

ONE

Introduction: From the Seventeenth
to the Nineteenth Century



Women live in deep seclusion in the women's quarters, tending only to womanly tasks and wine and food; and word of the inner quarters does not reach the outside. If they have two or three poems hidden away in their writing boxes, how can an outsider know their profundities? Some get lost in war, some are burned in imperial book burnings, some are suppressed by old-fashioned fathers and brothers, some are destroyed by unfilial sons and grandsons—too many obstacles for me to mention.

—Wang Duanshu

Whether the absence of women writers in either the literary language or colloquial genres of fiction [accounts] for the psychological immaturity of characterization in [Chinese] novels is a thesis I am not prepared to defend. As a theme for speculation and study, however, it would be of value in appraising the character of the Chinese novel. Any such speculation must take into account the one isolated specimen of psychological sophistication, *Honglou meng*, and determine its relationship to the main stream of Chinese fiction.

—John L. Bishop

Compared to other fairy tales, “Beauty and the Beast” stands out for the length of time between the couple’s first encounter and the onset of their love. Unlike “Snow White,” who is transported by a kiss, or “Cinderella,” who is smitten of an evening, Beauty and Beast take weeks, even months, for their feelings to mature.¹ “The Beauty and the Book” is, of course, an altogether different story, but it, too, concerns a long gestation period. If we take “beauty” as a generic term for women² and “book” to designate novels,³ the first clear confluence of these two lines of development in China took place in the early twentieth century, when novels for and by women became an important literary stream. This inquiry is about the prelude to that modern development. It begins with events of four hundred years ago.

The Problem

Chinese women first entered the book trade in significant numbers around the end of the sixteenth century. This is not to say that they first became literate then, for literate woman can be identified from the Han dynasty and earlier.⁴ What is different about the late sixteenth century is that beginning around this time, in certain parts of the country, it became more acceptable for a “woman of good family” (the so-called *guixiu* 閨秀, or gentlewoman) to write poetry and to seek to publish her poems.⁵ In addition, some courtesans and

nuns were published authors.⁶ Whether or not women sold their works for money, they at least traded printed collections with other literate women and, in that sense, conducted literary exchanges. This allowed them to build reputations outside the home. Their knowledge of one another's work might take place through personal friendships, but it could also be gleaned from works available for sale.⁷ Commercial booksellers could be involved when a "women of talent," or *cainü* 才女, published. A famous courtesan poet like Liu Rushi 柳如是 (1618–44) might depend on her admirers for help with publication.⁸ With the more cloistered *guixiu*, husbands, brothers, sons, and other interested males were part of the publication process, whether by providing money for a printer, writing a preface, or transporting a newly published book from here to there.⁹ And it was not unheard of for women themselves to see to the printing of work by other women.

For the *guixiu*, on whom this work centers, these developments had ramifications in domestic space and time. At home, some women had studios specifically for literary pursuits if they were wealthy, or at least writing boxes, not to mention pens, ink, and paper; and many were involved in poetry societies with other women. The literate gentlewoman might put such implements aside during her early married years, but writing and the culture of writing could resume their former place in her life once her child-bearing years were over.

At around the same time that women's poetry was, in its own modest way, "going public," and perhaps for similar reasons, the Chinese novel was entering a new stage. Masterworks like *Sanguo zhi yanyi* 三國志演義 (Romance of the Three Kingdoms) and *Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳 (The water margin) that had survived for hundreds of years in the oral tradition began to settle into definitive written forms;¹⁰ new classics, for example, *Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅 (Plum in a golden vase) and *Xiyou ji* 西遊記 (Journey to the west), came into existence, more or less anonymously;¹¹ and professional fiction writers like Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574–1646) and Ling Mengchu 凌濛初 (1580–1644) began to emerge.¹² Drama publication, too, became more widespread during this period, but since drama lies beyond the scope of this investigation, I will mention it only rarely.¹³

To ascribe developments in fiction to the same publishing boom that affected women, one brought about by late Ming economic development, is a reasonable way of accounting for the coincidence. But more specific points of linkage can be found.

These appear when we descend to the marketplace, the world of printers and booksellers, men with a vested interest in expediting the flow of reading materials. To understand how this stratum figured in the production process, we must review some basic facts about the trade. The publishers of women's writings and of fiction, or more specifically novels (*xiaoshuo* 小說), were not always identical, and the two fields did not behave in identical ways. Many individual collections by women were published by family presses, and many of the more active commercial publishers, such as Yu Xiangdou's 余象斗 Santai guan 三台館 of Fuzhou, Wang Qi's 汪淇 Huandu zhai 還讀齋 of Hangzhou, and the Tang family's 唐氏世德堂 of Nanjing, issued a range of publications that included some fiction but few if any writings by women.¹⁴ Within each of the two streams, gradations can be found between the more and the less commercially viable ends of the spectrum. A celebrated courtesan writer like Liu Rushi attracted great attention, and many sought to acquire her writings and paintings.¹⁵ Anthologies of women's works were sometimes commercial successes.¹⁶ In contrast, a famous father, husband, or son might publish a female relative's writings to satisfy the demands of filial piety or family pride rather than those of the market.¹⁷ This meant that, when financial gain was not of paramount concern, some writings by women came out in very limited editions. As for novels, they might be published as soon as they were written or they might circulate in manuscript for decades; commerce was not always a concern of the authors of fiction.¹⁸

Where links between women's and novel publishing can most easily be found is on the commercial side of the spectrum. One promising example is provided by Zhong Xing 鍾惺 (1574-1624), editor of *Mingyuan shigui* 名媛詩歸 (Selection of poems by famous women), an important collection of women's writings that appeared after 1626.¹⁹ Zhong is further associated with the editing of and commentaries on early editions of *Sanguo zhi yanyi* and *Shuibu*

zhuan.²⁰ However, questions have been raised about all these attributions.²¹ Proof of linkages cannot be based on Zhong alone.

Another important editor, Chen Jiru 陳繼儒 (1558–1639), is similarly linked both to women's writings and to fiction. Whereas the evidence in Zhong's case is suspect, that for Chen's involvement is more reliable. Few if any questions have been raised about Chen's editorship of the novel *Lieguozhi zhuan* 列國志傳 (Romance of the states),²² and his tri-color edition of the late Ming woman Fan Huzhen's 范壺貞 *Husheng ji* 胡繩集 (Grass ropes collection) is unusually fine.²³ Another, slightly less famous late Ming publisher, Zhou Zhibiao 周之標 (1616–47), is likewise said to have turned out volumes in both areas. Both his *Nüzhong qi caizi lanke ji* 女中七才子蘭咳集 (Lanke collection of seven talents among women) and *女中七才子蘭咳二集* (Lanke collection of seven talents among women, second collection) and the two novels with which he is associated, *Cantang Wudaishi yanzhuan* 殘唐五代史演傳 (The romance of the Five Dynasties) and *Fengshen yanyi* 封神演義 (Investiture of the gods), are important classics in their respective fields.²⁴ Additionally, Jin Shengtan 金聖歎 (1610–61), the celebrated fiction and drama critic, edited a collection of writings by women.²⁵ On a more personal level, the important woman anthologist Wang Duanshu 王端淑 (1621–ca. 1680)²⁶ was a friend of the important fiction writer and dramatist Li Yu 李漁 (1611–80), and she wrote a preface for one of Li's ten plays.²⁷

One can express surprise that, in a culture as bookish as China's, women writers should have appeared in significant numbers only in the late sixteenth century, or one can probe—as this study seeks to—a longstanding inhibition against women's participation in the world of novels, for this genre appears to have remained off-limits to the woman writer until almost the end of the imperial era in 1911. Between the late sixteenth and the late eighteenth century, when this study gets under way in earnest, one does find a few signs that women read fiction, even some that they wrote it. Moreover, women may have been more involved in one discrete branch of fiction, as readers and even possibly as authors. This is the “scholar-beauty fiction” (*caizi jiaren xiaoshuo* 才子佳人小說) of the mid-seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. But, although in-

dividual women readers of these novels can be identified, no more substantial involvement in their writing can, at present, be shown. Finally, some would claim the status of novel for a type of *tanci* 彈詞 (prosimetric narrative), in which woman writers played an important role. Even if one accepts this categorization fully, the inhibition against women writing vernacular novels (*zhanghui xiaoshuo* 章回小說) cannot be denied.²⁸

Why did so few women write vernacular novels? At one level this avoidance is so fundamental as to make the question seem absurd. Much of Chinese fiction written before the masterwork *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢 (Dream of the Red Chamber), first published in 1791, is rambunctious and caught up in masculine concerns. If China sought to protect its gentlewomen from pollution by confining them to the home, we should not be surprised that fiction reading—not to mention writing—remained off-limits to women in many households, or at least that traces of such activities are rare. For other categories of women, too, it appears to have been poetry or perhaps drama, but not novels, that caught the eye. The culture of partying on which a courtesan's livelihood depended meant that poems rather than novels were the right medium for attracting customers and advancing status, for example.

From another perspective, however, it seems hasty and defeatist to assume that appearances and realities coincided. Censorship was an important factor after the change of dynasties in 1644. Might novels by women have disappeared through such means? The spirit behind the “literary inquisitions” of the early Qing remained a potent force throughout the Qianlong era and destroyed many politically subversive materials.²⁹ Some of the most prominent women writers of the early Qing were Ming loyalists and hence highly censorable, although surprisingly few writings by women appear on lists of banned titles.³⁰ Or, might some other kind of censorship explain why the ravages of time affected women's poetry far less than women's prose? For example, Wang Duanshu's *Mingyuan shiwei* 名媛詩緯 (Canon of poetry by famous women) of 1667 is a loyalist anthology of women's poetry. What is striking is not so much its loyalism but the entire *juan* of prose (*juan* 31), advertised as “*baijia xiaoshuo*” 百家小說 (Stories of one hundred authors), that it prom-

ises in the table of contents and fails to deliver. *Juan* 31 is the only one in *Mingyuan shiwei* to have been advertised but not published.³¹ Additionally, Wang's anthology of women's prose, *Mingyuan wenwei* 名媛文緯 (Canon of prose by famous women), although almost certainly once published, does not survive.³² If these examples are anything other than fortuitous, it would mean not that prose (including novels) was avoided by women but that it was written and not preserved. If censorship is the reason, it would not be censorship to protect the Manchus but censorship of another kind.

The early Qing poet Zhang Hao 張昊 presents a slightly different kind of case in point. Zhang was a member of the rather well known Banana Garden Society (Jiaoyuan shishe 蕉園詩社) of Hangzhou, a women's poetry society of the late seventeenth century. According to Deng Hanyi's 鄧漢儀 (1617–89) *Shiguan chuji* 詩觀初集 (Survey of poetry, first collection; preface dated 1672), Zhang read and wrote popular fiction. However, only one preface and a few of her poems survive.³³ Much later, Shi Shuyi's 施淑儀 (b. 1878) early twentieth-century collection *Qingdai guige shiren zhenglue* 清代閨閣詩人徵略 (Biographical notes on Qing women poets) mentions Zhang and quotes *Shiguan* but omits the passage about Zhang's fiction.³⁴ Today, the association between Zhang and novelistic fiction would attract great interest, and no anthology would omit it.³⁵ But even in the late Qing (approximately 1890–1911), anthologists were likely to discount novelistic prose by women as irrelevant to their concerns. It appears, then, that the arbiters of the canon were largely indifferent to women's achievements in this field. Under such circumstances, it may be premature to conclude that women's involvement with novels from the late sixteenth century on was as minimal as first appears. Certainly women wrote fiction that was not preserved. The question is whether any of it can be retrieved.

Background and Foundations

Before proceeding further, the terms and concepts fundamental to this inquiry need to be clarified. Among the most central are women, publishing, and fiction. Literacy in general and literacy in fiction are other categories whose relevance to the project needs to be explained, as does the focus on the nineteenth century.

WOMEN

Until the end of the Ming dynasty in 1644, three categories of women—gentlewomen, courtesans (*ji* 妓, or *mingji* 名妓), and nuns (Buddhist *biquuni* 比丘尼 and Daoist *nüguan* 女冠)—engaged in literary activities. If other women were literate, they did not participate in poetical exchanges. At the beginning of the Qing dynasty, the pleasure quarters in major cities like Nanjing were destroyed in battle or razed, and courtesans soon lost their prominence in cultural production.³⁶ Some courtesans of the transition era married prominent literati and carried on a literary life in that manner,³⁷ and individual literate courtesans reappeared in later generations of gentry households, but the cultural power of the old-style courtesan class in gentry women's discourse never fully returned. Similarly the status of nuns, although quite varied, may have declined somewhat after the early Qing.³⁸ In any event, nuns are not known for their interest in fiction. For these reasons, this study concentrates on gentlewomen rather than the other two categories. Courtesans do come up for comment in Chapter 8, but with a rather different emphasis, to be introduced later on. And despite the resurgence of courtesans and other non-elite women in that chapter, the *guixiu* is still the primary concern of this book.

Many *guixiu* had only minimal reading skills, and others did not read at all. Moreover, there were eras of greater conservatism, when women's writings were frowned upon, especially if they circulated beyond the home. Yet from the late sixteenth century through the end of this study in the late nineteenth century, enough gentlewomen were literate to carry women's poetic creation forward in an unbroken line. It is among this class of literate women that the best hope of finding novel writers and readers lies.

PUBLISHING

Like the category of women, the category of publishing divides into three broad sections: government (*guanke* 官刻), commercial (*fangke* 坊刻), and family (*jiake* 家刻).³⁹ Government publishing is not a concern in this study, which focuses on commercial and family publishing.

Commercial publishers were, by definition, driven by the profit motive. In general, this led them to publish fiction more readily than women's writings, not necessarily because women's writings were unprofitable, but because most women did not aim to circulate their work in the public sphere.⁴⁰ Another important type of publishing has to do with what we might call "vanity" or, more accurately in the Chinese context, reputation.⁴¹ Regardless of the size of the readership a work was designed to reach, a friend or family member might pay to have it published, so as to create a more permanent record of what the writer, or her family, had achieved.

The dividing line between vanity and profitability can become quite blurred. When Meng Chengshun 孟稱舜 (1600–1682), the dramatist and publisher, decided to publish his daughter's works, the likelihood is that he was motivated primarily by family pride, although profit cannot be ruled out as a factor in his decision.⁴² Analogously, Duan Yucai 段玉裁 (1735–1815), an important eighteenth-century publisher, promoted the work of his daughter Duan Xun 段馴 by publishing her poems.⁴³ Because Meng and Duan were professional publishers, their printing of their daughters' work must be contrasted with purely family publishing, which operated only when the occasion arose. An example may be found in the case of Luo Qilan 駱綺蘭 (1755–1813?), whose poetry and other writings were published by the Gongs of Nanjing 金陵龔氏, her late husband's family.⁴⁴ Like other disciples of the renowned poet and man of letters Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716–98), Luo aimed to reach as wide an audience as possible, but the means through which she did so was the family press, not the commercial firm. In the field of fiction, such "vanity" publishing is far less at issue than it is with women's writing. It is rare to find a published novel in which commercial booksellers were not involved.

After profit and vanity, several other motives for publishing can be identified, among them, textual preservation and the creation of beautiful editions for connoisseurs. Preservation was a factor behind many re-editions of women's writings.⁴⁵ There is clearly such a thing as "vanity republication," in the sense that a woman writer's family or descendants might reissue her work in printed form.⁴⁶ In other cases of republication, profit has to be considered as a motive,

even though other motives may enter in.⁴⁷ As for novels, it is well known that they were reprinted in response to real or perceived demand (see Chapters 2, 7, and 8).

Editions for connoisseurs are probably more often found with fiction than with women's writings, but there are many fine editions of writings by women, too.⁴⁸ Deluxe editions can also be found among texts by male authors for women readers. These, too, qualify as women's literature in their own way. As Katherine Carlitz informs us, certain editions of *Lienü zhuan* 烈女傳 (Biographies of eminent women) have been particularly praised for their outstanding illustrations.⁴⁹ Some of these were the work of the famous Huang family of Huizhou, who also issued deluxe editions of fiction during the late Ming.⁵⁰

The prevailing impression that women published their work with family presses and nowhere else can now be slightly refined. Particularly in the late Ming, some women writers did turn to booksellers to publish their writings. As noted above, this was especially the case with anthologies, for which there seemed to be considerable demand.⁵¹ Additionally, the publishing efforts of Yuan Mei, Chen Wenshu 陳文述 (1775-1845), and others fall somewhere between private and commercial publishing. Yuan's reputation lent cachet to whatever he published. And many of Chen Wenshu's publications initially appeared through his own Yidao tang 頤道堂 but were later printed professionally and circulated fairly widely.⁵² Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority of writings by women were published by their families, which meant, of course, that even as they bolstered family pride, they were subject to family control.

The process of publishing involved numerous agents, including writers, publishers, and booksellers. Their separate functions contributed in different ways to the circulation in a wider world of books involving women and fiction.

The disjunction between the writers and publishers plays out slightly differently in the publication of novels and the publication of works by women. Women writers often found it convenient to act as if they were not entirely responsible for their own publications. Appearances and reality coincided when a work was published posthumously. Often in such cases the agents of publication,

usually the family, implied that the poems in question had been rescued from the fires to which they should have been consigned.⁵³ Living authors, too, found ways to distance themselves from the publication process. An example is Yun Zhu's 惺珠 (1771–1833) *Hongxiang guan shici cao* 紅香館詩詞草 (Draft *shi* and *ci* poems of Red Fragrance Studio) of 1814, which was issued by her son, allegedly without Yun's knowledge (see Chapter 4). A different kind of example is provided by Wang Duanshu, who attached her own poems to the end of *Mingyuan shiwei*, claiming that this was her husband's idea, not hers. We have no way of knowing the truth of this claim.

Authorial reserve affected the publishing of fiction as well. Male authors would sometimes attach their real names to novels, but they often used pen names, obscuring their connection with this genre. A variation on this pattern is the writer who had no intention of making money from his writing but whose book appeared posthumously, sometimes to great acclaim.⁵⁴ Two notable examples considered in this study are Cao Xueqin's 曹雪芹 *Honglou meng*, the leading vernacular novel, and Gu Chun's 顧春 (Taiqing 太清; 1799–1877) *Honglou meng ying* 紅樓夢影 (Shadows of *Dream of the Red Chamber*; preface dated 1861, published 1877), the outstanding example of a novel by a *guixiu* (discussed in Chapters 6 and 7). Both were printed long after being written. In contrast, Li Ruizhen 李汝珍 (1763–1830), author of *Jinghua yuan* (1828), brokered the publication of his own novel more than once and turned it out under his real name (see Chapter 2).⁵⁵

Like the distinction between authors and publishers, that between publishers and booksellers can also be refined. Publishing and selling often took place within a single establishment. Publishers employed book carvers, printers, illustrators, and other artisans—sometimes as permanent employees, sometimes on a temporary basis. (The latter could also be hired by families that did not have their own presses.) Many publishing firms were also places that customers could visit and purchase books. The term “bookseller,” however, need not imply a bookshop. All manner of individuals were involved in the process of transmitting books from publishing houses to customers. The more itinerant sellers may sometimes

have served as a conduit between publishers and cloistered women, whether in the case of writings by women, writings for women (such as *Lienü zhuan*), novels, or other genres.⁵⁶ Several of the women discussed in this study—Wang Duanshu, Yun Zhu, Wang Qiong 王瓊 (nineteenth century), and Shen Shanbao 沈善寶 (1808–62)—assembled large libraries, which then supported their own anthologies of women’s poetry. In some of these cases, husbands, sons, or brothers helped them collect texts, but booksellers may also have been instrumental in informing them of the latest publications and helping them to acquire them.⁵⁷ Additionally, in some parts of China, commercial libraries might send books to private homes.⁵⁸

The complex relationship between publishers, authors, readers, and booksellers cannot be fully exhausted in these few paragraphs. Other details emerge in the chapters that follow. One further observation about the effect of publishing on China’s reading scene is pertinent here. The upsurge in publishing of women’s works and fiction is usually situated first and foremost in the Yangzi delta area, or Jiangnan 江南. Without a doubt, the majority of seventeenth-century women writers (and hence readers) hailed from this area, moved there when they married, or paid attention to Jiangnan trends. Eventually other, smaller centers of women’s literary activity developed in Beijing, Fuzhou, Chengdu, and Guangzhou, among other places; yet it is reasonable to assume that Jiangnan set the tone for other areas, even as it drew on texts and ideas that originated elsewhere.

The mobility of leading female writers was probably greater in the nineteenth than in the seventeenth century.⁵⁹ As I argue in Chapter 5, the link between women in Beijing and Jiangnan became more richly productive of literary output in the nineteenth century than it had been at the beginning of the Qing. The growth of a Beijing–Hangzhou axis may or may not be matched by other axes, and it certainly had causes other than publishing;⁶⁰ but publishing was an important means through which Jiangnan’s *guixiu* kept in touch with their Beijing friends.

On the fiction side of the fence, whether or not an author hailed from Jiangnan, she or he could take advantage of a centrally located book market when it came time to publish. Originally from the

Beijing area, author Li Ruzhen traveled from his domicile in Banpo 板溇 (near the salt center of Haizhou 海州 in northern Jiangsu) to a publishing center in Suzhou to make contact with the fiction market.⁶¹ Here Jiangnan functioned less as a trendsetter and more as the point of access to a nationwide distribution network.

FICTION

The word “fiction” encompasses many categories in China, including classical short stories (*wenyan xiaoshuo* 文言小說), vernacular novels (*zhanghui xiaoshuo*), vernacular short stories (*duanpian xiaoshuo* 短篇小說), and the rhymed prosimetric form known as *tanci* (or *tanci xiaoshuo* 彈詞小說).⁶² Of these four categories, the last was the most accessible to women, both as authors and as readers. *Tanci xiaoshuo* belong to the larger category *tanci*, which includes writings in the Wu dialect, oral and performance texts, and texts that have nothing to do with women.⁶³ *Tanci xiaoshuo* are distinguished from other *tanci* in two ways. First, they were meant to be read and not performed. In this sense, they are rather close to vernacular novels. Second, their authorship, narrating voice, and intended readership were all female.

One can posit an evolution to published *tanci xiaoshuo* from oral storytelling by women in the women’s quarters. Throughout most of the eighteenth century, *tanci xiaoshuo* circulated in manuscript, and they continued to be handcopied even after reaching published form. The nineteenth century was the heyday of published versions of this type of fiction. The most outstanding published examples are sizable, and one or two are truly gargantuan in size.⁶⁴ Chapter 3 looks at the early publishing history of this genre.

Whether published, handwritten, or spoken, the underlying ethos of women’s *tanci* was substantially compatible with *guixiu* culture, particularly with its normative principle that a woman’s parents-in-law, parents, husbands, and sons be served. Siao-chen Hu’s sensitive readings have discerned signs of resistance to such strictures in even the most domestic-seeming *tanci*, but on the whole, writers kept their family traumas from public view.⁶⁵ This rather simple picture is complicated by an important strain in this genre of

writing, one that rails against women's confinement to the home. This is most in evidence in one of the earliest and certainly the greatest *tanci*, Chen Duansheng's 陳端生 (eighteenth–nineteenth centuries) *Zaisheng yuan* 再生緣 (The destiny of rebirth), composed at the end of the eighteenth century. Her heroine dresses as a man, passes the examinations, and becomes prime minister.⁶⁶ It can also be found in some later *tanci xiaoshuo*.⁶⁷ But as often as not, this genre conforms to rather than resists the status quo. Later, we will consider how the *tanci* option⁶⁸ might have served as a kind of women's novel (see the Afterword). But for now we merely aim to set out basic information.

In contrast to *tanci*, the relationship of the classical tale (*wenyan xiaoshuo*) to women's experience is rather elusive. Although a written rather than a spoken language, *wenyan* might have been easier than some forms of the vernacular for many elite women, since it was closer to the language they used for writing poems. Moreover, we know from edited collections that certain women were skilled at writing classical narratives. Wang Duan's 汪端 (1793–1839) preface to her famous collection *Ming sanshi jia shixuan* 明三十家詩選 (Selected poems of thirty Ming authors) is a case in point. Entitled “Jimeng” 記夢 (Record of a dream), it revolves around a dialogue between the author and the poet Song Lian 宋謙 (1310–81), who wonders why his poems were omitted from the collection. It is lively and well written. Another point of attraction might have been the delicacy and restraint of classical fiction, which could, at times, take on the sensibility of poetry. The short length of classical fiction might further have encouraged women to try their hand at this kind of writing, for a fine classical tale need not be more than a page or two long.⁶⁹ In contrast to vernacular fiction's expansiveness and potential for transgression, *wenyan* fiction might have been the more attractive option for those inclined toward fiction.

Almost no traces of collected or individual classical stories by women survive, however. The case of Wang Duanshu is again instructive. The short, Ming loyalist biographies she wrote in her collection *Yinhong ji* 吟紅集 (Red chantings; in print by 1655)⁷⁰ were eventually published under the name of her husband's friend Zhang Dai 張岱 (1597–1684?), with her permission.⁷¹ Biographies are not

exactly fiction, at least not in modern parlance,⁷² but this general type of work appears alongside more fanciful tales, for example, in an important early Qing collection of stories, Zhang Chao's 張潮 (1670–98) *Yuchu xinzhì* 虞初新志 (New tales of Yuchu; preface dated 1683, postface, 1700). From this we can infer that the categories were adjacent or sometimes even identical, at least in some people's minds. Yet it is only through an accident of preservation that Wang's authorship of some of Zhang Dai's biographies is known. Could it be that other classical prose by women was similarly disguised?

Another interesting case is found in the collection *Nü caizi shu* 女才子書 (Book of female talents), authored by Yuanhu yanshui sanren 鴛湖煙水散人, which came out in 1658. The subject matter of these twelve pieces is the accomplishments of talented women (real or invented) of the late Ming and early Qing, and it bears some ties to the longer scholar-beauty novel of the same era.⁷³ If one were to define women's literature broadly, as literature by, for, or about women, *Nü caizi shu* should be admitted to the category, yet there is no basis for claiming that its author was not a man. Not until the end of the Qing does one find a collection of classical tales attributed to a woman, and even then the claim is difficult to prove.⁷⁴ This is not to deny that other female authors of *wenyan xiaoshuo* might be identified someday; it is, rather, that for now the opacity of the materials makes this a difficult project to pursue.

The focus of this study is the third kind of fiction, the so-called vernacular novel, or *zhanghui xiaoshuo*. The reasons for this focus are quite straightforward. First, this kind of fiction offers the best hope of bringing new findings to the fore. In contrast to *tanci xiaoshuo*, for which female authorship is already well established, and the classical tale, where it is virtually impossible to prove, this third branch does yield a few examples. Even though most are no longer extant, what we know about them allows a partial revision of prevailing views. Second, of the three types of fiction, the vernacular novel is the one that underwent new developments, along with women's writing, after the late sixteenth century. It thus lies at the heart of the paradox raised above. Finally and, in some ways, most important, vernacular fiction was primarily consumed

through buying and selling. In contrast to *tanci xiaoshuo*, which might go on being handcopied even after publication, and to classical tales, which might or might not circulate commercially, vernacular novels were usually quite responsive to consumer demand. Thus, even when feminine authors of fiction are not significantly in evidence, one can still mine existing literature for signs of how fiction's female audiences might have shaped what a novel has to say.

In addition to vernacular novels, vernacular short stories are another area in which women might, in theory, have exercised their talents. However, the vernacular short story was not a robust form in the nineteenth century, and it will not form part of this analysis.

LITERACY

The availability of texts and the motives of publishers are much but not all of the story of books and beauties. Another important factor is literacy. In contrast to fiction, women, and publishing, which I have discussed rather ahistorically, I track literacy with reference to historical change.

Between the end of the sixteenth century and the end of the Qing, *guixin* readership underwent three periods of expansion. I cannot say for certain that it contracted during the two interim periods, but I am quite certain of the expansions.

The first occurred at the end of the sixteenth century, when women learned to read and write in increasing numbers. This is not always treated as an issue of literacy, but it seems to me that it can legitimately be handled in this way. Between the late sixteenth and the late eighteenth century, shifts in overall literacy impinge on this study far less visibly. Many women learned to read in the waning years of the Ming and the first thirty or forty years of the Qing, but I take this to be an extension of the trend that began in the late sixteenth century rather than a new development. This trend seems to have run out or reached a plateau near the end of the seventeenth century, when prominent women writers began to complain about the diminishing literary prowess of the younger generation and to lament the lost glories of the "Banana Garden Five" or "Banana Garden Seven" (see Chapter 5). If their perceptions are correct,

it might mean that the deepening orthodoxy and social control of the early Manchu conquest called out a more conservative strain in the culture and stopped or reversed the upsurge in feminine letters that had been in progress since the late Ming.⁷⁵

The second increase came in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It can be demonstrated in a number of ways, perhaps most easily through the efforts of literati such as Yuan Mei and Chen Wenshu, who, like late Ming literati before them, although in a somewhat different manner, challenged the prevailing orthodoxy that “lack of talent in a woman is a virtue.” These efforts preceded, and may also have been enabled by, the approaching end of “high Qing” orthodoxy. Yuan’s fifty or so disciples were not the only group of women who relied on the protection of a male teacher, nor were they even the first group to do so. But Yuan’s prominence made him emblematic of broader change.⁷⁶ Some of Yuan’s disciples went on to work under Chen Wenshu, whose coterie may have numbered thirty or more.⁷⁷ Another important group was the Ten Women of Wu (Wuzhong shizi 吳中十子), which operated under the leadership of Ren Zhaolin 任兆麟 (fl. 1776–1823) of Suzhou and his wife, Zhang Zilan 張滋蘭.⁷⁸ Its 1789 anthology of poems, *Wuzhong shizi shichao* 吳中十子詩鈔 (Recorded poems of the ten women of Wu),⁷⁹ preceded Yuan Mei’s *Suiyuan nü dizi shi* 隨園女弟子詩 (Poems of the female disciples of Suiyuan; 1796) by seven years.⁸⁰ *Suiyuan nü dizi shi* is the chief means by which Yuan’s community of disciples is known today.

A third important group was younger and came later. It centered on the editorial activities of a woman, Wang Qiong. This was neither a small group of fellow students like Ren’s group, nor a more dispersed set of individual writers like Yuan’s. It consisted of women whose works were edited into a single collection, *Mingyuan shibua* 名媛詩話 (Poetry talks about famous women), many of whom knew one another (see Chapters 2 and 3).⁸¹ The women in Wang’s anthology included most of Yuan’s disciples and the “ten women of Wu.”⁸² Thus all three groups may be regarded as disparate manifestations of the same trend.

Not every example of women’s publishing from this era was initiated by Yuan. As we have seen, the Ten Women of Wu pub-

lished before Yuan's disciples did. And the Bi family of Zhenyang, Jiangsu, constituted a separate project, at least initially. Its notable women members are Bi Fen 畢汾 and Zhang Zao 張藻 (sister and mother, respectively, of the scholar-official Bi Yuan 畢沅, 1730–97); and their early publications of 1776 and 1778 predate those of Ren, Yuan, and Wang. There are no known connections between this generation of the family and Ren or Yuan, although Bi Yuan's daughter later became one of Yuan's disciples.⁸³ This suggests that the Bi family project emerged independently but later joined forces with Yuan's. Like the Ten Women of Wu, the Bis' early venture into publishing indicates that Yuan's work with women drew on pre-existing patterns and was not a completely new trend.

Another harbinger of Yuan's efforts is found in an important anthology of women's poetry, this time edited by a man. This is Wang Qishu's 汪啓淑 (1728–99?) *Xiefang ji* 擷芳集 (A nosegay of flowers) of 1773.⁸⁴ According to the Mongol literatus Fa-shi-shan 法式善 (1753–1813), *Xiefang ji* pumped new life into the field of women's publishing and further stimulated the field.⁸⁵ Writing not long before his death, Fa-shi-shan regarded his own era as a kind of high tide for literary women, both because of groups like the ones just mentioned and because of *Xiefang ji*.⁸⁶ Once again it would seem to follow that the upsurge in women who could write meant a larger number who could read, as well.

Still another sign of change lies in the extensive reprinting of books of all sorts, including books involving women. Yuan Mei and especially Chen Wenshu were active in republishing the work of earlier women writers, most notably those of late Ming times (see Chapter 4). As a result, Wang Duan could write with feeling about such late Ming military figures as Zhang Huangyan 張煌言 (1620–64), as well as the women writers Li Yin 李因 (1616–85), Ye Xiaoluan 葉小鸞 (1616–32), Huang Yuanjie 黃媛介 (1618–85), and Liu Rushi, all stalwarts of the late Ming and early Qing.⁸⁷ Additionally, the works of certain still earlier women writers were reprinted at this time.⁸⁸ As for fiction, Zhang Chao's *Zhaodai congshu* 昭代叢書 (Compendium of an enlightened age; 1697) was first reprinted in 1833. The *tanci Tianyu hua* 天雨花 (Heaven rains flowers) may have followed a similar trajectory. It is dated 1651, according to the pref-

ace, although some suspect that it was written considerably closer to the publication date of 1804.⁸⁹ Whatever the case, the early nineteenth century marked a return to texts and practices not seen since the early Qing.

These developments in literature were accompanied by other signs of change. Although they did not take female disciples, writers like Shen Fu 沈復 (1763-?), whose *Fusheng liuji* 浮生六紀 (Six records of a floating life) of 1807 captured the plight of one talented woman, and Yu Zhengxie 愈正燮 (1775-1840), who denounced foot-binding, signal that the early nineteenth century's changing attitudes toward women were not limited to the wave begun by Yuan and Chen. Shen Fu does not figure in this study, but his patron, Shi Yunyu 石韞玉 (1756-1837), was a friend and supporter of several of the most prominent women in this study, among them Wang Duan, Qian Shoupu 錢守璞 (1801-69), and Gu Taiqing.⁹⁰

Whether literacy declined after the beginning of the nineteenth century is an open question, but the end of the nineteenth century saw another upswing and, along with it, a revolutionary new discourse about female learning. China's efforts to re-establish sovereignty in the face of foreign incursions lay behind this change. Ironically, this upswing benefited somewhat from these same incursions, inasmuch as missionary efforts to establish schools for girls and their home-study programs for women made a significant contribution to female literacy. Missionary programs to develop religious literature in vernacular dialects may also have played a role, along with modern forms of publishing, such as the newspaper, active in the treaty ports by the 1870s.⁹¹ These developments certainly affected categories of readers other than *guixiu*. But the most dramatic stimulus was a policy change on the part of China's leaders. Seeing value for the nation in enlisting female talent, they actively called on women to go to school. This initiative, under way by approximately 1898, built on the increase in female literacy to which publishing and missionary efforts had already given rise. Not only did China's leaders seek to improve female literacy, but they also sought to turn women's talent to new and nationalistic ends.⁹²

By 1898, the traditional contours of *guixiu* learning no longer suited the purposes of China's leaders. Such learning, they pointed

out, seldom led to mastery of a body of knowledge or to cognizance of the world outside the home. As a result, in the late Qing value system, poetry by women of the Ming and Qing could be mocked as mere “ditties lamenting spring and bemoaning separation.”⁹³ Once in place, this sea change in attitude brought an end to the configuration of “books” and “beauties” with which this study is centrally concerned.

RECEPTIVITY TO FICTION

The place of fiction in the reading and writing programs of China’s literate women is a second determinant of literacy. As indicated above, some seventeenth-century women were conversant with numerous genres, including fiction. In such cases, skill in writing fiction was linked with great literary versatility.⁹⁴ To judge from available seventeenth-century records, no woman wrote only fiction. Presumably, some women did read scholar-beauty fiction without having mastered other genres, since this type of reading material was thought to occupy a lower literary plane.⁹⁵ However, the one woman poet I have found who clearly read a scholar-beauty novel is known to have done so because she wrote a drama based on her reading.⁹⁶ This woman, surely, was literate well beyond the norm. Another unknown concerns the relationship between the new crop of literate women of the early seventeenth century and the rise of scholar-beauty novels. Were the first examples of these novels inspired by historical women, even if the genre later veered off into more fanciful plots and themes? The collection *Nü caizi shu* suggests at least a tangential relationship, because some of its tales are based on real women.⁹⁷

More clearly than their seventeenth-century forbears, early nineteenth-century women were interested in fiction. Their interest is much easier to document, particularly through the poems women wrote in response to *Honglou meng* (see Chapter 5). Because its focus is the nineteenth century, not the eighteenth or an earlier century, this study takes *Honglou meng*’s composition as a given. Thus, I do not address the question of what caused *Honglou meng* to be written or go into great detail about the partial overlap with Yuan Mei’s life

and times,⁹⁸ except to make the obvious point that this overlap is more than a coincidence of two unrelated phenomena. As is well known, Yuan is said to have believed that his Suiyuan garden was a model for the novel's Grand View Garden, and one of his prize female disciples, Jin Yi 金逸, was among the first women to write on *Honglou meng*.⁹⁹

Honglou meng may well have reached a few women in manuscript, but almost all of the poetical reactions to it postdate its first publication in 1791.¹⁰⁰ In addition, its publication stimulated a substantial number of sequels. With a few exceptions, these sequels were compatible with the tastes and interests of women readers, although none compares on any level with the brilliance of the parent novel (see Chapter 7). What this series helps to demonstrate is the whole new wave of fiction, connected in various ways to women's involvement in literature, that was set in motion by *Honglou meng*. Likewise the *tanci Zaisheng yuan* was written with women readers in mind.¹⁰¹

Just as increased literacy among women in the seventeenth century might explain the rise of the scholar-beauty novel, so *Honglou meng* and its sequels may be causally linked to the increase in fiction's female readers from the early nineteenth century on. In neither case is it clear exactly how to connect the two developments—whether newly literate women gave rise to new fiction or vice versa, or whether the linkage worked in both directions—but a broad homology between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries can be hypothesized if not proved.

The end of the nineteenth century witnessed still another configuration of women and fiction. By this time late Qing women (among other readers) were being blamed, not praised, for their interest in fiction.¹⁰² In the sweeping rhetoric of this era, a novel that failed to teach readers about the world was faulted as unworthy, even when it promoted virtue. Conversely, for a work of fiction to be deemed worthwhile, it had to spread a new kind of learning among its readers, especially women. By such a yardstick, even *Honglou meng* left much to be desired. Written by both men and women, the “new novel” that emerged from late Qing discourse represented a sharp break with what had gone before (see Chapter 8).

WHY THE NINETEENTH CENTURY?

It need hardly be noted that centuries are a foreign concept in the Chinese setting, and it makes perfect sense that in Chinese historiography it is the western incursions of the 1840s and the subsequent Taiping Rebellion, not 1800, that mark the moment of crucial change. Yet our slightly expanded nineteenth century makes a coherent unit in literary terms. It begins with the publication of *Honglou meng* (1791), the end of the Qianlong era in 1796, the death of Yuan Mei (1798), and the upsurge of female literacy at the turn of the nineteenth century. However one links these developments, collectively they frame a new relationship between women and fiction, one that continued until around 1911. This “century” of slightly over one hundred years was dominated by foreign incursions; although these did not affect the style of Chinese fiction, they did make a mark on its content. It is these last hundred or so years of traditional vernacular fiction that this study sets out to explore. The period can be further demarcated by Gu Taiqing’s life (1799–1877), which extends through much of the century. *Honglou meng* sequels make a third, more commercially driven continuity across the same time span. Stretching from *Hou Honglou meng* 後紅樓夢 (Later *Dream of the Red Chamber*) of just before 1796 to Gu’s *Honglou meng ying* of 1877, this series produced two examples of novels whose authors or editors were female, and several others whose plots, characters, or rhetoric suggests a feminine audience. Once one reaches the last decade of the Qing, however, the scene changes so dramatically that even an apparent sequel like Wu Jianren’s 吳趸人 *Xin Shitou ji* 新石頭記 of 1908 is clearly the product of a different world (see Chapter 8).

Apart from the way fiction flourished among women in the nineteenth century, the other great attraction of the period is its comparative ease of access, as far as linking women to fiction is concerned. This is in contrast to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which provide extremely few leads. Granted that in the nineteenth century, too, most women writers did not write fiction or write about it, and, as always, the vast majority of women did not write at all. Nevertheless, a picture of the women who

read and ultimately wrote fiction can be extracted from the evidence at hand.

A Précis of the Whole

This study is divided into two parts. The first, “Contiguities: Women, Fiction, and Print Culture Circa 1830,” lays the groundwork for the second. It consists of four case studies, all from the early nineteenth century, all contiguous in terms of time. Each describes one facet of the relationship of women to fiction in the early nineteenth century.

The first part begins with Li Ruzhen and his landmark novel, *Jinghua yuan*. This novel is substantially and famously about women, but it is not by a woman, and even its apparent target audience is male. Yet judging from the four women who wrote endorsements for it, among a total of fourteen endorsers, *Jinghua yuan* did not mean to exclude female readers. Chapter 2 proposes, rather, that the novel’s large cast of female characters and its inconsistently “feminist” attitudes were designed to reach women as well as men.

Chapter 3 is about Hou Zhi 侯芝 (1764–1829), a woman editor and writer of *tanci*, whose dates coincide almost perfectly with Li’s. Hou had ties to some of the people in Li’s world. The themes of *Zai zao tian* 再造天 (Rebuilding heaven), a *tanci* by Hou, parallel some of Li’s, but from a very different, and more clearly women-centered, point of view. Altogether, Hou is known to have published or written five *tanci*. Issuing Chen Duansheng’s *tanci* *Zaisheng yuan* was one of her accomplishments as a publisher, even though some of her other writings argue against this *tanci*’s radical views. Her own written fictions are not particularly successful in an artistic sense, but they appear to have been well enough received.

Building on this background, Chapter 4 focuses on three leading literary women of the early nineteenth century. All three are tied in some way to fiction, whether *tanci* or *zhanghui xiaoshuo*. The first is Liang Desheng 梁德繩 (1771–1847) of Hangzhou, wife of a prominent intellectual and one of several women to write a conclusion to Chen Duansheng’s *Zaisheng yuan*. Hers beat out all other candidates and is nowadays regularly reprinted with the main text by Chen Duansheng. Thanks to Liang’s decision to marry the heroine to a

long-time suitor and “rescue” her from her prime ministership, *Zaibeng yuan* could circulate widely among women whose reading was supervised by family members, both female and male. Yet nowhere does Liang advertise her authorship. It is chiefly through Chen Wenshu that we know she was the author of these concluding chapters.¹⁰³

The second woman is Liang’s niece and surrogate daughter Wang Duan, also from Hangzhou. Wang was also the daughter-in-law of Chen Wenshu. Liang took over as Wang’s mother after Wang’s real mother, Liang’s sister, died at a young age. Known especially for her editorial work, Wang Duan has attracted interest because of the possibility that she may have written a novel, *Yuan Ming yishi* 元明逸史 (Lost history of the Yuan and Ming), a work she subsequently destroyed. Without Chen Wenshu, we would not know of this work. One can glean a sense of *Yuan Ming yishi*’s subject matter from materials that survive in Wang’s collected poetry. Her destruction of this piece provides a point of departure for speculation as to why so little fiction by women survives.

The third woman is Yun Zhu, from another prominent Jiangnan family, but this time with ties to the north through her Manchu husband. Yun is known primarily for her work as an editor, particularly of the collection *Guochao guixiu zhengshi ji* 國朝閨秀正始集 (Correct beginnings) of 1831, described in rich detail in a recent study by Susan Mann.¹⁰⁴ Rather than marking the end point of the eighteenth century, as it does in Mann’s study, *Zhengshi ji* here becomes one measure of the extent of female literacy during the early 1830s—after Yuan Mei’s death but while Chen Wenshu and his learning community still held sway. A second point of interest is Yun’s association with the novel *Honglou meng*. This association came about through the friendship between her prominent son, Linqing 麟慶 (1791–1846), and *Honglou meng*’s second author, Gao E 高鶚 (*jinsbi* 1795). Yun’s collected poetry further reveals that she wrote two sets of poems about fiction—*Honglou meng* and its first sequel, *Hou Honglou meng*. Yet her anthology tends to obscure her own and other women’s interest in readings of this kind. Yun’s life and her approach to female talent reveal a gulf between the canon and the full scope of fictional involvement in women’s lives.

Chapter 5, the final chapter in this part, builds on the coincidence that four books—Hou Zhi's *tanci Zai zaotian*, Li Ruzhen's *Jinghua yuan*, Yun Zhu's *Guochao guixiu zhengshi ji*, and Wang Xilian's 王希廉 new edition of *Honglou meng* (notable for a short commentary by his wife Zhou Qi 周綺)—came out in the space of four years. The chapter proceeds from this coincidence to review and summarize all the evidence about women as readers from Chapters 2–4, and it asserts women's growing involvement with fiction.

The second part is entitled “Continuities: *Honglou meng ying* in Its Nineteenth Century Setting.” Whereas the first part deals latitudinally (or synchronically) and from multiple angles with the 1820s and 1830s, the three chapters in this part use a longitudinal/diachronic approach to these and other decades. In terms of time, its coverage both precedes and follows that of Part I. And whereas the first part has as much to do with reading as with writing, in the second writing prevails. Its central purview is the series of sequels to *Honglou meng*. *Honglou meng ying* is the only extant nineteenth-century novel identifiably by a woman that I have found, although one other such work, no longer extant, can also be identified.

Chapter 6 details the life of the author Gu Chun (Taiqing). Gu was a Manchu from the Beijing region but with ties to Jiangnan. She was in correspondence with Liang Desheng and Wang Duan, whom she may have met in Hangzhou during her youth (although the possibility seems remote), and she was acquainted with Yun Zhu's family through her Manchu ties. Her happy marriage to a Manchu prince was supplanted by literary relationships with women, especially the poet and critic Shen Shanbao, after her husband died. This chapter outlines the novel *Honglou meng ying*, which it matches against Gu's own life story. The juxtaposition of author and novel allows me to claim an autobiographical focus, even while *Honglou meng ying* lives up to its billing as a sequel to *Honglou meng*.

Chapter 7 situates *Honglou meng ying* in the long series of sequels to *Honglou meng*. The series is then explored for evidence of other female authors, and it provides the basis for a hypothesis that such sequels could be written with female audiences in mind. Unlike *Honglou meng ying*, which was published years after it was written,

most of the other sequels were published for profit not long after they were composed.

Chapter 8 discusses the publication of *Honglou meng ying* in 1877. With publication, this novel finally entered the commercial realm. Its content is not what one would call “modern,” in that it is neither reformist nor inclined to set China in an international context, and it is pro-, not anti-, Manchu. The conditions under which it was published, however, show signs of possible responsiveness to developments at Shenbao guan 申報館, the first modern Shanghai publishing firm. The chapter concludes with a comparison between *Honglou meng ying* and two late Qing novels by or for women. The point here is not to discuss the fine points of late Qing fiction but to create a foil for understanding *Honglou meng ying*’s emergence in an earlier age.

The ties between Parts I and II are complex and various. To give just two examples: inspired by *Honglou meng*, *Jinghua yuan* prefigures the discussion of sequels in Part II. And Gu Taiqing’s personal links to Liang Desheng, Wang Duan, and (to a lesser extent) Yun Zhu are part of the foundation for her poetic output. In both connections, the second part emerges from and builds on patterns already identified in Part I.

Slight as they are, the changes documented in this study are easily obscured by the political upheavals of the century and the literary manipulations of the canon. During the 1820s and 1830s, a writer like Yun Zhu might be actively engaged with fiction, but her anthology downplayed this interest. With still greater equivocation, Wang Duan wrote a work of fiction and later destroyed it. In contrast, during the 1860s and 1870s, Gu Taiqing completed a novel, which she circulated under a recognizable pen name. Minuscule though this sample is, in the context of supporting evidence it hints at an improving climate for women fiction writers as the nineteenth century developed.

If women and their relation to fiction changed over the nineteenth century, the novel changed as well. Part II concludes with some observations on the difference it made for fiction to have female readers. The late nineteenth century produced many kinds of novels, but most works in the chain of sequels to *Honglou meng*

acknowledge female readers in new ways. The likelihood that these sequels anticipated women in their audiences creates a contrast to scholar-beauty fiction, which does much less to acknowledge women readers or highlight their critical powers (see Chapter 7). However, the great majority of nineteenth-century novels would still have been considered off-limits as far as most *guixiu* were concerned.

Conclusion

This study has several main findings. The first is the emergence of a new phase in women's literary culture during the first decades of the nineteenth century. This development had multiple causes and manifestations, among them Yuan Mei's and Chen Wenshu's tutelage of women, *Honglou meng*, and the commercial development of writings earmarked for women or written in part for female audiences. The second is that *Honglou meng* stimulated women poets as no work of fiction had done before. This is somewhat ironic, since the novel emerged during a period when women's writing had declined. Given the extent of women's interest in Cao Xueqin's masterpiece and in view of the rather lowly status of sequels, I regard it as no accident that among the first novels by women were sequels to *Honglou meng*. The third finding is that a whole subcategory of works, the *Honglou meng* sequel, came into being with women included in their intended audience, although not every sequel was designed for proper *guixiu*. The poetry and sequels responsive to this novel allow me to argue that the situation at the beginning of the seventeenth century—when the vernacular novel could be deemed a masculine genre and hence off-limits to women—no longer obtained by the end of the Qing.

The leap from reading to writing is the most important measure of women's increasing involvement with novels. Apart from all the women who wrote on *Honglou meng* itself, at least two important women writers, Yun Zhu and Shen Shanbao, left reactions to sequels to *Honglou meng*. Two other women may have written sequels, one of which survives. A third woman writer served as editor of her brother's sequel. And other fictions indebted to *Honglou meng*, such as *Jinghua yuan*, became the subject of women's poems.

Finally, images of female critics are rather regularly found in sequels to *Honglou meng*. Collectively this and other evidence suggest that women were a factor in the production and consumption of *zhanghui xiaoshuo* by the end of the third quarter of the nineteenth century, not long before politics would turn the novel to new ends.

The final conclusion has to do with Gu Taiqing, who dominates the second section. Gu has roots that link her to earlier poetry circles in the Hangzhou region, to *tanci* writers like Liang Desheng, and to possible fiction writers like Wang Duan. Once these roots become clear, Liang and Wang take shape retrospectively as precursors and supporters of what Gu would later do. Gu's unique case allows us to view *Honglou meng ying* as an extension both of developments in the lives of specific women writers and of events that brought the chain of sequels into being. Gu also allows us to look forward, in that the conditions under which her novel was published in some ways reflect the modernizations of the late Qing. Yet she herself was very much at home in the old *guixiu* world. Gu's importance can be measured in space as well as time. A longtime Beijing resident, she was always highly mindful of trends in Jiangnan women's poetry, and several of her best friends were originally from Hangzhou. Conceivably, it was southern, not northern women who had most to do with her venture into novel writing. At the same time, she was close to her Manchu husband and shared his love of *Honglou meng*. Like *Honglou meng* itself, Gu's life and works are a mixture of southern and northern influences, of Manchu and Chinese themes.

In proceeding from the late 1790s to the end of the Qing, I seek to reinforce the case, already advanced by Amy Dooling, Kristina Torgeson, and Susan Mann, among others working backwards from China's literary modernism,¹⁰⁵ that the May Fourth movement was not as pathbreaking as it claimed in bringing women writers to the fore. This is emphatically not to say that I view women's relationship to the novel in the nineteenth century as a direct precursor to either of these later two stages. Late Qing literature on, for, and by women in no way evolved from *Honglou meng ying*. Still less did Ding Ling 丁玲 (1904–81) and other modern women writers articulate ideas, feelings, or techniques first voiced or employed by Gu

Taiqing. Only in the sense that the barrier separating women from vernacular fiction showed some signs of yielding before the late Qing does Gu's work shed light on ensuing developments. Her story offers hints but not proof that women might have appropriated this fiction still more fully and imaginatively, had not political circumstances intervened.

This study has a more broadly comparative dimension. When I make use of the arguments raised by Ian Watt in *The Rise of the Novel* apropos of eighteenth-century England (Chapter 7), my aim is to show how Chinese women took up writing novels after reading novels authored by men. At the same time, I am aware of the challenges to Watt's argument, some of which concern female agency.¹⁰⁶ One may well ask whether women's involvement with the novel in China was derivative, along the lines Watt describes. Did women turn to writing fiction only long after men? Did the novels women wrote merely follow in men's footsteps, or did they add something new? The situation in China is particularly complicated because of the existence of a whole separate genre of fiction in the form of *tanci*, which assumed the role of the "women's genre." Yet as Gu Taiqing's example amply demonstrates, the prosimetric style of *tanci* meant there was much it could not do. *Tanci's* way of combining prose and verse made it an awkward medium for reproducing the Beijing vernacular. For this task, novels were more promising. Moreover, Gu was probably not adept at Wu dialect, in which *tanci* tended to be written. Finally, *tanci* by convention disallowed portraying courtesans in a favorable light, something Gu aimed to do.

Another complexity lies in *Honglou meng's* self-presentation as a novel both written by and centering on a man. It may well be true that "*Honglou meng* is not a novel in the European sense of the term precisely because it does not confer femininity upon its author";¹⁰⁷ but there is no doubt that it inspired women's greater involvement with the novel. Furthermore, despite *Honglou meng's* masculine authorship, it is a novel whose prominence depends in large part on its ability to picture alternatives to the status quo. It is not at all surprising that it fed women's efforts to write poems on novels, to criticize novels, and to write novels of their own.