible to tell from the records if either had children.

7. Ibid., pp. 78–83.

8. See ibid., pp. 81–82.

9. As Dorothy Ko writes, when Wang discovered husband and concubine becoming too intimate, she wrote a poem expressing her displeasure. My information on Wang comes from Ko, Teachers of the Inner Chamber, pp. 129–136. Yet another case is that of the poet Qu Bingyun, who frequently discussed and exchanged poetry with her husband, who had a concubine. Although Qu did not introduce or choose the concubine, she maintained steady contact with the young woman, especially through poetry, giving her the courtesy name Liangxing, a homonym for "loving you." The two were constant companions, thus demonstrating the situation of rising above jealousy in which the main wife takes the lower-class, less-well-educated concubine under her wing. My information on Qu Bingyun comes from Liu Xi Meng, Poetry as Power: Yuan Mei's Female Disciple Qu Bingyun (1767–1810) (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2007).

11. The novels of valiant heroes and heroines include An Old Man's Radiant Words and the late-Qing novels about martial heroes such as Tale of Filial Heroes, Rounding the Brigands (Dangzhou chi), and Judge Bao and His Valiant Lieutenants (Sanxia wuyi). Numerous late-Qing figures (e.g., Zhang Taiyan, Huang Zanxian, and Liang Qichao) promoted the ideal of the valiant hero prominent in such works.


13. This perception was accompanied by the sense among many Chinese intellectuals of the senescence and corruption of the Manchu empire. As cited in Guo Yanli, Zhongguo jindai wenxue fashuo (Jinan: Shandong jiaoyu chubanshe, 1990), volume 1, see, for example, the poetry of Wei Yuan (1794–1856), p. 125; Zhang Weiping (1780–1859), p. 161; and references to Lu Song (1791–1860), pp. 214–216; Lu Yitong (1804–1863), p. 218; and Bei Qingqiao (1810–1863), pp. 225–227 (e.g., satirical poems about the ridiculous tactics of the Qing military against the British).


15. See Karl, Staging the World, regarding the idea that “China became thinkable as specifically national at the same time as, and only when, China became consciously worldly,” that is, at the end of the nineteenth century. Such a framing also has to do with the “incipient understanding of how imperialism worked to ideologically create its object”; see pp. 13 and 151–152.

16. See Cochran, Twilight of the Literary: Figures of Thought in the Age of Print (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 135. These points derive from Cochran’s discussion of Kant and his “world idea as the conceptual framework of modernity.” Cochran refers to Kant’s creation of “the modern science of man as an autonomous agent . . . derived from the idea of an abstract human without local limitations” (pp. 169, 20; emphasis mine).

17. These stipulations can be found in numerous novels besides Flowers of Shanghai, including the 1899 Tracks of the Snow goose, the 1908 Nine-tailed Fox (jiuweihua), and Sun Jiazheng’s 1903 Shanghai Splendor (Haishang fanhua meng). For the second and third stipulations, see Haishang fanhua meng (Changchun: Shidai wenyi chubanshe, 1993), 128.326 and II.21.597, referring to the two parts in this edition as I and II, followed by chapter and page number. “Equality,” called pingdeng, appears in this novel in a reference to the use of status apppellations between the prostitute and the man’s family, including his main wife (II.14.510). Shanghai Splendor, to be sure, ultimately emulates the truly ging-inspired couple who leave the cold world of Shanghai and return to Suzhou, where the man’s wife awaits him patiently with their newborn child, while the prostitute agrees to kowtow as concubine to the wife (II.22).

18. Such portrayals continued for several decades, as shown in studies by Ellen Laing, “Women in ‘Shanghai manhua’ (Shanghai sketches)” and Barbara Mittler, “The New Woman: Dreams, Nightmares (and Realities) in Women’s Magazines from the Republican Period,” from a 2004 conference at Heidelberg University, “New Gender Constructs in Literature, the Visual and the Performing Arts of Modern China and Japan.”


20. See Niehai hua, 21.245. She also says, “You haven’t got what it takes to make me stay by you for good!”

21. For further elaboration about who smokes and who does not, and of the significance of opium versus tobacco, see McMahon, The Fall of the God of Money, pp. 155–162.

22. See ibid., p. 20; and for a discussion of opium and sex, pp. 114, 129–132, 162–169.


25. Rey Chow, Women and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pp. 54–55, and her wording for this point in terms of the “split between upholding Confucian virtue and dramatizing that which undermines those virtues.” Chow’s point is that the act of punishing the self by disallowing romantic fulfillment is the effect of historic trauma (something also seen in Traces of the Flower Moon and Shanghai Dust). Chow also notes the idea of woman “as the locus of social change” (p. 39). “Because women are the fundamental support of familial social structure, the epochal changes that historians document are most readily perceived through the changing status of Chinese women” (p. 53). She sees “women’s lives as the place
where the most intense ideological issues can be dramatized" (p. 104) and notes that the woman problem is the kind of issue that "culture either dismisses point-blank or subsumes under the largest and most irresponsible terms" (p. 119).

26. See "Feminist Knots: Sex and Domestic Work in the Shadow of the Bondmaid-concubine," Inter-Asia Cultural Studies 3.3 (2002): 449–467, which discusses the question that arose when Taipei prostitutes protested: could they be considered feminists and radicals, or were they examples of false consciousness and mere remnants of a former base existence that had not evolved properly? Could "sex work and sexual service... be validated as a 'right'?" (p. 452). On the further relevance of late-imperial sexual formations in contemporary Taiwan, see also Zhang Jiarong, "Guoqi guoqi yizhi lai: 80 niandai xiangxing xiaoshuode qingfu shuxie" (M.A. thesis, National Tsinghua University, 2006).


28. See Lydia Liu's Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity—China, 1900–1937 (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1995), which examines the debates on individualism and humanism in early-twentieth-century China. She sums up the traits as follows, paraphrasing Sun Yat-sen: "serve, ignorant, self-centered, and lacking in the ideal of freedom" (pp. 48–49). Liu discusses the development of a new stylistics in fiction which focused on a character as an individual in possession of psychological and moral truth, and not a mere element in a kinship hierarchy (p. 94).

29. Frank Dikötter discusses the role of science in his Sex, Culture and Modernity in China (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1995), pp. 7, 17, 110. In the new science of the healthy citizen, women were to become healthy mothers (pp. 17–18), while the new habits of hygiene still maintained the dangerous qualities of female sexuality (p. 61). The division was still made between the man with his brainy capacities and public role and the woman and the function of her womb and her sequestration from the public world (p. 29). Sex was transformed into a "medical category denoting degeneracy, disease and contamination" (p. 122). As for European knowledge, in general it was "selectively appropriated," especially in terms of the distinction between procreative and nonprocreative sex, including homosexuality and heterosexuality (p. 139). The individual's right to pleasure was bracketed as a European notion.


31. See "Concupiscence and New Feminist Imaginaries," p. 19 (talk presented at the Sixth International Super-Slim Conference on Politics of Gender/Sexuality, National Central University, November 27, 2004). Many thanks to Ding Naifei for supplying me with this manuscript.


**Character Glossary**

"A Bao" 阿寶
"A Lian A Ai" 阿懐阿愛
"A Xian" 阿嫌
afurong 阿芙蓉
ai 愛
"Ainu" 愛奴
an buwang wei 安不忘危
An Ji 安吉
An Xuehai 安雪海
Ba Yingguan 巴英官
ba Yixiang kanle yi kan 把鎅香看了一
"Ba Qulian" 白秋蓮
Bailin 拜林
bajie 巴結
banlabaya 半拉包牙
Bao Tianxiao 包天笑
Baoxai 趙雪
bu 或
buorong 包容
Baozhu 趙珠
bashi 把勢
Bei Qingqiao 貝青喬
bensi 本事
benxiaoning nan yi 本性難移
Bi shenghua 笔生花
bi yeyou 寶冶遊
Bian Sai 卑塞
bianfa qiziang 變法自強
bifa 笔法
biji 笔記
Bitao 碧桃
Bu Honglou meng 補紅樓夢
Buke 逋客
burnie 不僕
bushu yuanjia buju tou 不是冤家不聚頭
buzhi wei ren 不知為人
Cai Erkang 蔡爾康
caimiu 才秀
caizi jia liumang 才子加流氓
Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹
ceshi 陝西
"Chang F" 婵娥
changzhan 長三
Chen Duansheng 陳端生
Chen Sen 陳森
Chen Shaoxian 陳少先
Chen Shiweng 陳時象
Chen Wenzhan 陳文贊
Chen Xiaoyun 陳小雲
Chen Yinke 陳寅恪
Chen Yuan 陳沅
Chen Yuanyuan 陳園園
"Chen Yunqi" 陳雲奇
Chen Zilong 陳子龍
Cheng-Zhu 程朱
chi 腦
chixin 痕心
chou 愁
chui jia 出家
chu jiu 出局
chushi 處士