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-philanderer 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 polygamist-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 superior 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 dominant sexual regime.

Fictional, historical, and biographical literature projects an image of the masterful polygamist who wins the loyalty and harmonious service of multiple women. My approach to the fantasies of this literature, fiction in particular, is to emphasize 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 polygamist 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 benefit 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-
ing 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 Chinese phenomena that had previously been vilified as signs of traditional Chinese decadence and degradation, including opium smoking, footbinding, the connoisseurship of courtesans and boy female impersonators, and polygamy and concubinage. As the modern Chinese nation began to take shape, these signs of backwardness 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 certain 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 polygamist-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 overwhelmingly 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 women he has sex with. Terms for polygyny and concubinage in modern Chinese include *yifu duoqi,* “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 *qiqie zhidu,* the “institution of wife and concubines,” which comprehends the strictly lower status of concubines, called *qie* (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* (*Honglou 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 unavailable 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 polygamy, 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 this 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. Of the two counter-narratives, one is that of sublime love in which there is a tortured affair between two people. The other counternarrative 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 definer 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.9

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.”10 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 or 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 impasses 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 caizi 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 baojian), or Traces of the Flowery Moon (Huayue heng). 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 affairs 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 polygynist, but also the ascetic monk or the misogynist 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), Hysteric 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 away 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 fleeces 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 hysteric. As a core model of the human subject in general, the hysteric 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 hysteric 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 hysteric 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 hysteric, 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 “reduc[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 lan-
guage 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 occupa-
tion of such a position only succeeds by an arbitrary act of exclusion and demarca-
tion. It is normally socially prohibited to refer to the arbitrary nature of that exclu-
sion, 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 sub-
ject 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 remark-
able 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. Polygyny 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.
If polygyny was the dominant regime of sexuality in China as it entered the global scene of modernity, then the implication is that anything sexual we see even today must be viewed as having descended—however indirectly or unevenly—from the age of legal and faithfully practiced polygyny. Although modernity is defined in multiple ways, in sexual terms China became modern when it abolished bound feet and polygamy. But dominant social structures like these do not simply disappear, or if they disappear, do not do so without leaving a long history of psychic traces. How these traces play out in modern China requires knowing what the models of manhood and womanhood were as China approached the end of its imperial existence, hence the task of this study. The topic of polygamy in China is particularly compelling because it allows us to see male promiscuity in institutionalized form. The primary fact is that the man’s promiscuity largely assumed a recognized, legalized, and proceduralized shape. Polygamy and prostitution functioned according to custom and precedent, though many men and women broke the rules. The embedded nature of these sexual practices made it such that in the face of epochal change in the nineteenth century, loyalty to China also included loyalty to polygamy and the patronage of courtesans. Given such history, and in particular given the intricate nature of Chinese polygamy, we should begin to wonder what remolding people had to undergo in order to assume post-polygamous identities. Dismissing polygamy as a relic of the past risks not only dismissing its possible operation in Chinese society today, but also what it can teach societies that were never so blatantly polygamous as to have it assume institutional form.