

# *Misers, Shrews, and Polygamists*



SEXUALITY AND

MALE-FEMALE

RELATIONS IN

EIGHTEENTH-

CENTURY

CHINESE FICTION

KEITH

MCMAHON

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## PREFACE

The majority of people investigating gender and sexuality over the past dozen or so years have worked in American and European cultures and have rarely been able to find in-depth studies about these topics in non-European fields. This book is one of several recent attempts to alleviate that problem.

More translation and exposition of sources will be necessary in this study than in those on Western culture. Too many of the texts I rely on are utterly unknown to contemporary readers and scholars; most have never been and probably never will be translated. The linguistic and bibliographic demands of these works have required extensive explication, cross-referencing, and comparison of editions. Readers in fields in which such aspects are no longer at issue must understand the need for this approach, although they may skim over parts they deem too specialized, including some lengthy translations which I nevertheless feel will have little or no other chance to be seen in print.

As involved as I have become in the effort of gaining access to rare texts, however, I am still primarily interested in using them to map a broad range of sexual and gender-related behavior. My main goal will be to treat novels as if they were debating the issue of polygamy, a prominent material manifestation of male sexual privilege, even though polygamy was of course taken for granted in eighteenth-century China and by and large not openly questioned. In other words, although authors were in no way united in seeing polygamy as a problem, their works are full of signs that such male sexual privilege was ambiguous and problematic.

Numerous sources besides vernacular fiction provide information on

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polygamy and sexuality in general in China: e.g., the classical tale, biography and autobiography, court cases, collections of miscellaneous jottings, medical literature, genealogies, prescriptive texts on such things as feminine virtue, the art of sex, and household management. I limit myself to vernacular fiction because of what I have mentioned above: the rareness of and difficulty of gaining access to Chinese erotic novels, which make up over half of what this book covers. In fact, peculiar conditions surround research on erotic novels. Although the study of erotica is still highly restricted in China, over the last ten years I as a foreigner have been able to read and research books that relatively few mainland Chinese can ever see or discuss as openly. Some of these works exist only in China; most are in Beijing or are otherwise located in libraries here and there in Asia, Europe, and the United States. Without the sponsorship of the Committee on Scholarly Communications with the People's Republic of China (now called the Committee on Scholarly Communications with China, a unit of the National Academy of Sciences), I would never have gained the cooperation of educational authorities and the librarians of rare book rooms in China, which severely restrict access to many of the works discussed in this book. Nor could I have met with Chinese scholars and friends who have helped interpret many points of language and material life in both the rare and nonrare works. I have also spent many hours in the United States reading microfiche and microfilm copies of numerous other rare and obscure works not yet republished. Fortunately, scholars in the past two decades have produced numerous reference works providing plot summaries and other information about rare novels; the *Zhongguo tongshu xiaoshuo zongmu tiyao* (1990) and Ōtsuka Hidetaka's *Zōho Chūgoku tsūzoku shosetsu shomoku* (1987) are two of the most useful of these works. Because of the time and special effort it has taken to do such research, I am greatly interested in establishing a foundation of knowledge about these novels and their composite whole as erotic literature. Such knowledge should provide a point of reference for future studies in numerous fields.

I have written this book over many years and am indebted to numerous people for helping me in various aspects of my work. Chen Yupi, Li Ling, Pan Suiming, Shen Tianyou, Sun Xun, Yu Songqing, and Francois Wildt have provided the greatest assistance and inspiration. Others have read and/or critiqued parts of this work and will be noted at the appropriate places. Three anonymous readers criticized weaknesses, cor-

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rected errors, and gave supplemental information. The administrators of the affairs of foreign scholars (*waiban*) at Beijing University have for three lengthy periods provided me with a comfortable and economical setting for my studies. Other foreign students and scholars from Africa, Europe, and North America made those times the best of my life. Fellowships from the Committee on Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China and the liberality of the University of Kansas in granting me nonfinanced leaves have been of vital importance as well. The Chinese University Press, *Late Imperial China* (published by The Johns Hopkins University Press), and The University of Chicago Press have kindly permitted me to include previously published material in chapters 3, 5, and 7, respectively.

I am deeply sorry that Helen McMahon, my mother, passed away before she could see my work finished.

### *Notes on Romanization*

This book uses the pinyin system of romanization. Titles of books will be kept in pinyin and only translated the first time they appear and whenever they are the subject of lengthy discussion (for example, a whole chapter or section of a chapter).

For readers unfamiliar with the pinyin system, its three most troublesome consonants are as follows:

C is pronounced *ts* as in “its,” but functions as an initial (as in *cai*, rhyming with “eye”).

Q is pronounced *ch* (*qing* sounds like *ching*, rhyming with “sing”).

X is pronounced *sy*, a palatalized version of *sh* (*xi* sounds like *syee* or *shee*).

In addition, the reader may want to remember these other troublesome sounds:

Z is like the *ds* in “heads.”

Zh is like the *j* in “Jim.”

Zhi, chi, and shi sound like *jer*, *cher*, and *sher*, all rhyming with “her.”

The *i* in *zi*, *ci*, and *si* is something like a shwa sound with the lips more closed.

## POTENT POLYGAMISTS AND CHASTE MONOGAMISTS

### Sexuality and Male-Female Subjectivity in Qing Fiction

Having multiple wives was one of the main badges of male privilege in Ming and Qing China (1368–1644 and 1644–1911). This book is about how such male sexual privilege plays itself out in vernacular novels from about the mid-seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries. I will read fiction for its representations of sexuality and male-female subjectivity, at the same time investigating the gender roles of the patriarchal polygamous family. I will use the terms miser and shrew as metaphors to caricaturize male and female extremes implied in the construction of these roles and often illustrated in these works. The two poles define a sexual economy in which man and woman occupy mutually alien positions from which each can theoretically take vital essence from or lose it to the other. In order to protect himself from such loss, the polygamous man must distance himself from any one woman and instead master and have healthy intercourse with many women. Miser is the caricature of this retentive self-containment at its extreme. *Pofu*, “shrew,” is the caricature of the overflowing, male-enervating woman. She metaphorically “scatters” (*po*) her polluting fluids on the man, who is fragile unless he builds his defenses and masters her. With the miser and shrew in the periphery, the potent polygamist and his alter ego the wastrel are the central characters of these novels, positive and negative versions of the filial progenitor upon whom everyone’s future is supposed to depend.

From the study of these and other characters, the main issues that will emerge are these: How does the man with many wives manage and

justify his sexual authority? What factors condition the wastrel's ruination? Why and how does the socially privileged man often escape or limit his presumed authority, sometimes to the point of portraying himself as abject before the shrewish woman? How do women accommodate or coddle the man, or else oppose, undermine, and sometimes remold him? Finally, with what logic and what limits does the man place himself lower than spiritually and morally superior women—as in the case of the feminized scholar-poet—and to what extent does he thereby repair his own or other men's bad image?

The reasons for my focus on polygamy have to do with the realities of both Qing society and the contents of Qing fiction, and with the fact that scholars have tended to discuss this topic only briefly or in passing. Few so far have examined its constructedness according to the aspects of sexuality, gender, and subjectivity.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps they have considered it as a mere aspect of patriarchy and the rule of the male elite and therefore too narrow a topic of study. In terms of the social-symbolic order, however, polygamy was a model of success, a kind of perfected form of marriage aspired to by lower-class men and even women (who would rise by becoming concubines or chambermaids in wealthy households, for instance). The access to multiple sexual partners, whether marital or not, was legalized, glorified, and widely enjoyed by Ming and Qing men, a great number of whom were the most powerful and competitive members of their local and national elites. To be sure, polygamy was not the model or ideal for every man and woman; and in fact monogamy was the usual form of marriage, while polygamy was a matter of privilege and means. Furthermore, many variations of marriage existed, including the uxorialocal (called *ru zhui*), in which a man married into a woman's family, and which plays a significant role both within and in place of polygamy in many Qing novels discussed here. Nevertheless, to study sexuality and gender in premodern China is also to study polygamy and its particular assumption of the primacy of the male cycle of energy.

The fiction that most frequently illustrates the miser, shrew, polygamist, and other character types I discuss in this book often goes under the rubric of *renqing xiaoshuo*, a term used by numerous scholars in modern China meaning, literally, "fiction about human situations," with a strong emphasis upon *qing*, "feelings, sentiment."<sup>2</sup> This loosely termed group of works includes stories about love affairs, sexual encounters, marriage, family life, and upbringing (not included are works primarily about such

things as dynastic history, battles against real and demonic enemies, or court cases, which nevertheless contain material relevant to the study of sexuality and which often make their way into works otherwise focused on *renqing*). The issue of desire and how to regulate it runs through all these situations. These domestic topics and the accompanying array of male and female character types are most fully charted in a number of lengthy novels of the Ming and Qing, including *Honglou meng* (Dream of the Red Chamber, also known as Story of the Stone) and several lesser-known literati novels, as well as numerous shorter works both erotic and nonerotic.

The organizing principle of my discussion is in fact to treat works according to whether or not they contain sexual detail and according to relative length and complexity of portrayal. The shorter works (twenty chapters or so) provide idealistic and rather formulaic portraits of monogamy and polygamy. These are the scholar-beauty romances (*caizi jiaren xiaoshuo*) of chapters 5 and 6 and *Shenlou zhi* (The Mirage of Love) of chapter 12. The lengthy novels (of one hundred or so chapters) contain highly detailed and problematizing representations of gender and sexuality. These are the works examined in chapters 7 to 11 and 13—that is, *Yesou puyan* (A Country Codger's Words of Exposure), *Honglou meng*, *Lin Lan Xiang* (The Six Wives of the Wastrel Geng), *Qilu deng* (Lantern at the Fork in the Road), *Lüye xianzong* (Trails of Immortals in the Green Wilds), and *Ernü yingxiong zhuan* (Tales of Boy and Girl Heroes). The shrew and the miser appear in many of these works but are often the subjects of individual novels and stories—especially in the case of the shrew—and as such form their own subgenres. They will be treated in chapters 3 and 4.

The period during which most of this fiction was written is between the early Qing around the 1650s and the end of the mid-Qing in the early 1800s. Exact dates are often hard to establish: some works may very well have been written as early as the late Ming, others as late as the 1860s. *Ernü yingxiong zhuan* is from the third quarter of the nineteenth century, but I include it because of the example it offers as a novel in critical revision of *Honglou meng*, which—along with other lengthy works like *Rulin waishi* (Scholars), *Yesou puyan*, *Lin Lan Xiang*, *Qilu deng*, and *Lüye xianzong*—is from the core years of this period, the mid-eighteenth century and the middle of the Qianlong emperor's reign, from 1736 to 1796. In their survey of Chinese society in this period, Susan Naquin and



Evelyn Rawski define the "eighteenth century" that they cover as extending from about 1680 to 1820, roughly corresponding to the time covered here.<sup>3</sup> This segmentation of time has to do with the stability and prosperity that obtained then, and the fact that China had not yet begun to suffer the massive invasion of Western power and influence. These works of fiction are the last to give a rendition of Chinese social life in an as yet relatively undisturbed state, though of course influence did not occur overnight after the Opium Wars in the 1830s and 1840s, nor was contact and economic or social influence absent before decline began. Prosperity is evident in the growth of agricultural output and the amount of internal and external trade.<sup>4</sup> Decline is apparent from the tripling of population to reach approximately 300 million by 1800, and the overtaking of China's economic capacity, which seems to have reached its limit given the technical levels of production and transportation. The late eighteenth century saw the beginning of widespread opium addiction, though this was not very evident in fiction of the time, which instead occasionally portrays the vogue of tobacco smoking.<sup>5</sup> If *Rulin waishi* and other works are any sign, then the eighteenth century saw a high degree of cynicism about success in the examination system (the government-supervised method of selecting candidates to serve in the local, provincial, and national administrations), which was accessible by legitimate means to an ever smaller percentage of men. Instead, the practice of buying lower degrees increased toward the end of the dynasty and made it easy for wealthy but otherwise ineligible men to gain the attendant prestige and serve in office, as numerous novels illustrate.

The method of this research will be to examine the constructedness of fictional character types such as miser, shrew, henpecked husband, doting mother, wastrel, and benevolent polygynist. That is, I will investigate them according to the ways they are informed by both the ideology of political and economic orders, and by the collective fantasy of the symbolic order.<sup>6</sup> In what follows, I will explain my application of the concepts of ideology and symbolic order, which I keep separate in order to delineate my greater focus on the symbolic. Although densely related and perhaps in the long run distinguishable only for heuristic reasons, ideological and symbolic orders name the political and economic field on the one hand, which is not necessarily or always commensurate with the personal and collective field of fantasy and sexual unconscious on the other.<sup>7</sup> This distinction is especially useful in illustrating the ways in which various

texts or character types enact conformity or subversion within the patriarchal system without necessarily representing the interests of groups or classes in a politically and economically defined hierarchy.

Gender derives central meaning from the kinship structure. The laws of kinship define the symbolic order, which is primarily structured by the paternal family—its rules of descent, incest prohibitions, and the binaries of male and female, senior and junior, and inner and outer.<sup>8</sup> The symbolic function of this order is in effect to assign each subject a place and a role in the kin group even before he or she is born. A basic premise of my study is that the rules or laws of kinship—including gender definition and hierarchy—are such because of historical and social construction, not innate or natural necessity. With this in mind, I will be particularly interested in subjectivities that appear to escape the normative symbolic order defined by patriarchal polygamy.<sup>9</sup>

One of the most important aspects of gender that I will examine is the representation of male and female sexual capacities, especially as found in the *ars erotica*. Inherent in that portrayal is the assumption of the primacy of the male cycle of energy (what I will sometimes call the miserly-ascetic paradigm, defined in chapter 4). In the *ars erotica*, that cycle of fullness and depletion and the economization of *yang* essence centrally define and justify the polygynist's role and, by association, those of the other gendered subjects surrounding him. The order of the patriarchal-polygamous family; the representation of sexuality in sexual intercourse; and the playing out of hierarchical binaries such as man and woman, masculine and feminine, husband and wife, mother and son, and so forth (up to and including what might be called subsidiary binaries such as polygynist and concubine, main wife and concubine, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, or son and father's sister's daughter)—I will survey all these as they function in their particular symbolic order in the context of the economic mode of production of Qing China, which I will briefly define as follows.

For my purposes in this study, the miser and his practice of usury metaphorically define the economic mode of production in the society of Qing fiction. In other words, he and his miserly-ascetic paradigm encapsulate the imaginary version of real conditions as allegorized in these works. According to that allegory (which I discuss more fully below), the miser is in the business of collecting night soil from everyone and then selling the product to farmers. The night soil fertilizes crops, which when

they fail lead farmers to go into debt to the miser, who exacts higher and higher rates of interest from the farmers and hoards more and more of their debt-paying rice. Soon famine occurs because the price of rice is too high. Some benevolent officials and members of the local elite may provide relief to some folk who are left and perhaps punish a few misers.

According to Confucian state values, the one who deals in money and trade is a grade lower than the one who plows the earth. Nevertheless, in spite of this traditional denigration of mercantilism, in fact the miser and the hedonist merchant have wealth and/or life-styles that far outstrip their supposed superiors, that is, the peasants and even the officials. Of course, the miser is an allegorical reduction of the mercantilist landlord or businessman, who is an acquisitive materialist and lover of luxury—not a filthy, self-denying, shit- and gold-collecting miser. But from the perspective of the lowest and poorest in the social hierarchy, who are supposed to be satisfied with little to feed their minds and bodies, the mercantilist's wealth is usury by another name.

In nonallegorical terms, the social and economic order in the works I discuss is roughly as follows: The emperor reigns in the guise of a benevolent polygamist-patriarch called the Son of Heaven. He rules with the help of an underpaid but powerful officialdom ostensibly steeped in the Confucian canon and holding highly coveted positions. Parallel to the civil bureaucracy, a hereditary military class also exists with its own set of examinations for selecting leaders who are nevertheless held to be subordinate to civil officials. The military is useful in guarding border regions and quelling internal unrest due, for example, to popular religious uprisings, famine rioting, or rebellious non-Han minorities. The major portion of the population consists of peasants and urban commoners, who produce and market agricultural and other goods and engage in numerous menial occupations. Many hereditary and semihereditary classes exist (the latter being ones from which the individual could choose to depart), e.g., artisans, slaves, servants, actors, doctors, etc. Buddhist and Taoist religious personnel are numerous, many but not all government-registered, and including hermits, mendicants, and esoteric practitioners (e.g., the suppliers of aphrodisiacs and secret erotic arts in Qing fiction), as well as relatively wealthy and heavily patronized abbots and abbesses. Finally, there are merchants of all levels, the richest of whom, however, are still insecure if they rely only on money for their well-being. In other words, in Qing China the rich merchant still felt it necessary to, for

example, place his son on the road to officialdom, buy himself or his son an official position (as I have said above, an increasingly viable option in the mid- to late Qing), or use his money to curry favor with (underpaid) officials. Otherwise he was too vulnerable to official harassment and intervention in his mercantile activities. In short, the hierarchy of power (*ming*, name, politically recognized fame) over money (*li*, profit) was always clearly in place.

How are the aspects of ideology and symbolic order projected onto and embodied by individual and collective subjects? Fiction can be seen as part of a broad representational system consisting of the repertoire of images and stories through which a society identifies itself and its subjects, or through which it “figures consensus” (in Kaja Silverman’s words).<sup>10</sup> It is through these images and stories that subjects are enlisted in ideological and symbolic orders in light of such things as kinship rules, political ideology, economic conditions, and class rank. In other words, fiction can also be seen—like dreams, psychic symptoms, and types of patterned behavior—as registering the workings of conscious and unconscious fantasies, or of what can also be called the “fantasmatic.” In Jean LaPlanche’s and J.-B. Pontalis’s terms, the primary function of the fantasmatic is the “mise-en-scène of desire”—that is, the staging of scenarios in which subjects play parts, defending and justifying themselves and acting out wishes, in all this basing themselves on the collective repertoire of social and symbolic roles.<sup>11</sup>

The major fantasy in this book is that of the polygynist utopia of the erotic romances, the world in which a benevolent and potent polygynist (who is also usually a landlord, merchant, exam candidate, or official) enjoys the assemblage of wife (usually of the same or higher class) and concubines who are beautiful, sexy, and not jealous (usually but not always from lower social classes). This fantasy consists of the playing out not only of the polygynist’s desires, however, which will prove to be not so transparently unified to begin with, but of many subjects’ desires, counterdesires, delayed desires, displaced ones, and so forth. The characters of Qing novels are as if part of a grand theatrical scene in which men and women, wives and husbands, paternal and maternal cousins all have assigned roles, but also in which they can exceed or bend their roles, or be reassigned parts.<sup>12</sup> Under certain temporary conditions, for instance, women can turn into men; likewise, men can turn into women, always retaining, however, certain male-privileging effects—thus the many sto-

ries in which cross-dressing or some form of it occurs. Some male characters in particular come close to embodying twentieth-century definitions of masochism, which especially lends itself to reversals and changes of position in which normative subjectivity is thrown into abeyance or assaulted. Although I will not attempt a theorization of the term masochism in the context of eighteenth-century China, the mention of it here (with Freud, Gilles Deleuze, and Kaja Silverman, *inter alia*, in mind) is important because of the possibility it names of subversive, non-normative male subjectivities.<sup>13</sup> Alongside the complaisant and self-gratified man who the polygynist is presumed to be, there are other not-so-centered male subjects, as we will find, who express deficiency (e.g., the initiate in the *ars erotica*), paranoia (the miser), or inferiority to women and desire for abdication (e.g., Jia Baoyu in *Honglou meng*). There are also examples of super-compensating potency (e.g., Wen Suchen in *Yesou puyan*). Women, on the other hand, are normatively defined as inferior and deficient. But again, as we will find, certain female characters defy or modify the normative order: thus, for example, the shrew, the talented beauty of the chaste romance, or the warrior woman.

Of all characters, the most central in these novels is also one who unconsciously places himself on the road to self-destruction, the young wastrel. He is central because he is the one who can most effectively threaten everyone else's present and future. Although he could supposedly repair himself by changing his ways, as numerous novels assert, other works demonstrate that due to inherent weakness, the wastrel will never change except if the superior woman sets things straight again. In short, (1) he is inherently weak, and (2) his supposed inferior is really his superior. The situation is one in which male weakness depends for its correction on the female other whom the man normally expels from the ruling brotherhood. "Brothers are like hands and feet. A wife is like a piece of clothing" (*xiongdi ru shouzu, qizi ru yifu*), the motto goes. The Qing novel, with the exception of *Honglou meng* (which is problematic in other ways, as I will show), only goes so far as to say, "Wear the virtuous wife rightly and you will succeed," or "Wear the right wife and you will succeed." The superior and right wife must nevertheless always agree to be taken off, put away, and exchanged, even if she has saved her husband. Only when the man occupies a feminine position vis-à-vis other men does he have to obey the same order of expendability. In his hands, feminine sacrifice then becomes something beautiful and redemptive, as

witnessed, for example, in Qu Yuan's female impersonation in the face of rejection by his ruler (in the pre-Han poem *Li sao*, Encountering Sorrow).

The final question of this preliminary introduction concerns the availability of the study of polygamy to other scholars interested in sexuality and gender subjectivity. In Chinese, Turkic, Arab, and other cultures, polygamy offers an example of an overt form of what by juxtaposition has for the most part been practiced illegally, surreptitiously, or metaphorically in Eurocentric cultures. In contrast to such things as keeping mistresses, visiting prostitutes, and having greater freedom in divorce, polygamy represents a particularly unabashed version of the fantasy of male sexual and reproductive freedom. Two questions can then be asked. Although polygamy has now been outlawed and almost entirely shamed out of existence in China, what still remains in its aftermath? This is a question that I believe must be asked in all studies of gender and sexuality in twentieth-century China (just as similar questions must be asked about what of the slave past remains in contemporary race relations in the United States, or what of opium-trading colonialism remains in current Euro-American interactions with China). But framed spatially rather than temporally, the question becomes: What do we recognize of polygamy in repressed or displaced forms elsewhere? How does polygamy clarify aspects of male centrality (including masochism) in other cultural orders—especially, for example, in light of the distinctions among types of wives and concubines, or the *ars erotica's* construct of the male cycle of energy? These questions help define what I now structure as the surreptitious counterparts to polygamy, its resistant alter-versions in monogamous cultures. Polygynists and wastrels, in short, are everywhere.

Finally, in one sense this study shows the impossibility of polygamy, the fact that it is a male fantasy in which real women have no place—something that Qing novels more or less already articulate. However, it is also true, as I have said above, that polygamy is not as transparent in its male privileging as it first appears. It can also be viewed as a form of disavowal of or compensation for male impotence and inadequacy. Moreover, as an institution and not a fantasy, it is something in which real women do in fact participate for the sake of social maneuvering and advancement, including the domination of men and their resources. One hardly sees a slave holding the senior position on a plantation, for example, but one can see a matriarch holding such a position in a patriarchal-polygamist family, although of course her power rarely extends outside the family.

## The Various Character Types and the Theme of Female Superiority

The threesome of miser, shrew, and polygamist is a crystallization of the dozen or so character types featured in this book. The miser and the shrew are the two most rancorously alienated of all—the miser because he is afraid of being consumed by the woman, her wastrel offspring, and other competing men; the shrew because she hates the way men and their female allies treat her as expendable. To repeat, the essential gesture of the miser is retention, that of the shrew is scattering. As for the polygamist, he despises the miser and ignores the shrew. He is the sexual boss who sits at the top of society and takes as many women and men as he wants. (The polyandrous woman also appears in Qing fiction but is rarer by far and is never legitimized in the same way as the polygynist; she is always a libertine, never, for example, a benevolent matriarch.) In all, the dozen or so character types include misers and ascetics, that is, nonpolygamous, self-contained men who flee the sexual battle altogether; shrews and lascivious women, who do their utmost to defeat or seduce the polygamist; impotent, henpecked husbands, whom shrews force into abjection; lecherous polygamists and wastrels, who incite and outflank the shrew and make nonsense of the miser and other representatives of containment; doting mothers, whom pedant fathers detest for letting their sons turn into wastrels; self-sacrificing women, who are victims of the polygamist and shrew; potent and benevolent polygamists, who are like reformed wastrels; and, finally, talented male-impersonating beauties and handsome effeminate scholars, who are models of monogamous union.

A recurrent theme of these fictional arrangements of male and female behavior is the woman's superiority over the man. The shrew is a belligerent manifestation of such superiority. Resorting to cutting words and clever strategy, she succeeds in defying the man and exposing his innate impotence. The self-sacrificing woman and the talented beauty, on the other hand, are virtuous manifestations of female excellence, chaste paragons who put base men to shame. The talented beauty is the most successful and self-determined of superior women in that she wins the right of monogamy and her own choice of marriage partner. She is a supremely capable woman who proves her excellence through wit and literary skill.

The theme of talented women, moreover, implies the inferiority of men, and produces effeminate and vaguely desexualized male personae like Jia Baoyu of *Honglou meng* (mid-eighteenth century) or the monogamist scholars of the chaste romances (mid-seventeenth to eighteenth centuries). To be sure, these types repair the image of the intemperate polygamist made prominent ever since the wastrel Ximen Qing in *Jin Ping Mei* (Golden Lotus, also known as *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, late sixteenth century). However, although refined and unlustful, the feminized man like Jia Baoyu also represents a male unraveling. To him, the superior woman is a sign of the failure of his own sex; he himself has reached a dead end beyond which he sees no way out. As for the monogamist scholar, in these works he is still a tentative model not very fully portrayed. The fullest model of a successful man in Qing fiction is still that of the potent polygamist, who in terms of Ming-Qing literary history amounts to an idealistic reparation of the dissipated Ximen Qing.

Increasing numbers of scholars have written about sexuality and gender in the Ming and Qing, addressing both fiction<sup>14</sup> and nonfiction.<sup>15</sup> Susan Naquin's and Evelyn Rawski's *Chinese Society in the Eighteenth Century* (1987) provides the most succinct account of marriage, family life, and gender roles in eighteenth-century China, and is the most convenient background reading for the social and economic conditions of that period. Erotic fiction has still been under-studied, however, as has the phenomenon of polygamy in both its fantasmatic and real-institutional forms, as I have already mentioned. With the increasing availability of erotic works through photographic reproduction and republication, a large body of materials awaits students of the history of sexuality in China. Putting polygamy at the center of the present study is to acknowledge its structuring importance in the social and symbolic hierarchy of Ming and Qing China.

Likewise, the theme of the superiority of women has until recently received little scholarly attention. In this book, it will be considered as part of the same scenario as polygamy and the constructions of male privilege in general. As this and other recent studies show, the elevation of women is capable of multiple functions: for example, the critique of and compensation for bad male behavior, the feminization and purification (or atonement) of the alienated male self, the projection of greater self-determination for the female self, or the idealization of companionate, monogamous love. Male veneration of the woman also has the effect of entrapping her in the binary of either chastity or lasciviousness.



At the pole of chastity, man and woman are suspended in an infantile state of innocence and androgyny. A series of oppositions takes shape: for example, sexualized polygamy contrasts with desexualized and cross-gendered monogamy, potent polygamists with apologists for male baseness, sexy and unjealous concubines with chaste and self-determining beauties, and so forth.

The most expedient way to elaborate such contrasts is to describe the characteristic tendencies of polygamists and their fellow characters first in a generalizing and composite fashion without much regard to specific sources. The following summary relates in somewhat archetypal fashion the essential male and female mentalities of Qing fiction. Once these essentials are set forth, I will follow with a discussion of fiction's place among the various sources of Qing history, then a further account of the social assumptions necessary to understand sexual life in these works.

### Misers, Shrews, and Polygamists

The polygamous man portrayed in Qing erotic romances would like to have as many women as he can for free, in effect gratuitously to have sex without end. Although the hero of these romances always settles for a finite number of wives, this final containment of his amounts to an aesthetic closure and an after-the-fact bow to the ideology of temperance.

If the woman attempts to be as nomadic as the man, she is called unchaste, to keep on being which she must become shrewish—that is, good at defying those who accuse and despise her. To a promiscuous husband who won't agree to her request for male lovers, she counters: "Do you mean that only the governor is allowed to make a fire; the commoners can't even light a lamp?"<sup>16</sup> Few shrews choose to be so daring, and most instead mainly demand that the man be monogamous. Virtuous women have other alternatives if, like the shrew, they wish to be more than maidens who sew in the inner chambers and await becoming either wives or concubines: they may dress as men and go out to win public honor in the form of examination success; they may become warrior women (*xianü*) and battle for righteous causes; or, more humbly, they may stay at home but study the classics, learn to write poetry, and produce their own literary collections, as many women did in the Qing.

Shrew is also the name for the demonic woman, the one who at-

tempts to subdue the man by means of the power of her sexuality, which includes both the force of female pollution and the capacity to steal male *yang* essence. She represents the woman's ability to attract and control the man. A sorceress in *Yesou puyan*, for example, evokes her special powers (*shu*) by baring her breasts, rubbing them with her hands, manipulating her navel, and taking three steps forward and three backward. If after reciting a spell she still fails to subdue the man, she then resorts to her most lethal weapon, her genitals, which she directs at her enemy and uses to shoot him with her "yin gas" (*yinqi*, ch. 80, 9b-10a). In this fantasy, she literally "scatters" her polluting effluvia on the man.

The shrew rages at the rule of chastity. In the Ming and Qing, a woman can win honor for herself and her community if she maintains lifelong celibacy after her husband dies; but the least suspicion that she is unchaste turns her into a "lascivious woman" (*yinfu*). As she reflects to herself in the novel *Zui chunfeng* (Drunken with the Spring Winds), the angry woman finds satisfaction in neither chastity nor lasciviousness.<sup>17</sup>

If a woman is skillful enough, she controls men by taking actions or using words that make him lose face, by plotting against female rivals for her husband's attention, or by using more long-term means such as the manipulation of her children prior to their passing under the control of the patriarch.<sup>18</sup> She does not even have to be clever to perform such manipulation. Simply by doting on and coddling her son or grandson, she can turn him into a wastrel who ignores his father's rule and wastes his father's wealth.

Two emblematic situations—those of the wastrel and the prostitute—describe sons and daughters in Qing fiction and define the conditions for a disastrous relationship between man and woman. An emblematic situation embodies an essential or stereotyped relationship such as that of the shrew and the henpecked husband, the indulgent mother and the spoiled son, or character types such as the wastrel or the female paragon. The first of the two emblematic situations is the family consisting of the miserly or the pedantic father, the indulgent mother, and their consequently spoiled, wastrel son (as in *Qilu deng*, discussed in chapter 10 below).

The spoiled son meets and falls in love with the woman who emblemizes the second situation, the prostitute who is managed by her own mother and father. All daughters in Qing China are in a sense "managed" by their mothers and fathers, who hope for the best marriage deal in the

form of a son-in-law who brings them profit and good face. To make a literal prostitute of their daughter is to make her profitable in a more baldly utilitarian way than usual. She is the lure set out for the wastrel who falls for prostitutes he thinks truly love him. When the wastrel runs out of money and the prostitute-daughter's parents won't allow the youths to marry, the daughter becomes hysterical, swallows poison, and dies (Jin Zhonger in *Lüye xianzong*, discussed in chapter 11). Like the raging shrew, the daughter who commits suicide is a hysteric who acts in an unseemly or desperate way in order to defy her manipulators, whether husband or parents, who are motivated by unbending standards such as chastity, profit, and face.

Highly improved versions of the wastrel and the prostitute are the scholar and the beauty, a pair of talented and handsome monogamous lovers who find each other and marry without their parents' money or supervision. The scholar in this case is loyal to one woman alone, who wins him in freedom from parents and polygamists.

At their opposite extremes, men are either philandering wastrels or ascetic misers; women are either lascivious shrews or chaste self-sacrificers. In between are the beauties and scholars, who each contain the other in cross-gendered symmetry, each having the looks or taking on the attributes of the other. They also complement each other in the syntax and imagery of the poetry they exchange in lieu of engaging in premarital sex. Such complementarity makes them a perfect match, the only monogamous one in Qing fiction.

Miser is a name for various types of economizing and pleasure-deferring men. In a literal sense, the miser is the mean landlord and usurer who forces his tenants into virtual slavery and lets starving debtors freeze to death after refusing them another loan. In a metaphorical sense, he is the neo-Confucian pedant who lives by stored wisdom and rules by doctrine. He is the polygynist who collects and saves women. If he is a follower of the *ars erotica*, he also saves semen, which he ejaculates rarely in order to avoid wasting innate *yang* energy, of which he imagines he has a finite amount in his lifetime. The truly mean miser, on the other hand, finds women too troublesome and replaces them with money. In other words, he liberates himself from dependent attraction to women and escapes from marriage in all but name only, attempting utterly to disregard both of his torturers, the shrewish wife and the wastrel son.

Miserliness is also a name for the male reaction to the extreme diffi-

culty of self-control, especially in regard to women. Instead of reforming into some version of a temperate man, the miser peevishly outflanks both wastrel and henpecked husband, two prime examples of men who lose control. As the "Sutra of Wife-fearing" states, unbridled "seeking of women" leads to helpless "fear" of them (see *Cu hulu*). The miser is the most successful creator of superego, which he uses to deny his former ego that was spellbound by women. With the superego he attempts to kill motherly love and wifely emotionality—in other words, what he perceives to be women's unlimited capacity to flood him with demands. His hatred of motherly love includes hatred of a product of that love: the spoiled, wastrel son, who robs the miser's wealth and disobeys his rules.

As representative of the superego, the miser is a keeper of boundaries, especially the one between the women's inner and the men's outer precincts of the house. The enforcement of chastity and the maintenance of the patriline are ostensibly the chief goals of dividing inner from outer, but another important goal is to keep women from interfering in men's—especially father's and married brother's—financial affairs, which women attempt to manipulate for their own sake and that of their natal and uterine families.<sup>19</sup>

The miser also hates altruism, although he is clever at mouthing altruistic phrases and quoting from classics about altruistic behavior. He enacts a parody of the legalist philosopher Han Fei's (third century B.C.) interpretations of the *Laozi* (i.e., *Lao tzu* or *Tao te ching*, the Taoist text of ca. fourth or third century B.C.), which single out such sayings as, "In ruling people . . . nothing is more important than frugality" (ch. 59).<sup>20</sup> As the *Laozi* states, when virtues such as benevolence and righteousness appeared, humanity had already begun to decline (ch. 18). For the miser, the reign of feces was the ideal age, the one in which the most valuable currency was the night soil used to fertilize crops for the next harvest, as mentioned above—crops that, according to his rule, barely kept the people's bellies full. In the *Laozi's* words, "Empty their minds, fill their bellies" (ch. 3). The more there is to imagine, the more there is to desire. The more virtues there are, the more the miser must be considerate of others—that is, ancestors, women, children, and other competing men.

The shrew is subversive of male privilege. In dominating the man, she attempts to punish the superego and remake it in her own image. If the man is miserly enough—that is, if his superego is strong enough—then he can usually manage to stay beyond her reach. But in order to stay

beyond, as it turns out, he must occupy a very small realm upon which he can keep a firm grasp—perhaps only a single room—together with all his money and the keys to all the locks of his house.

In the end, however, the world belongs to the polygamists, whose conduct of desire is considered the most authoritative and admirable. They hold society's highest positions, from emperor to local official, merchant, and landlord. They laugh at the pathetic miser, kick the shrew, or, if she is outrageous enough, stop visiting her or expel her from the home. The polygamist buys marvelous aphrodisiacs from itinerant Tibetan monks and meets one sexy woman after another, all of whom want to be kept by him, whether as prostitute, concubine, or adulterous paramour. Unfortunately, however, polygamists are also expected to spend ostentatiously. Having collected his bevy of women and built his empire of wealth, he and his wastrel descendants will continue to spend both money and energy of desire until, as the proverb states, "by the fifth generation they are finished" (*wushi er zhan*). This is more or less the situation illustrated in *Honglou meng*, whose Baoyu is of the fourth generation.

Moderation is the virtue that men use to stem that dissolution without becoming too miserly. For instance, the man is moderate when he stops at one or two concubines. In scholar-beauty fiction, the middle way tends to create monogamous or two-wife polygynous men who are soft enough not to become miserly and misogynous but who also have enough self-discipline to study. It is as if father and mother ally to raise a temperate son, who then marries only one or two wives. Moreover, the temperate son's wife is a "talented" woman who is equal or superior to the man in literary skills and moral or even martial courage. In *Honglou meng*, *Ernü yingxiong zhuan*, and other works, the male counterpart to the talented woman is a young man who is feminine in appearance and emotionality. He does not chase after women or associate with "wine and meat comrades" (*jiurou pengyou*), as does the wastrel. In *Ernü yingxiong zhuan*, he assumes the role of what I will call the "coddled polygynist," whose wives both coddle and control him in order to keep him from succumbing to his innate weaknesses. He in turn listens to their words and never exceeds the proper limits of being coddled. Qing fiction thus creates the perfect couple by (1) portraying women as superior to men and (2) the crossing of gender characteristics, both of which have the effect of desexualizing the normally philandering man. The representatives of this ideal match appear in their most stylized and rationalized

form in the chaste romances of the early to mid-Qing. In the context of the miserly and polygamous society of Qing fiction, the monogamous scholar and beauty embody the most symmetrically idealized form of moderation—the version, incidentally, that European readers saw starting in the eighteenth century in the first translated works of Chinese vernacular fiction, including *Haoqiu zhuan* (The Fortunate Union) and *Yu Jiao Li* (translated into French as *Les Deux Cousines*), both originally from the seventeenth century.<sup>21</sup> The Age of Enlightenment was thus exposed to the cleanest examples of a romantic genre that was otherwise full of eroticism and fully countenanced polygamy, as found in scores of works that have yet to be translated.

### Marriage and Sexuality in Fiction and Other Sources of Qing History

The reason for my focus on polygamy, as I have said, in part reflects the material covered, which repeatedly centers around either situations of polygamy or the avoidance of it, and in part reflects actual conditions in the society in which this fiction was written. The main characters of most of these works represent the elite ten or so percent of the Qing population, a group that tended to strive for extended families in which polygamy was commonly practiced. Such things as the actual percent of polygamous families or the average number of wives in them are difficult if not impossible to ascertain. What fiction represents is the aspiration to polygamy, and, at the very least, the caricature of what such situations were probably like. Since more conventional historical sources provide only glimpses into the polygamous family, historians have been limited in their discussion of this crucial aspect of traditional Chinese life. They have also limited themselves, perhaps, because of their caution vis-à-vis the evidence of fiction which, besides constituting largely uncharted territory, is supposedly more blatant than conventional historical sources in exaggerating, distorting, and, in short, doing whatever it wants to manipulate its contents. But regardless of the type of source, the stance of this book is that narrative and linguistic constructions are all that can be known of such things as male and female, penis and vagina, or “we” and “other”—thus my emphasis on the constructedness of gender and sexuality. This is

not to deny so-called concrete evidence, but only to emphasize that "facts" do not occur in isolation but are determined by expectation and interpretation.

But neither is this to say that fiction is a supreme and self-sufficient source for Qing social history. Medical texts, for example, are crucial in defining the general image of health and what men, women, and children should do to maintain health and prevent or cure illness. The *ars erotica* prescribes an economy of sexual conduct and provides images of the ideal and, by implication, nonideal man and woman and their sexual behavior. Prescriptive works on governing the household treat common problems such as inheritance, selection of spouses, maintenance of chaste relations, conduct of sons, and so forth. Numerous historical works provide, for example, biographies and autobiographies, genealogies of great families, information on the application of family law and on marriage customs of various regions, cases of virtuous or other remarkable conduct such as widow suicide or suicide of loyal lovers, and anecdotes about sensational phenomena such as hermaphroditism, sexual vampirism, or possession by demons. Court cases contain detailed accounts of sexual and other related crimes and provide valuable information about everyday life. Fiction and drama do, however, illustrate many of the chief characters of Qing society, including the central and peripheral members of the polygamous household and their mainly urban neighbors of high and low rank.

This book will cite a number of these sources, but by far most of these will be vernacular fiction, many under discussion for the first time. Besides treatment of sexuality and gender, then, it will be necessary to engage in basic introduction and exposition of fictional sources and in so doing to concentrate on the literariness of these works. This means, for example, to distinguish between what is formulaic or hyperbolic and what can be taken as representative of real situations, between what frequently recurs and what is unique to one or two works, to identify recurring themes and their variations, to trace central and recurring plot lines and their permutations, to describe character types and their reduced or admixed forms, and to locate significant social issues that fiction dramatizes via plot manipulation, caricature, and setting.

Although it is difficult to describe what this fiction does not include, it is nevertheless an important exercise to imagine what those things are in order to have a better idea of the scope of these works. I will attempt to cite items mainly having to do with sexuality. The Qing fiction treated in

this book barely describes the pain of footbinding and the close-up vicissitudes of life with crippled feet.<sup>22</sup> In their descriptions of sexual promiscuity, these works rarely portray the realities of unwanted pregnancy, abortion, sexual disease, or female infanticide.<sup>23</sup> Body functions such as urination, defecation, and sexual intercourse—heterosexual, homosexual, both simultaneously, vaginal, anal, oral, and oral-anal<sup>24</sup>—are all described in detail, but such functions as childbirth and nursing, rarely. The common folk belief in women as sources of pollution mainly appears in fantastic or figurative form, as in the above case of the sorceress or in the shrew's rage, but in the novels I examine the everyday belief and its manifestations are rare in extensive and particularistic form.<sup>25</sup> A few instances briefly portray men repelled at the supposed odor or ugliness of an exposed woman.<sup>26</sup> In one case a man avoids intercourse with his postpartum wife, although no direct mention is made of the one-hundred-day postpartum taboo.<sup>27</sup> The inconvenience or complications of menstruation are more common, however, especially in *Honglou meng*, which makes several mentions of women's illness due to menstrual irregularity.<sup>28</sup> Menstrual blood appears in its most explicit form in an erotic novel which makes it into a hyperbolic detail of closure to a long session of sex: a man and woman are vigorously making love, but while the man performs cunnilingus, the woman's period suddenly arrives and splashes forth like a fountain, wetting the man from head to toe. Two nearby maids laugh and congratulate the woman for giving first birth to a son, then get bath water for the man, who meanwhile spits out blood but otherwise shows no sign of fear or disgust.<sup>29</sup> In another work, a man and woman make love for a lengthy time during her period.<sup>30</sup> Elsewhere, menstruation is sometimes the excuse of a woman wishing to avoid intercourse.<sup>31</sup> Another type of female blood, the virgin's hymen blood, is a celebrated sign of chastity and, in erotic fiction at least, is both a mark of her initial pain at intercourse and a formulaic feature of the occasion of penetrating a virgin. Finally, as Bret Hinsch has already noted, although male homosexuality is extremely common in Chinese sources, lesbianism is rare, and in a form that excludes heterosexuality is even rarer.<sup>32</sup>

The above summary underscores the fact that, for the most part, Chinese vernacular fiction is not a context for playing out the everyday scenes of women's lives except as part of the dialogue with men and as viewed by men, who wrote most if not all of these works. It is always possible that some authors of the anonymous works of Qing fiction were



women, but such a fact cannot yet be known. The list of what cannot be found in fiction obviously includes many more things: for example, extended interaction with foreigners, life among farmers and the "mean" classes,<sup>33</sup> and the lives of eunuchs other than as evil plotters. I will indicate other subjects in passing.

As for the question of who wrote and read these works, it is for the most part only possible to make suppositions, some of which are based on biographical fact. Prefaces and other biographical sources often stereotypically portray writers as frustrated literati who never succeeded in the life of official advancement; many writers perhaps did not care for such success. Since the eighteenth century reportedly saw an increase in nonofficial career opportunities for members of the lower elite, with or without examination degrees, it is possible that many unknown writers were also from this new group, which included editors of exam essays, painters and calligraphers, poets and writers of belles lettres, government and other clerks, and secretaries of merchants and officials.<sup>34</sup> All these occupations appear in Qing fiction, especially *Rulin waishi*; and some authors were in fact from this group. The social status of writers probably ranged from the lowest, perhaps including literate members of the "mean" class of actors, to the highest, including current or former but then impoverished members of the elite, such as Cao Xueqin, the author of *Honglou meng*. Although it is not known if women were among these writers, there were in those times female poets, dramatists, and storytellers. The readers of vernacular fiction were presumably officials, other literati, merchants, and the male and female members of the households of these and other mostly urban folk who had the means to learn how to read. The majority of writers probably lived in or around Jiangnan (the lower Yangtse River region) and also the territory between it and the capital; but writers and, of course, readers came from other regions as well. The *Qilu deng* author was from Henan; the setting of *Shenlou zhi* is in Canton, although the author may not have come from there. Some writers wrote for and probably earned a profit, such as the authors of the scholar-beauty romances, especially the erotic ones. Other authors wrote mainly for themselves and their circle of relatives and friends and were not in a hurry to finish their works, much less earn a profit; these include the authors of *Honglou meng*, *Lüye xianzong*, *Qilu deng*, and *Yesou puyan*.

It also has to be remembered that government censorship of erotic literature made the writing and publishing of such works potentially dan-

gerous. Literati values, moreover, held the vernacular novel as a whole in low esteem compared to poetry and prose in the classical language. Records of those who wrote these novels are accordingly infrequent and often secondhand. Lists of censored erotic works, especially the one Ding Richang issued in 1868, can nevertheless be helpful in determining which works were common up to a certain time. Novels that were only slightly erotic were probably considered inoffensive, including ones that borrowed or else supplied the contents of operas that were popular during the Qing.<sup>35</sup> Operas with lewd innuendoes were in fact popular throughout the Ming and Qing (authorities banned an especially bawdy type in Beijing in 1785);<sup>36</sup> and female impersonation, with its inherent erotic possibilities, was common throughout the Qing and after. Nevertheless, fiction could and did include details that would be utterly impossible to stage in public.

It is easier to place these works in their historical context by discussing the customs that prevailed in Qing society and by outlining the general situation of marriage, the family, and sexual relations. One of the most important alliances in Chinese society was that between man and woman and their respective families through marriage. In Naquin and Rawski's words, the family was the "basic unit of production and consumption" (33). "Virtually universal" for women (108), marriage was centrally motivated by the imperative to have male descendants, for the sake of which unfortunate results sometimes occurred if the wife did not bear a son. Female infanticide was reportedly high, especially in certain regions. Adoption and concubinage were the morally and legally accepted methods for obtaining a son if the wife did not bear one. In some cases among commoners, however, if a couple failed to have a son, they would borrow a man or woman from outside the family to help produce one, as apparently happened in southern Shaanxi and other regions, according to Xu Ke's *Qingbai leichao* (1917, Classified Collection of Unofficial Sources of Qing History).<sup>37</sup>

The most common and accepted form of marriage was the virilocal monogamous one, in which the woman married into the man's home. But uxorilocal marriage, in which the man married into the woman's home, was also common, especially in certain regions<sup>38</sup> and under certain conditions—for example, when a family with an only daughter was in need of labor and / or if a prospective husband was too poor to marry virilocally.<sup>39</sup> Uxorilocal marriage in fiction is often into an elite family

with an especially talented daughter whose parents can't bear to marry her away from home. In its satire of examination learning and the ladder of success, *Rulin waishi* portrays uxori-local marriage as an easy way for poor or venal men of mediocre talent to advance themselves.<sup>40</sup> Another common form of marriage was the so-called minor one in which a young girl was adopted into a family whose son she would later marry. Such an arrangement, however, is rarely a focus of portrayal in early to mid-Qing fiction.<sup>41</sup>

As I have noted, polygyny was the most desired and respected form of marriage for men, even if it occurred in only about 10 percent or so of all marriages and regardless of the fact that in the Qing population of eligible partners, men outnumbered women.<sup>42</sup> As some moralists complained, wealthy men took more than their share of women. The average number of concubines per polygamist is difficult to determine since sources such as genealogies often report only the concubines who bore sons. Fictional cases generally go from one to four or five concubines, although a few works feature polygynists who take as many as twelve (*Xinghua tian*) or twenty wives (*Langshi qiguan*). The reverse situation of a woman having more than one husband or lover was considered an utmost abomination. But in poor regions of Gansu and elsewhere, the shortage of women reportedly led to two or more brothers marrying one woman, who, however, was not privileged in the way a male polygamist was.<sup>43</sup> Some works of fiction toy with the appearance of a woman almost marrying two husbands—always, however, as part of a comedy-of-errors-style confusion of identities. As for a woman who is not a prostitute but nevertheless has multiple male lovers, the erotic *Zhaoyang qushi* (The Lascivious History of Han Empress Feiyan), *Ruyi jun zhuan* (The Tale of Tang Empress Wu's Favorite, Master Pleasure), and especially *Zui chun-feng* (Drunken with the Spring Winds, about a woman from a rich urban family)—the former two from the Ming, the latter the Qing—provide the best examples.

As for choice of marriage partners, control was in the hands of parents and grandparents, as dictated by custom and law. In spite of this norm, more or less self-determined situations like those written about in scholar-beauty romances seem actually to have been possible, although they may have been rare.<sup>44</sup> A Qing poet of the Qianlong era, however, wrote that, "Following the dictates of one's parents is the tradition of the classic rites; setting one's own life's course is only found in novels and stories," of which he did not approve.<sup>45</sup>

The virtue of female chastity was something to be made public, especially among commoners in the Qing, when the government awarded special praise to widow chastity, for the sake of which memorial arches were built and names listed in honor of outstanding cases. The honor to the woman in such instances inevitably brought honor to family and community as well.<sup>46</sup> Women were commemorated for going to the extremes of suicide or self-disfigurement to preserve their chastity in times of war and plunder or other violent situations.<sup>47</sup> Virginity was also commended, although not in such prominently documented ways. Some parts of Guangdong reportedly had the custom of taking the cloth stained with the bride's virgin blood, covering it with a red cloth, and placing this "cloth of marital happiness" (*xipa*) on a red tray to show to the families of husband and wife.<sup>48</sup> In one novel, the man takes the virgin's cloth and stores it forever in a small treasure box.<sup>49</sup> In general, erotic fiction reflects a fascination with virginal blood not only as a sign of purity but as an effect of pain at first intercourse and as cause for the man's tenderness for the delicate maiden.

Although high in social status, the extended family in which polygamy was most common ended up being a corporation whose prosperity was often difficult to maintain. In Hugh Baker's words, such families were "open to fission," whether because of conflicts between brothers and their individual families or because of the societywide custom of partible inheritance. Each son, whether a wife's or a concubine's, supposedly inherited an equal share of the patriarchal wealth.<sup>50</sup> Downward mobility was thus a risk even for those who managed to gain enough wealth to form a household to begin with and then own enough property or goods to pass on to sons. As for those at the bottom of the social hierarchy, it is estimated that 10 percent or so of the poorest men were forever without the prospect of marriage, because of both poverty and the unequal access of men to women.<sup>51</sup>

The majority of households were either two-generation "elementary" or three-generation "stem" families, that is, ones in which the middle generation consisted of only one married couple, as opposed to the "extended" family in which the middle generation consisted of two or more couples.<sup>52</sup> According to Baker's study of prosperous extended families in southern China, a typical cycle was such that the members of the third generation would earn little and generally lead a life of leisure, while those of the fourth generation would sell more and more property and slowly sink into poverty (131). Again, the stereotyped impression was

that "by the fifth generation, a family was finished." Nevertheless, a wealthy family could maintain local dominance for a century or more. Qing romances commonly end with a projection of prosperity into an indefinite future, but other novels concentrate on the inevitability of decline brought on by the gambling and philandering of males and by fission due to female jealousy and covetous bickering.

As shown in numerous novels, the upbringing of children, especially sons, was of critical importance in Chinese society because of both the need for care in old age and hopes for upward—and fear of downward—mobility. Among the poorest people, children might be sold to escape debt. In more stable homes, sons and daughters stayed carefree with the mother or other women of the family until age six or seven. At this time the son would come under paternal authority and learn some profitable skill. If the household could afford it, he would begin schooling for hopeful attainment of a civil service degree. Such advancement was legally open to all men except those of the "mean" class, which included musicians, actors, and lowly yamen employees (but the eighteenth century also saw a loosening of those restrictions in the form of a government decree allowing their descendants to sit for exams).<sup>53</sup> However, regardless of class, 90 percent of China's men are said to have found it impossible from the start to enter the chain of examination success.<sup>54</sup> Poverty, lack of influence, and the excess number of contenders made such a desirable option increasingly difficult to entertain. As for the daughter, she would undergo the painful process of footbinding and commence education in feminine arts such as sewing and weaving in preparation for marriage into her husband's household. Women's education in letters was common in elite families, as reflected in many Qing novels, including some which portray women achieving ideal monogamous matches. Talented and literate courtesans and nuns also continued to exist, as they had for centuries.

Concerning age of marriage, Qing law stated that women could marry once they reached fourteen, men when they reached sixteen. But in actual practice young people tended to marry in their late teens or around twenty.<sup>55</sup> Although men and women were supposedly rigidly separated before marriage—as were nonmarried, non-blood-related men and women after marriage—it is difficult to determine how strictly these rules were applied. Historical and fictional sources demonstrate that segregation was stricter among the upper classes, who could afford, for

one thing, to have large enough homes to maintain separate quarters for women, especially unmarried daughters. But among the elite it was nevertheless possible for unmarried cousins, for example, to become familiar and even fall in love, whether or not they succeeded in getting married.<sup>56</sup> Novels make access between unmarried men and women, cousins or not, seem extraordinarily easy, although the same novels usually refer to the rules of segregation and portray at least the partial enforcement of those rules, as will be seen in the chapters below. Erotic works go to extremes to dramatize easy sexual access, but nonerotic works play with breaking the rules of segregation as well. In a famous scene of *Rulin waishi*, for example, Du Shaoqing promenades hand in hand with his wife in public in Nanjing. Doing such a thing is scandalous both because respectable women should not be so openly visible and because a man should not touch his wife except in the bedchamber (ch. 33, 454). In another episode, the poetess Shen Qiongzhi establishes herself in Nanjing as a dealer selling her own poetry, mountings of paintings and calligraphy, and embroidery. When she travels alone in public, young men trail after her gawking and catcalling, to which she responds with angry insults (ch. 41, 563–64). Such things as a literatus walking with his wife in public or an independent, educated woman setting herself up as something other than a courtesan were probably more likely seen in Nanjing and other cities of the lower Yangtze delta than elsewhere. But such individuals would in any case not be free from criticism or open harassment. Unmarried or upper-class women ordinarily went out of their homes only on holidays or other special occasions, and then most properly if accompanied by other women or male and female servants; otherwise they would go out only in a covered carriage or sedan chair. In fiction, most of the women seen walking the streets are middle-aged or older go-betweens, flower sellers, nuns, and fortune-tellers. In actual society there would have been more than these, including women and girls of the common class except those around marriageable age, who were probably kept out of sight.

The ages at which youths first knew of or had sex can be found in numerous novels, which, of course, can only be taken as supplying suggestive evidence. The narrator in *Xingshi yinyuan zhuan* (Marriage Fate to Arouse the World) laments that spoiled upper-class youths know sex by age eleven (ch. 44, 638). An urban common woman in *Yu Lou Chun* (The Cross-dressed Scholar's Three Wives) states that "most people" know

about sex at around thirteen or fourteen (ch. 2, 11a). Erotic novels like *Shenlou zhi* portray men and women in wealthy merchant households first having sex at age fourteen (ch. 2). *Honglou meng* has Baoyu starting at age eleven or twelve, with his maid Xiren older by two years (ch. 5). These ages in part reflect the fact that men of the elite class began sexual activity and married earlier than most.<sup>57</sup> Their easy access to maids or prostitutes is one thing, however; that they would have had such early premarital relations with women of their own class, even if so often portrayed in fiction, is more difficult to assume.

The above has been a synchronic picture of marriage, gender roles, and sexuality in the early to mid-Qing period, or roughly the eighteenth century. The indeterminacy of dating and authorship of most of the fictional works I cover will prevent a more precise diachrony than "early to mid-Qing." Nevertheless, concentrating on that period, I will use fiction to describe a relatively recent and intense expression of male privilege, that of polygyny, which was legal and widespread until the early years of the twentieth century, and is still part of the memory and background of many contemporary Chinese. This fiction shows that, long before modern Chinese governments officially condemned polygamy and made monogamy the only legal form of marriage, numerous voices in the Qing either were feeling compelled to create careful justifications of polygamy, as if defending against some opposition, or were engaging in detailed accounts implying the impossibility of successful polygamy, especially from the woman's point of view. The later Western Christian influence of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries no doubt had a major moral and economic effect on the transition from polygamy to monogamy, although it is not yet clear how extensive such influence was and exactly how that transition occurred.<sup>58</sup> Explanations of present sexual relations must take into account the evolution from this recent past, which is full of its shrews, wastrels, misers, and ascetics—all of whom, especially the shrew and the wastrel, still inhabit the current imagination even if polygamy has been declared illegal and many other forms of male privilege have been dismantled.

Finally, the words I have chosen for the two extremes of male and female character types, "miser" and "shrew," are originally of narrow semantic range but are temporarily borrowed for broader though not totalizing use. That is, for instance, they do not mean that all male or female

behavior in these novels should fit along a scale of miserliness or shrewishness. I originally used the words in an earlier study which already laid out the reductive formula of male retention and female scattering, for which miser and shrew are intended to stand.<sup>59</sup> Twentieth-century stereotypes continue to reflect the same or related ideas, although “miser” and “shrew” should probably be replaced by words more appropriate to current times. The question Did (or do) misers and shrews really exist? is answerable only in a narrow sense and is probably not even worth asking. The two terms indicate modes or moments of behavior, not permanent and integral mentalities that exist in mass numbers or fixed wholes. “Polygamist” is also a borrowed term and could easily have been replaced by “wastrel” or “libertine,” which in fact resonate better with “miser” and “shrew” than does “polygamist.” “Wastrel” and “libertine,” however, do not convey the sense critical to this study of the legitimized and condoned access of one man to many women. A succinct way of describing miser, shrew, and polygamist in one breath is this: in the end, the miser and the polygamist are alike in equating potency with number, which ultimately translates into gold / semen. Although weak in terms of political and economic strength, the shrew is someone who does whatever she can to manipulate—whether to attack, evade, or coddle—the man’s obsession with potency and numbers.