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Chinese Women, Power, Politics, and Sexuality

A Brief Introduction

This study traces the close relationship between power, politics, and sexuality in China's long history, from earliest times to the present-day. It argues firstly, that adopting sexuality as an analytical category in Chinese historical development reveals its centrality to statecraft and politics, and secondly, that it is female sexuality which political regimes both in the past and present have given primary attention. Evidence to support these claims is drawn from published studies of dynastic imperial courts, Chinese family history, and literature.

The Last Empress

Two years after the last Chinese woman ruler Empress Dowager Cixi (1835-1908) died, the book *China under the Empress Dowager* by J.O.P. Bland and Edmond Backhouse was published. This work, which for a long time remained the authoritative account of Cixi's 47-year reign both within and outside China, offered graphic, even mesmerizing descriptions of her controversial court as well as titillating reports of Cixi's decadence, especially her lascivious persona.¹ For Bland and Backhouse and their followers, Cixi represented the apotheosis of 'Oriental' female sexuality wielding political power.² Cixi was one of only three women in some 2000 years of imperial history who exercised sovereign power, the others being the Han dynasty Empress Lü (reigned 188-180 BCE),³ and Empress Wu (also known as Wu Zetian 625-705; reigned 690-705).⁴ Whatever merits these three women demonstrated during their suzerainties, the authors of historical records tended to slander them, and in the cases of Wu and Cixi, accuse them of sexual crimes. Empress Wu was censured for her sexual affairs with younger

men whom she brought to court and lavishly favored.⁵ More than twenty years after Cixi died, Charles Pettit wrote in his biography of her that she was “obsessed by sex: unable to control her libidinous desires in later life, she has young men brought to her bed at night and poisoned the next morning”.⁶

Recent research on Chinese women and gender studies has not only challenged these particular narratives, but also indicated how sexuality in China was deeply embedded in discourses of government power and politics.⁷ As sexuality studies in the late twentieth century moved beyond its Western borders, China scholars began to debunk the Orientalist presentation of erotica in the works of Robert Hans van Gulik,⁸ and to investigate the connections between power, politics, and sexuality.⁹ Their studies have shown that during the imperial age (from the Qin dynasty 221BCE—CE 1911 to the fall of the Qing dynasty) not only did empresses and female courtiers (as well as indulgent emperors) fall under scrutiny for their sexual behavior, but also ordinary people. As one scholar has argued, since ancient times successive Chinese imperial regimes were more concerned about gender and sexuality than any other premodern state.¹⁰

In imperial China, “sexual politics and state politics” were closely tied: because every emperor had to have a successor, and every emperor had to marry, women were integral to dynastic continuity. Chinese emperors were polygamous, but permitted only one wife, who ranked above all other consorts and concubines, and whose male offspring would presumably ensure the patriarchal line of the family. While there were numerous regulations governing the sex lives of emperors as well as many directives administrating the behavior of palace women, every dynasty experienced a fair share of sexual intrigues unleashing power struggles and personal vendettas.

The afore-mentioned Empress Lü, for example, ordered the torture and mutilation of her rival, Lady Qi, a lower-ranking consort with whom her husband Emperor Han Gaozu had become so enamored that he tried to have the heir-apparent Ruyi (Lü’s son) deposed, and replaced with Lady Qi’s son.¹¹ Although he was persuaded of the impropriety of such an action by his advisors—Ruyi did become emperor after his father’s death—Empress Lü’s malfeasance continued unabated. With her emperor son’s early death, she manipulated the selection of two child emperors in succession, and took control over the court as ruler. She appointed members of her own family to high positions, organized the murder of four of her husband’s remaining sons to prevent their succession to power, and arranged the marriage of her own granddaughter to her emperor son.

Empress Lü's cruelty and interference in state matters, which only ended with her death in 180 BCE, was a benchmark in Chinese imperial history. This exemplar of female power elicited a major backlash. Hereafter officials and scholars denigrated the power of women at court, and infused female wickedness into the historical descriptions of the fall of each dynasty.¹² But often these same accounts criticized male rulers: for having too many concubines, failing to distinguish between the primary wife and consorts, engaging in favoritism, and worst of all, neglecting government business while building and enjoying their harems. In the minds of these commentators (and their successors), politics and sexuality were closely entwined.

Although it is tempting to conclude from this synopsis that pleasure-seeking emperors and wanton palace women were a constant trope of Chinese imperial history, closer examination of dynastic records reveals a complex picture of varying scenarios, depending on time, and the interpretations and re-interpretations of textual sources that admonish rulers. Modern scholars have demonstrated that the regulation of 'proper' and correct gender relations also extended to the general populace. The family, as the fundamental unit of Chinese society, was the primary target of state policies governing sexuality. But even in the most prudish of regimes, there was room for fictional accounts that made fun of dicta warning ordinary people of the dangers of improper sexual behavior, but also conveying the consequences of sexual misconduct. It is at these three sites, the imperial court, the family, and fiction, where this essay examines the relationship between sexuality and politics. This study argues, firstly, that adopting sexuality as an analytical category in China's long-term history reveals its centrality to Chinese statecraft and politics, and secondly, that it was female sexuality to which dynastic regimes gave primary attention.

A Closer Look at Politics and Sexuality at Court

Fear of the potential harm that licentious female sexuality posed to the Chinese political order lays deep in its history. Already in the Zhou period (1046 BCE – 256 BCE), authorities endorsed ethical imperatives that separated women from men into inner and outer spheres, and prescribed women's three obediences enjoining a woman to obey her father before marriage, her husband during marriage, and her son during her widowhood.¹³ Although such rules decreased women's direct influence on state affairs, women nevertheless did participate in politics indirectly through the

establishment of marriage alliances between powerful families, a convention that was to continue during the Han dynasty (206 BCE – CE 220). In that era, imperial marriages were sites of power struggles between empresses, empress dowagers, consorts, and eunuchs (castrated males employed to serve the emperor and supervise palace life), i.e. exactly the kind of personal tussles that officials and historians blamed for the collapse of dynasties.

One of China's greatest historians, Sima Qian (145 BCE - c. 86 BCE), writing in his work the *Shiji* (*Records of the Grand Historian*) blamed power-hungry women for the fall of the Zhou dynasty. Such observations about female behavior in the political arena led to concern with female fidelity in the domestic setting. By the time the scholar-official Liu Xiang (77 BCE – 6 BCE) compiled *Lienü zhuan* (*Biographies of Women*), a work considered by some “the most influential Chinese book about women ever written”¹⁴ —with the didactic purpose of praising virtuous daughters, wives, and mothers, and condemning seductive and power-hungry shrews who sowed chaos and destroyed dynasties—a woman's chastity was seen to be the ultimate female virtue, while a man's loyalty to his family and his dynasty its male analogue.¹⁵

With the fall of the Han ruling house, it would take several hundred years before China was re-united under one dynasty. The cosmopolitan Tang era (618-907) had absorbed influences of nomadic groups who had ruled northern China during the Han-to-Tang interregnum. Nomadic culture, which endorsed the levirate custom whereby a widow would be married to a brother or even a son of the deceased, is partly to explain the female ruler Wu Zetian's meteoric rise to power and emperorship.¹⁶ She had been a concubine to the first Tang emperor Taizong (566-635), but had a passionate affair with his son the future Emperor Gaozong (628-683). After Taizong's death she adhered to Chinese convention, and became a Buddhist nun, but eventually plotted her return to the palace. Gaozong remained smitten by Wu, deposed his empress, and married her. After his death, Wu's son ascended the throne, but she overthrew him and his three brothers, and then abolished the Tang dynasty, calling her new dynasty the Zhou. Reigning as the only female emperor in Chinese history, Wu Zetian did demonstrate she was a capable ruler, promoting competent administrators, the cult of motherhood (despite murdering her own children!), and various religions to counter Confucian-oriented restraints on women. Notwithstanding these achievements, historical sources have concentrated on her intimate life with two half-brother musicians.¹⁷ Her death prompted the revival of the Tang dynasty, and although a number of powerful women at court did try to

participate in state affairs, space for female-solo rulership came to a definite end, until Empress Cixi became the principal sovereign in the nineteenth century.

What did not come to an end, however, was the impact of sexuality on Chinese politics. In 755 the Tang Emperor Xuanzong (r.712-756), an accomplished ruler during most of his suzerainty, fled the capital when troops led by General An Lushan began a rebellion against the dynasty. In the midst of the unrest Xuanzong was compelled to arrange for the death of his favorite consort Yang Guifei.¹⁸ In the years leading up to the rebellion, Xuanzong had allowed General An unprecedented access to his inner court and even encouraged Yang Guifei to adopt General An as her son. Thus, once An directed his troops in revolt against the Tang, Yang was blamed for leading Xuanzong astray in the pursuit of pleasure and neglect of his state duties. Yang Guifei became yet one more example of the danger powerful palace women provoked.

Everyday Sexual Politics in the Chinese Family

Although the Tang dynasty did survive the An Lushan rebellion, the revolt marked a turning point in the fortunes of that regime and a defining phase in Chinese history. Historians consider the transition from the Tang to the next major dynastic era, the Song (960-1279) a time of key social, economic, and political changes, including the disappearance of a circumscribed group of aristocratic clan power-holders.¹⁹ While the imperial institution of emperorship remained intact during the Song, the powers of officialdom (in effect a new sociopolitical elite) recruited through the civil service examination expanded, and the acceptance of Neo-Confucianism (an ideology bent on transformation of society from the ground up) cast much influence on the state's efficacy to influence social/sexual mores. Although recent scholarship has aimed to dismantle the simplistic model of restrictions on women's behavior because of the promulgation of Neo-Confucian moral puritanism that encouraged the confinement of women to the 'inner quarters,' and widow chastity, other research has demonstrated the significance of changing ideals of masculinity during the Song, and the following dynastic era, the Yuan (1271-1368), relevant to the politics of sexuality.²⁰

The institutionalization of the examination system during the eleventh century created a hegemonic elite manhood, which took pride in intellectual and aesthetic pursuits such as calligraphy and poetry-writing. The high regard

for these interests helped diminish the prestige of physical activities such as archery, riding, sword fighting, and boxing; the ideal man was now sedentary, 'soft', and cerebral.²¹ Learned men engaging in literary and artistic exchange also fostered a vibrant and glamorous courtesan culture that stimulated men to display their talents in public homosocial net-working occasions such as official banquets and drinking parties attended by these women.²² But such frivolity proved a potential threat to family harmony, and by the twelfth century conservative male voices were urging men to consider the value of female fidelity, especially in the aftermath of the Song defeat to the Jurchen steppe regime (Jin dynasty 1115-1234) that had conquered northern China. Men's loyalty to the Song government, which now ruled only the southern half of China, was likened to women's faithfulness—by the Yuan period when all of China was controlled by the Mongols, it was not only the chaste wife but also the chaste widow which signified the importance of loyalty/fidelity in Chinese political culture.²³

Hundreds of years of contact with highly militarized steppe societies had left Chinese men not only humiliated due to their political losses, but also convinced of their superiority to the invaders, not least because the relative freedom of women in nomadic cultures clashed with Chinese ideals of womanhood based on obedience and chastity.²⁴ The instability of the Southern Song and Yuan eras drove men to integrate their concubines into their own family structures so that the male children of these women would have the same legal parity as sons by their wives.²⁵ The Chinese view of the Mongol practice of the levirate as incestuous discouraged widow remarriage and helped support the exaltation of widow chastity and even female suicide.

With the founding of the native-Han Ming dynasty (1368-1644), the relationship between sexuality and politics was propelled in new directions. While the Ming era is known for extensive economic development and intense commercialization, growing overseas exchange, large inflows of bullion, an improved transport and communications infrastructure, and not least, a vibrant publishing industry, the period also fostered a certain anxiety about these 'riches'.²⁶ The power of market forces may have clashed with rigid Neo-Confucian mores and threatened the ideal of a stable social hierarchy, but it also unleashed new visions about human nature, including an obsession among male literati with the concept *qing* (emotion, passion) that helped feed the fires of a rising chastity cult that too became a kind of mania—and ironically, a symbol of Confucian virtue.²⁷ The Ming government regularly issued awards recognizing widows who did not remarry as well

as those women who committed suicide when facing sexual assault. Male literati also endorsed the chastity cult, through the burgeoning print media, because it associated them with prestigious ideals sponsored by the state.²⁸ By the end of the dynasty, the chastity cult also embraced 'faithful maidens', young women who refused to marry, or who even might commit suicide, after their fiancé's unexpected demise.²⁹

The popularity of widow chastity continued during the Manchu Qing dynasty (1644-1911), with government-sponsored moral campaigns helping to propagate the ideal among the commoner classes—for them female virtue became an increasingly useful status marker.³⁰ The Manchu rulers saw endorsing Neo-Confucian virtues as a means to gain support of their Han Chinese subjects. For them it was politically useful to promote chastity, the analogue of male fidelity, as a way to overcome the problem of residual loyalty to the Ming dynasty.³¹ For the Chinese male literati who wrote accounts of chaste widows, which they published in local gazetteers or in vernacular story collections, such exposés also became an opportunity to exercise their power over women through appropriating the right to observe and critique them.³² The craze for honoring chaste women continued into the early nineteenth century when more and more communities financed and built large ornate ceremonial arches in commemoration of local women's fidelity.³³ Such monuments symbolized both state power and local people's reverence for the chastity cult, as well as recognition of their efforts to conform to the political ideology of the Qing regime. With the expansion of literacy among elite women, the government endorsed the printing of didactic manuals that extolled Confucian exemplary female behavior.³⁴

Evidence of state intervention into the sexual lives of the Chinese people is well-documented in legal cases that show how the Qing government aimed to insure a stable social order through a proliferation of statutes designed to punish sexual deviance, reward female chastity (without encouraging suicide), and promote proper social interactions between men and women throughout society.³⁵ Eighteenth-century legislation promulgated initially by the Yongzheng emperor (r. 1723-1736) and later by his son the Qianlong emperor (r. 1736-1796) affected several facets of sexuality: prostitution was prohibited; the sexual use of servile women was curtailed; harsh penalties were imposed on a variety of rape cases; and homosexual rape was severely punished.³⁶ But given China's dramatic population increase in the eighteenth century and growing social and economic dislocation, it was not always easy for local officials to standardize and carry out the application of law. And,

as Sommer demonstrates, complications arose as the male/female ratio sharpened due to the increasing levels of female infanticide, elite polygyny, and widow chastity, so that poor men began having ever more difficulties to procure a wife; eventually, they became outcasts. The transient ‘rogue male’ who preyed upon humble chaste women and young boys figured disproportionately in the juridical caseload. Legal records also show that among families in desperate circumstances, it was not uncommon to engage in polyandry whereby a second husband joined the household and shared the wife’s domestic and sexual labor in exchange for financial support, or to offer a wife for sale.³⁷ Such practices notwithstanding, among the mass of the Qing-era population, however, just as the role of the chaste wife remained the essence of femininity, so did too normative masculinity adhere to a husband’s sexual monopoly of his wife. In that way, the reach of the state into people’s sexual habits in late imperial China persisted intact.

Chinese Fiction and Sexual Politics

Fiction and drama are valuable sources for the history of Chinese sexuality because they reveal insight into how ordinary people reconciled (or rejected) the demands of the state in their private lives.³⁸ Fiction and drama were known to scrutinize the dark underside of sexual relationships between ordinary people. Stories featuring shrewish wives and henpecked husbands, for example, based their plots on commonly-experienced family strains that exacerbated a wife’s antagonism toward her husband caused by: pressure to bear sons, demands of a mother-in-law, and a husband’s attention to other women—especially a concubine.³⁹ Shrew stories inverted the male-female relationship—the women portrayed as cunning and violent, and their husbands weak and ornery—and were understood as a threat to the ideals of the patriarchal family. These tales were thus, on the one hand, satirical entertainment but also, on the other hand, admonishment against impropriety in the management of family relations.

One of late imperial China’s greatest novels, *Jin Ping Mei* (*The Plum in the Golden Vase*) focuses almost exclusively on sexuality in the domestic sphere. This work was written in the late Ming by an unknown author and set during the years 1111-27, shortly before the fall of northern China to the Jin invaders. It tells the story of Ximen Qing, a wealthy apothecary and social climber. The novel is about his economic and political machinations, his relationships with his various wives (eventually six), the women’s

mutual relationships, and features 72 detailed sexual episodes. Despite his overabundance of sexual partners, Ximen has want of offspring. Herein lies the heart of the author's message: issueless sex, conducted with a harem of bickering, adulterous women, is sex divorced from its natural purpose.⁴⁰ This is a world of Confucian dystopia: the characters are bound to each other not by the political ideals of filiality, chastity, and loyalty, but through a web of misbehavior and incest. The author's purpose is to probe the circumstances which give rise to ordinary individuals doing evil, i.e. engaging in illicit sex, and who thereby suffer retribution.

Despite the novel's preoccupation with the tenets of Confucian sexuality, this work is not an indictment of polygamy per se. Polygamy, or be more exact polygyny, whereby a man is restricted to one legal wife but allowed multiple women with whom he consorts, was a well-established practice in China, and available to any male who wanted and could afford it.⁴¹ In fact, many prescriptive Confucian texts as well as medical advice books affirm the propriety and health benefits of polygyny.⁴² Literary experts have argued that in contrast to the stern message of Ming-era pornography that sex kills, many of the protagonists in Qing novels are able to enjoy multiple extra-marital sexual encounters, and even have them regularized in marriage. For example, the writer Shen Fu's (1763-1825) memoir *Fusheng liuji* (*Six Records of a Floating Life*) authenticates the tensions between conjugal love and filial duty, with the protagonist clearly expressing his love for both his wife and the concubine that she herself had procured for him.

Concluding Remarks

Empress Cixi's death in 1908 and the founding of the Republic of China in 1911 ushered the beginning of a new phase in Chinese politics in which the master narratives of nationalist modernization and socialist liberation dominated political agendas until nearly the end of the twentieth century. But as a number of publications indicate, shifting politics did not erase the importance of loyalty to the family and state.⁴³ During the Republican era (1912-49) era legislation gave women easier access to free-choice marriage, divorce, and improved inheritance rights, but concubinage persisted as a legally protected practice, and the well-ordered family remained the basis of the social and political order.⁴⁴ In Maoist China both male and female sexuality were confined to marital bonds, and considered crucial to the reproductive success of the state.

By the end of the 1970s, the Chinese government switched political directions, initiated massive economic reforms, and inaugurated the one-child policy, meaning a married couple was allowed only one child, although in the countryside some families might have two offspring. In urban areas, families with daughters were known to invest heavily in their schooling and upbringing, resulting in today's generation of highly educated career women, many of whom do not necessarily want to marry and have children. But they are ridiculed, and if they are single by age 27, they are labeled *shengnü* (leftover), an expression adopted in 2007 by the Ministry of Education and now a common phrase in the Chinese vernacular.⁴⁵ Given that since 2004 the government has deemed marriage and childbearing to be essential components of its "harmonious society" strategy, women not marrying is considered a threat to social stability, particularly because of the overabundance of single men in the aftermath of the one-child policy.

The reform era also ushered in another legacy of China's gender history: wide-spread prostitution, and a sexual economy which is dominated by the exchange of wealthy and politically influential men and unmarried young women who like 'old-style' courtesans trade their femininity and sexuality for material wealth and financial security from these men.⁴⁶ China's present-day sexual landscape also offers homosocial networking venues (high-end bars, restaurants, massage parlors, and brothels) where entrepreneurs and local officials 'engage in business' while sharing the pleasures of sexualized entertainment which helps build and cement relationships between the two groups of men.⁴⁷ These practices are condoned, if not encouraged by the state, as they contribute to the Chinese economy both directly and indirectly, such as in the case of the real estate industry.⁴⁸

In conclusion, one may claim that the history of sexuality and politics in China is both repetitive and consistent, while only the material circumstances change. Sexuality and politics remain an integral facet of Chinese statecraft, and as in the imperial era, with female sexuality interpreted in terms of either reproductive or male needs.

Notes

1. *China Under the Empress Dowager: Being the History of the Life and Times of Tz'u Hsi, Compiled from State Papers and the Private Diary of the Comptroller of the Household* (London: Heinemann, 1910). This work went through many reprints, and a slightly revised version issued by the prestigious Peking publisher Henri Vetch in 1939. In his 1976 biography of Backhouse, *The Hermit of Peking: The Hidden Life of Sir Edmund Backhouse* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1976), British historian Hugh Trevor-Roper showed the vast majority of Backhouse's life-story and virtually all of his scholarship as a fraud....
2. Keith McMahon, *Celestial Women: Imperial Wives and Concubines in China from Song to Qing* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 202-03 introduces contemporaneous and fictional accounts of Empress Cixi that have perpetuated controversial images of her. For an introduction to recent revivalist scholarship on Cixi, see Li Yuhang and Harriet Zurndorfer, "Rethinking Empress Dowager Cixi through the Production of Art," *Nan Nü: Men, Women and Gender in China* 14, no.1 (2012):1-20.
3. Hans van Ess, "Praise and Slander: The Evocation of Empress Lü in the *Shiji* and the *Hanshu*," *Nan Nü: Men, Women and Gender in China* 8, no.2 (2006): 221-254.
4. Empress Wu has been the subject of many published studies. Three recommended biographical studies of her are: Timothy Barrett, *The Woman Who Discovered Printing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); Richard Guisso, *Wu Tse-t'ien and the Politics of Legitimation in T'ang China* (Bellingham: Western Washington Press, 1978); N.Harry Rothschild, *Emperor Wu Zhao and Her Pantheon of Devis, Divinities, and Dynastic Mothers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).
5. Keith McMahon, *Women Shall Not Rule: Imperial Wives and Concubines in China from Han to Liao* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), 194-98.
6. Charles Pettit, *La femme qui commanda à cinq cent millions d'hommes: Tseu-Hi, impératrice de Chine (1835-1908)* (Paris: Éditions du Laurier, 1928), 238.
7. See essays in *Sexuality in China: Histories of Power and Pleasure*, edited by Howard Chiang (Seattle: University of Washington, 2018). For an overview of how gender and women's history became an academic part of Chinese studies, see Harriet Zurndorfer, "Waves of Publications on Chinese Women and Gender Studies," *NORA—Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 26, no.4 (2018): 357-66.
8. See Charlotte Furth, "Rethinking van Gulik Again," *Nan Nü: Men, Women and Gender in China* 7, no.1 (2005):71-78; Paul Goldin, *The Culture of Sex in Ancient China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002).
9. The opening of historical archives in the People's Republic of China since the 1980s enabled scholars to gather materials concerning government power, politics, and sexuality. Path-breaking studies on this topic include Matthew Sommer, *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000) and Janet Theiss, *Disgraceful Matters: The Politics of Chastity in Eighteenth-Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).
10. Susan Mann, *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History* (Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press), xvii.

11. McMahon, *Women Shall Not Rule*, 66-69.
12. Bret Hinsch, *Women in Imperial China* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 39-40. See too Bret Hinsch, "Evil Women and Dynastic Collapse: Tracing the Development of an Ideological Archetype," *Quarterly Journal of Chinese Studies* 1, no. 2 (2012): 62-81.
13. Hinsch, *Women in Imperial China*, 21. China's earliest archaeological and inscriptional data indicate that the political and economic status of women, as represented in burial practices and religious beliefs, was inferior to men. See David Keightley, "At the Beginning: The Status of Women in Neolithic and Shang China," *Nan Nü: Men, Women and Gender in Early and Imperial China* 1, no.1 (1999): 1-63.
14. Hinsch, *Women in Imperial China*, 44. The best translation of the Lienü zhuan is Anne Kinney, ed. and trans., *The Exemplary Women of Early China: The Lienü zhuan of Liu Xiang* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).
15. Mann, *Gender and Sexuality*, 14; Goldin, *Culture of Sex*, Chapter 3.
16. Bret Hinsch, *Women in Tang China* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 48-52.
17. McMahon, *Women Shall Not Rule*, 194-98.
18. Hinsch, *Women in Tang China*, 52.
19. Nicolas Tackett, "A Tang-Song Turning Point," in *A Companion to Chinese History*, edited by Michael Szonyi (Hoboken: John Wiley, 2017), 118-28.
20. For an insightful discussion on the impact of Neo-Confucian ideals on both elite and non-elite families, see Hinsch, *Women in Imperial China*, 130-38. The reasons for the increasing popularity of footbinding beginning in the Song era which confined women physically to the home has been the subject of debate among leading historians. Dorothy Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005) stresses the erotic (not moral) origins of footbinding whereas Patricia Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 41-43 suggests footbinding helped make women more delicate and compatible with the ever more refined and sedentary male literati. Pioneering studies of Chinese masculinity include Kam Louie, *Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); and Bret Hinsch, *Masculinities in Chinese History* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013).
21. Louie, *Theorising Chinese Masculinity*, 6-7. Geng Song, *The Fragile Scholar: Power and Masculinity in Chinese Culture* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004). Interestingly, during the first decades of China's recent reform era, heavy metal music aficionados recounted in their lyrics the physical attributes of Tang dynasty masculinity that placed great value on strength, aggression, and power. One of the most popular Chinese bands in the late twentieth century was in fact called Tang Dynasty. See Cynthia P. Wong, "A Dream Return to Tang Dynasty': Masculinity, Male Camaraderie, and Chinese Heavy Metal in the 1990s," in *Metal Rules the Globe: Heavy Metal Music Around the World*, edited by Jeremy Wallach, Harris Berger, and Paul Greene (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 63-85.
22. Beverly Bossler, "Shifting Identities: Courtesans and Literati in Song China," *Harvard*

- Journal of Asiatic Studies* 62, no.1 (2002), 5-37.
23. Beverly Bossler, *Courtesans, Concubines, and the Cult of Female Fidelity: Gender and Social Change in China, 1000-1400* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2013).
 24. Linda Cooke Johnson, *Women of the Conquest Dynasties: Gender and Identity in Liao and Jin China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011); Bettine Birge, "Levirate Marriage and the Revival of Widow Chastity in Yuan China," *Asia Major*, 3rd series, 8 no.2 (1995): 107-46.
 25. Bossler, *Courtesans, Concubines, and the Cult of Female Fidelity*, Chapter 5.
 26. Timothy Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).
 27. A scholarly overview of the female suicide cult is Paul Ropp, "Passionate Women: Female Suicide in Late Imperial China—Introduction," *Nan Nü: Men, Women, and Gender in Early and Imperial China* 3, no.1 (2001): 3-21. Siyen Fei, "Writing for Justice: An Activist Beginning of the Cult of Female Chastity in Late Imperial China," *Journal of Asian Studies* 71, no.4 (2012): 991-1012 challenges earlier analyses of the cult, including the pioneering study by Mark Elvin, "Female Virtue and the State in China," *Past and Present* 104 (1984):111-52. See too Harriet Zurndorfer, "Prostitutes and Courtesans in the Confucian Moral Universe of Late Ming China (1550-1644)," *International Review of Social History* 56 (special issue) (2011): 197-216. On the moralization of sexuality in Confucian discourse, see Richard G. Wang, *Ming Erotic Novellas: Genre, Consumption, and Religiosity in Cultural Practice* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011).
 28. Katherine Carlitz, "The Daughter, the Singing-Girl, and the Seduction of Suicide," *Nan Nü: Men, Women, and Gender in Early and Imperial China* 3, no.1 (2001): 22-46.
 29. Weijing Lu, *True to Her Word: The Faithful Maiden Cult in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).
 30. Susan Mann, "Widows in the Kinship, Class, and Community Structures of Qing Dynasty China," *Journal of Asian Studies* 46, no.1 (1987): 37-56.
 31. Hinsch, *Women in Imperial China*, 186.
 32. Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 3.
 33. Wu Yulian, "'Let People See and Be Moved': Stone Arches and the Chastity Cult in Huizhou during the High Qing," *Nan Nü: Men, Women and Gender in China* 17, no.1 (2015): 117-63.
 34. Susan Mann, "The Education of Daughters in the Mid-Ch'ing Period," in *Education and Society in Late Imperial China, 1600-1900*, edited by Benjamin Elman and Alexander Woodside (Berkeley: University of California Press), 19-49.
 35. Theiss, *Disgraceful Matters*.
 36. Sommer, *Sex, Law, and Society*.
 37. Matthew Sommer, *Polyandry and Wife-Selling in Qing Dynasty China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).
 38. Mann, *Gender and Sexuality*, Chapter 8.

39. Yenna Wu, *The Chinese Virago: A Literary Theme* (Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1995).
40. Tina Lu, "The Literary Culture of the Late Ming (1573-1644)," in *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, vol.2, edited by Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 63-151. For a learned and helpful introduction to Jin Ping Mei, see David Roy, "Introduction," in David Roy, trans., *The Plum in the Golden Vase or Chin P'ing Mei*, vol.1, *The Gathering* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), xvii-xlvi. Roy completed the full translation of the novel in five volumes in 2013.
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45. Harriet Zurndorfer, "Escape from the Country: The Gender Politics of Chinese Women in Search of Transnational Romance," *Gender, Place, and Culture* 25, no.4 (2018): 489-506.
46. Harriet Zurndorfer, "Men, Women, Money and Morality: The Development of China's Sexual Economy," *Feminist Economics* 22, no.2 (2016): 1-23.
47. Two important ethnographic studies of this phenomenon are: John Osburg, *Anxious Wealth: Money and Morality among China's New Rich* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013); and Elanah Uretsky, *Occupational Hazards: Business, Sex, and HIV in Post-Mao China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).
48. Zurndorfer, "Men, Women, Money, and Morality," examines how the Chinese social media confronted the irregularities of the real estate market in large cities like Shanghai in which the sexual economy was crucial to the financial success of the building and construction industries.