

## Introduction: The cloistered lady and the bare stick

When a family wanted to know more about a girl who had been suggested for a daughter-in-law and asked what kind of a girl she was, the neighbors would answer, “We do not know. We have never seen her.” And that was praise.

Ning Lao T’ai-t’ai (Pruitt 1945:29)

If a man plots to have illicit sex in broad daylight, it is usually when he happens to encounter a woman in some lonely village or remote empty place. . . . If he encounters a young girl of fifteen *sui* or under, then he may be able to “join by means of coercion”; but if she is over sixteen *sui*, then it is unlikely that the rape will be consummated. . . . But women who walk alone without any company are rarely chaste.

Magistrate’s handbook, early nineteenth century (Sommer 2000:108)

The strict boundaries around young women that were supposed to keep them chaste and pure were the same boundaries that upheld the honor of the family in nineteenth-century China. These boundaries were as salient in the laws of the eighteenth century as they were in the upbringing of respectable women at the turn of the twentieth century, as Ning Lao T’ai-t’ai could testify. Tensions surrounding this ideal of female purity were thoroughly explored in early Chinese texts, one of the most widely read being the classic “Tale of Yingying.” Here is a synopsis of that story, written by a Tang scholar named Yuan Zhen (779–831): Yingying is a fair seventeen-year-old when her mother introduces her to the comely scholar Zhang, to whom the mother owes a favor. He falls in love at first sight and attempts to approach Yingying through her maid, Hongniang. Hongniang persuades Zhang to write love poems to Yingying to seduce her. This works so well that Yingying, after an initial display of outrage, climbs over the wall of her compound to Zhang’s bed and sleeps with him.

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For the next month, he joins her secretly every night in the western wing of her home, where they make love. In the end, though, Zhang abandons Yingying for the capital, where he sits for the exams and rebuffs her tender letters. Stories of the affair spread throughout the capital, many of them richly sensual and romantic, some cruel and hurtful. Yingying ultimately marries another man, and Zhang another woman.

Yingying's story is replete with regret, resentment, and nostalgia. It features passionate accounts of divine union, fearsome images of women as dangerous and polluting, and outpourings of anger and shame. The tale reappeared in many variations on the stage, including a thirteenth-century play called *The Western Wing*. In the seventeenth century its themes were transformed and given a happy ending in the opera *The Peony Pavilion*, which in turn inspired a best-selling American novel by Lisa See.<sup>1</sup> In the tale of Yingying, all of the tensions explored in Part I of this book are revealed: the tension between cloistered women and sexual desire, the shame attached to women who have sex outside of marriage, the enterprise of the single male determined to get access to a woman he desires, the overwhelming power of physical desire and the sublime bliss of its consummation, and the inability of parents, morals, and high walls to contain passion. The figure of the maid as a boundary-crossing intermediary is also a key part of this story. It is Hongniang, after all, who suggests the seduction strategy that allows the plot to unfold.

Yingying's affair with Scholar Zhang gave readers a chance to consider all of these tensions, and to come away with a new, if not cheery, appreciation of the irresolvable nature of the conflicting imperatives. The thing to notice about Yingying, in the original story, is that she is hardly a shrinking violet. In fact, she (not Scholar Zhang) initiates sexual intercourse by coming to *his* bed, despite her apparent awareness of the costs to her that will inevitably follow. He, by contrast, illustrates the relative ease with which men can escape the consequences of lost romance and find comfort in new relationships. Hers is a cautionary tale, but one with enough emotional complexity to give readers' imagination plenty to feed on. The earliest versions of the drama *The Western Wing*, derived from Yingying's story, take full advantage of the sensual language and imagery in the original text, as analyzed by West and Idema: the garden, the full moon, and the flowers all convey *yin* imagery of sexually accessible beauty. Red flowers, especially the red peony, point to the engorged vulva; the flesh is white jade or "mutton fat"; the penis is "the jade one"; zither

<sup>1</sup> For a translation and close readings of the original Tang story, see Yu 2000:173–201. On *The Western Wing*, see West and Idema 1991; on *The Peony Pavilion*, Tang 2002; Lisa See's novel is *Peony in Love* (2007).

strings are the frenum of the clitoris; and playing the zither is a method of arousal (West and Idema 1991:142–146, 147). We should not imagine, then, that young girls brought up to conceal themselves deep inside the boudoir were unaware of the world beyond. In fact, mere mention of deep concealment would have sufficed to remind the girls of Yingying's story. Many Yingying-style tales also sent a powerful message: the ideal “female beauty” (*jiaren*) of fiction is talented, virtuous, and ill-fated (Grace Fong 1997:273–275).

This introductory chapter examines the central tension in Yingying's story: the historic imperative requiring that women be cloistered at home, juxtaposed against the constant circulation of men through the social, political, and economic systems of the country. The sex and gender system in nineteenth-century China revolved around cloistered women. Boundaries that concealed women defined the system, and the sexuality and status of every man and woman in the empire was measured in relation to those boundaries. The boundaries divided people who were respectable (the Chinese term was “*liang*,” or “good”) from everyone else. To be a respectable person, you had to belong to a respectable family, and the mark of a respectable family was the purity of its women. A pure woman's respectability was ensured, as Ning Lao T'ai-t'ai tells us in the preceding quotation, if she stayed out of sight. We can construct a map of the entire nineteenth-century social order using this paradigm of concealment. At the center of that social order sat the *guixiu* (ladies cultivated in the boudoir): the wives and marriageable daughters of upper-class men who lived a life concealed from public view. Women in all respectable families tried to follow their example, and those who failed lost status commensurately.

Why were cloistered women so central to the sex and gender system in a society in which the family was based on male descent lines? And why did the end of cloistering make “the woman problem” the burning issue in China's first national revolution in 1911? These are some of the questions this book examines. In doing so, the book takes the long view. That is, we will not be concerned so much with gains and losses, or progress and setbacks, in the so-called status of women, or with questions about gender equality. Rather, we will ask how the relationships between gender and power have been configured in China's modern history, particularly in the transition from the late empire to the modern nation. Our primary focus will be the Chinese cultural context within which those relationships were framed and negotiated over time. This approach enables us to view modern Chinese history through a lens that makes us think differently about the social and cultural costs of the end of the empire and the beginnings of the nation-state. Was the end of the

civil service examination system in 1906 more important than programs to send women out of the home for school and work? Why was the one-child family policy a culturally legitimate option in post-Mao China? How much do classical ideas about sexuality and gender performance figure in contemporary sexual behavior? By using sexuality as a category of historical analysis, this book poses and offers answers to these and other questions. The rest of this introduction shows how sexuality was embedded in every aspect of social life in Chinese culture – from marriage to social status and from notions of space to patterns of mobility – and, especially, in Chinese politics and government.

## **Sexuality and social life**

### *Sexuality and marriage*

In nineteenth-century China, every person was supposed to get married and rear sons to carry on a patriline. Chances for marriage, however, varied with gender and status. Nearly 100 percent of females married; up to 20 percent of males never did. Marriage in respectable families of means was arranged, usually by parents, and a married son ideally lived with his parents in a joint household that included his wife, his married brothers, and all of their children. His sisters would be “married out” into another patriline. Wealthy parents had many advantages in this marriage market. They could marry off their children earlier, attracting desirable young brides with fancy bridal gifts and presents and supplying elaborate dowries for their daughters. The wealthy could afford to add concubines to the family, especially when a wife did not give birth to a son – “the rich got children,” as one scholar put it (Harrell 1985). Thus the wealthy could hope to achieve the Chinese family ideal, which was to have many generations under one roof. But even people of modest means aimed at the ideal, and the vast majority of Chinese in the nineteenth century spent at least part of their lives in a joint family household shared by relatives of three generations.

Getting married and having children were social expectations, and the wealthy had a better chance of fulfilling those expectations than did the poor. Similarly, women had a far better chance of living the ideal than did men. Women were almost certain to marry at some point in their lives, even after decades of service as maids or indentured servants, because of the insatiable quest for fertile young women in the marriage market, and because wealthy families enhanced their reproductive success by acquiring concubines. By contrast, large numbers of men died unwed because

they could not find or afford a bride. Access to a bride was a defining condition of every young man's life chances. And in every generation, a vast pool of impoverished young men died without marrying at all. Unmarried men without wives or children – rootless “bare sticks,” as they were called – were feared by respectable people in settled communities and closely monitored by the government. They were perceived as disruptive, predatory, and undisciplined by the constraints of life in a settled family home.

The demand for brides and concubines was constant, and it rose in times of peace and prosperity. Yet because a male heir was required to continue a patriline, most married couples had a strong preference for sons. This tilted the sex ratio of surviving children, sometimes due to neglect or even infanticide of unwanted baby girls, particularly among the poor and especially in periods of hardship. The result was a marriage crunch that squeezed out poor males. The crunch tightened and loosened with the ups and downs of the dynastic cycle and the regional economy. So in the sex and gender system described here, the cloistered young woman occupies one end of a continuum; at the other end is the rootless young male – the bare stick. She is surrounded by institutions and relationships that hold the social order in place. He is a free-floating marginal figure whose presence is a continuing threat to that social order.

### *Sexuality and social identity*

We can already begin to see how sex and social status were related in the nineteenth century. But sexuality was even more central to social identity than one might suppose. Social status in late imperial China was measured in many ways, but the most fundamental distinction was drawn between people who were considered respectable (called “good” [*liang*]) and people marked as pariahs (called “polluted” [*jian*]). Every household in the registered population was classified under one of these two categories, which also defined the boundaries of marriage markets. Before the eighteenth century, women of pariah status were sexually available for prostitution and entertainment, but not for marriage with respectable commoners; men of pariah status were forbidden to take brides from respectable commoner families. Pariah men were also barred from access to the single most important path of upward mobility: education. They could not enter local academies, nor sit for the civil service examinations.

The vast majority of commoner families were “good” people, members of stable communities whose menfolk worked at respectable jobs in

one of the “four occupations” (scholar, farmer, merchant, or artisan). Only a small minority of households appeared in the tax registers under the category “polluted.” Men and women in these households were stigmatized by work that was considered degrading or vile (yamen runners, actors, prostitutes and singing girls, butchers, and certain local outcast groups were all counted as *jian*). Although pariah men and women performed necessary services in communities of respectable persons, sometimes in very intimate capacities (such as, for women, preparing a bride for a wedding or, for men, escorting a funeral entourage), they were isolated from the respectable commoner population by residence, dress, and powerful legal barriers.

Among the hundreds of thousands of respectable commoner households, social status was measured by a complex balance of prestige, power, and work, defined differently for men and for women. Among men, a great divide separated “those who labor with their minds” (the scholar elite) from “those who labor with their hands” (farmers and artisans). Male status hierarchies were occupational, ranking scholars/officials first, as the mental laborers, followed by farmers or cultivators,<sup>2</sup> artisans, and merchants, in order of prestige and respectability. Cultivators were considered more respectable than artisans or merchants, even though they often had less prestige and power, not to mention wealth. This was because their work was productive labor, yielding food for the people and tax revenue for the state. Artisans, who simply manipulated raw materials and sold them for a profit, and merchants, who merely profited from the labor of others, ranked below farmers on this scale of social worthiness.

For women, by contrast, status was defined not only by the occupation of father, husband, or son (a woman could inherit a posthumous title based on a son’s distinction in office or in the community), but also by sexuality. And both status and sexuality were intimately connected to work. The key status line for women was the line separating brides and wives of respectable commoners from all other women, whether concubines, maids, nuns, courtesans, or prostitutes. Because, by making a good match for their daughter, a woman’s natal family could actually improve their status, respectable women intended as brides were groomed with status markers in mind. A respectable young woman might or might not

<sup>2</sup> The Chinese term, *nong*, is usually translated “peasant.” I prefer the term “cultivator,” because many subjects classified as *nong* were in fact farmers with their own plots, whereas others were tenants or even farm laborers. The central meaning of the term refers to manual labor in agriculture as a primary producer.

be educated (to prepare her for the top stratum of the marriage market), but she would invariably be taught how to do respectable “womanly work,” that is, to work with her hands inside the home, as a spinner, weaver, or embroiderer. Other kinds of work that had to be performed outside where a woman would come into contact with men, including farm work, threatened a woman’s potential to move up in the marriage market. Whether scholars, cultivators, artisans, or merchants, the ability of a family to cloister women, train them for womanly work, and place them in a respectable marriage was a crucial marker of status.

Unmentioned in the occupational hierarchies defining respectable men’s work were soldiers and priests or monks. Military service was the lowliest occupation known to nineteenth-century Chinese, summed up in the folk saying “Good iron is not made into nails, good men are not made into soldiers.” In the nineteenth century during peacetime, battalions of soldiers – often with their families – were stationed in strategic towns and along critical borders, isolated from communities of ordinary commoners. When rebellion broke out, or when a dynasty fell, however, bandits and soldiers alike could invade the homes of commoner families and the inner quarters that concealed respectable women. Women trapped inside a walled city under siege committed suicide when the city fell, to protect their own honor and the honor of their families. Women who fled walled cities seeking protection from warfare in rural villages were vulnerable to attack on the road. Either way, times of disorder were times when even the most cloistered women might be exposed and shamed. A crudely illustrated woodblock print deploring the travesties of the Taiping rebels’ occupation of Jiangnan in the 1860s is full of examples of such scenes (see Figure 1).

### *Sexuality and social space*

Among upper-class people, rules for sex segregation started within the household. Married sons lived with their parents, and the ideal family housed many generations under one roof. Space had to be arranged, therefore, so that a father would never be alone with one of his son’s wives, and so that a senior male’s young concubine would be kept away from his sexually active sons. Dining, accordingly, was not a communal family event but was, rather, segregated by sex, with older women and servants attending to men at the table.

Sexual transgression was just one concern. Equally important was the upbringing of daughters as future brides. In upper-class households, in which both sons and daughters were educated, a daughter could study



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1a-b. Travesties of the Taiping Rebellion. *Source:* Jiyun shanren [pseud.], *Jiangnan tielei* (Tears from iron in Jiangnan). Taipei: Guangwen shuju, 1974, pp. 7, 17.



1a-b (*continued*)

with her brothers and male cousins up to the age of twelve *sui*,<sup>3</sup> but that was the sole venue for their interaction. As she entered puberty, she was pulled back into the *guige*, or women's quarters, which was set off in the rear of the house, where it was shielded from sight and sound of the entry halls and reception rooms where visitors came and went. There she might continue her education under the supervision of a governess or female relative, while also learning to sew, embroider, play the zither, compose simple poems, write shapely characters with a brush, and possibly try her hand at monochrome ink painting. This transition into the women's quarters coincided not only with puberty but with marriage plans, for young girls of the upper class were betrothed by their parents early in life. Embroidery, then, was not simply a practical skill or an idle pastime, but rather a kind of preparation for marriage in which a young girl began to fashion shoes (see Figure 2) and the elaborate trimmings for her dowry trousseau.

If the spaces of the household were organized to prevent sexual interactions and to prepare for sexual interactions, and the sequestering of women was the primary obsession, then an upper-class girl was reared to marry out – to think of herself as the future wife of a particular chosen boy – as soon as she entered puberty. This dedication to a future husband was so complete that some girls committed suicide if a fiancé died before the wedding. They could not conceive of a future without that proper marriage. Why would a young girl have this particular vision of her future life? To understand this, we need to remind ourselves that a daughter's relationship to her natal family was different from a son's. The patrilineal rituals of the kinship system presumed that all women married and became ritual members of the marital family, not the natal family. So a daughter was not listed in the family genealogy, and when she died, she had no place on her natal family's ancestral altars. Her permanent ritual place was located in the genealogy and at the ancestral altar of her husband. Many young girls, for that reason, were betrothed by their parents at birth, often to the infant son of a family friend. Respectable parents who feared that they could not afford a proper marriage for a daughter, particularly the dowry costs, had recourse to expedient options such as adopting out a daughter as a *tongyangxi*, or "little daughter-in-law." In this arrangement, a baby girl or a very young daughter would be taken in by her future husband's family, reared as one of their own children, and then expected to share a bed with her husband as soon as the marriage

<sup>3</sup> Age was calculated in lunar years, and a child was considered one *sui* at the year of her birth. Every person gained one *sui* at the New Year. Thus, a child born just before the New Year might turn two *sui* shortly after birth.