

**Sisters in Crime:
Women and illicit sexual affairs in late
imperial Chinese erotic fiction**

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Abstract

This research aims to investigate the literary representation of the female relationships and illicit sexual affairs in late imperial China erotic fiction. Focusing on the plots of *touqing* 偷情 (having secret sexual affairs), this research utilises five selected examples of vernacular erotic fiction composed around 1572-1730 as the main source to investigate women's lives and social activities in illegal circumstances: *Langshi* 浪史 (Chronicles of the Libertine), *Xiuta yeshi* 繡榻野史 (Unofficial History of the Embroidered Couch), *Rou putuan* 肉蒲團 (The Carnal Prayer Mat), *Taohua ying* 桃花影 (Shadow of Peach Blossoms), and *Dengcao heshang zhuan* 燈草和尚傳 (Legend of the Candlewick Monk).

Bonded with their own desire to be fulfilled, female participants of illicit affairs each have a specific role, function, and things to offer, forming a network comprised of these unlikely sisters in crime. To understand how such a network functions and sustains, female characters of the texts will first be grouped and analysed based on their image and common traits respective to their chief identity in the text. The discussion will then lead to an investigation of the interactions portrayed to reveal the respective role of each female type and their implications for the perceived female relationship under the exceptional circumstances of collaboration on sex crimes. The research will also compare the relationships portrayed in erotic fiction and other literature of the era, including *Honglou meng* and *Jin Ping Mei*, to illustrate the unique behaviour and network derived from the collective participation in illicit sexual affairs.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This research aims to investigate the literary representation of the relationship between female and illicit sexual affairs in late imperial China through the study of selected erotic novels composed around 1572–1730. Focusing on the plots of *touqing* 偷情 (translated as ‘having secret sexual affairs’), the bulk of female characters will first be analysed based on their image and common traits respective to their chief identity in these novels. An investigation of the portrayed interactions and their implications on perceived female relationships in the exceptional circumstances of collaboration on sex crimes will follow.

Focusing solely on the representation of females in erotic fiction, the goal of this research is to address the differences between females and the complexity of their relations. Building upon current scholarship on late imperial Chinese women’s history and relevant literary studies, this research aims to contribute to the field by examining *females* as a diverse collective. Instead of joining the flourishing studies of gentry women and their work, whose life circumstances and achievements are crucial and effective in breaking the “victimised traditional Chinese women” misconception identified by Dorothy Ko,¹ my view is that while these studies gave much overdue credits to outstanding females and the mundane females. Those in between the elite and the enslaved — neither exemplary nor condemned — should also be included in the study of women’s history and literary study, however, they remain overshadowed, if not largely overlooked.

It is unsurprising that erotic tales that focus on heterosexual desire tend to feature a large number of female characters of all sorts. The wealth of depiction of females certainly attracts much interest from researchers and inspired studies revolving around the topic of desire and its

¹ Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 1–5.

representation, overlapping with the literary representation of sensual women. However, not all female characters in erotic fiction serve as purely sexual objects: some of them function purely as collaborators in illicit affairs without their sexual involvement. Such a situation places all females involved in collective guilt for the same punishable sex offence. Consequently, their relationships become bound not by social norms, but by their collective effort to defy them.

Works of erotic fiction circulating in late imperial China have been studied for their representation of the culture of sexuality, gender relations and social structure. While we lack exact information on authorship, publication origin, and distribution of the majority of the copies, these works are believed to have chiefly circulated in the Jiangnan area from late Ming to early Qing and were most likely written by literati without official positions. The plots of *touqing* form the core of erotic fiction, dominating the majority of relationships portrayed. Aside from the few texts that could also be categorised as court-themed or homosexual-themed, most stories depicted the sexual relationships of commoners from different social backgrounds, where bisexual tendencies were not uncommon; it is also this latter group of texts that serve as the main text materials for this research.

Placing the literary representation of women at its core, the main focus of the research is the association between erotic liaisons and the female network in erotic fiction. The term *female network* is used here to refer to the link between the females from the ‘inner’ domain of late imperial Chinese households, comprised chiefly of females in the roles of mistresses² and maidservants and their relation to the outer females such as *pozi* 婆子 (women of a specific group of profession or religious affiliation, usually slightly older), neighbours, kin with their collaboration to orchestrate illicit affairs as the thread binding them together. Through the

² In this thesis, the term *mistress* denotes a character who is a woman in a position of authority or control. While the characters concerned also doubled as a *mistress*, as in a sexual partner outside of marriage, the term is used only for the former meaning to specify the status aspect of the character. This group of characters will be discussed in detail in chapter two.

investigation of each female character's archetype, this research will also explore the portrayal of women's sex life in relation to their social background. With the results of this analysis, the research looks to bring attention to the image and interrelationships of females in an eroticised representation beyond a generalised and faceless female collective image, with the goal of providing a complementary angle to the understanding of late imperial Chinese female desire and its literary representation.

In late imperial Chinese erotic fiction, female characters of sexually active age often were depicted either as sexually uncontrollable or moralistic and chaste. The literary cliché of the nymphomaniac female was gradually and increasingly embodied by ordinary women, rather than supernatural entities, compared to prior literary works. In fact, while some erotic fiction could be chiefly summarised as a fantasy sexual journey of the male protagonist, female characters were given much more of the spotlight with diverse characteristics that distinguished them from each other, providing rich materials in terms of the literary representation of stereotypical female involved in illicit affairs.

Aside from variance in content and explicitness, these novels also display a non-uniform stance on the tension between unpermitted female desire, where the social expectations of a 'proper' women were challenged. Through the comparison of different stories about illicit sexual activities, recurring themes and stereotypes in texts generally regarded as erotic fiction will be identified. Attention will be paid in particular to how women were described to manoeuvre within their social limit in facilitating illicit affairs, the developments in their attitudes and behaviours, their interactions and interdependence.

1.1 Aims of the research

This research looks to utilise erotic fiction as a source for the investigation of women's lives and social activities under illegal circumstances. In her review of the links between fiction and history, Louise Edwards wrote, "while fiction is clearly a 'representation' of reality or an

author's impression of 'real life,' it is often a powerful source of information about life within its incidental descriptions of scenes or events."³ In her summary, fiction in China "was free to incorporate a range of themes and subject matter that would otherwise have remained un-narrated." In contrast to the historical narrative genre, fiction describes the private and personal and is able to "make mockery of the moralising of historical narratives."⁴

What is reflected in various non-fiction documents may provide glimpses into the actions and relations of those involved in sexual crimes, but due to the different purposes of their composition, details of those incidents are usually omitted. Questions such as how the relevant persons became involved in an illicit affair or what prompted their decision to risk punishment or even their safety remain unanswered or only partially documented. As non-fiction documentaries may serve as factual records, they are immune to the confinement of moral values promoted in society, including occasions when the personal and emotional aspects were explored and scrutinised. Some records, such as oral testimonies, may be a direct record of actions and emotions of people committing sexual crimes, but such records are not immune to modifications for official purposes either.⁵

Proposing the possibility of utilising fiction to inform the understanding of Chinese women's history, Edwards highlighted the pornographic as an important function unique to fiction but absent in most other literary or historical records. She suggested that "all people function within a moral economy that informs their decisions about daily behaviors." For women, such an economy was dominated by sexuality. From this perspective, the depiction of characters in erotic fiction defies but also remains under the framework of such a moral

³ Louise Edwards, "Gendered Fictions and Chinese Women's History," in *Overt & Covert Treasures: Essays on the Sources for Chinese Women's History*, ed. Ho Clara Wing-Chung (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2012), 317.

⁴ Edwards, "Gendered Fictions and Chinese Women's History," 311–312.

⁵ Karasawa Yasuhiko, "From Oral Testimony to Written Records in Qing Legal Cases," in *Thinking with Cases: Specialist Knowledge in Chinese Cultural History*, eds. Charlotte Furth, Judith T. Zeitlin, and Ping-chen Hsiung (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), 101–122.

economy. As such, with the detailed writing of the erotic and pornographic, fiction may provide insight for the further understanding of moral codes surrounding sex, the politics of marriage, and the household and, above all, serve as “a path into understanding the domestic sphere as an eroticised space and its implications for... sexual chastity.”⁶

The late Ming time has been suggested to have “an explosion of discourses on desire,”⁷ with fiction becoming a popular medium where the topic could be explored in many ways. Fiction, in turn, became a great source for researchers to understand those discourses. Most researchers conducted their analysis based on a specific selection of texts, sometimes strictly erotic fiction, but more often, a broad range of texts that discuss human desire of varying degrees and under various labels. For example, Keith McMahon and Martin W. Huang based their analysis on a range of stories and identified various desire-relevant topics, each discussed with selected categories. With the genre of fiction spanning a range of different *renqing xiaoshuo* 人情小說 (fiction of human sentiments), their works have provided insights into the many manifestations of desire, such as the topic of shrews and jealousy, chastity and polygamy, desire and karmic retribution.⁸ The more recent work, *Wanton Women in Late-imperial Chinese Literature*, adopted a slightly different method of pinpointing the topic of wanton women and investigated its representation in various materials ranging from fiction to drama and ballads, in which Mark Stevenson also challenged the conventional understanding of the term with his proposal of “the male homoerotic wanton woman.”⁹

These studies collectively outline the literary representation of specific character traits such as wantonness and shrewishness. They also present the texts’ general reflection of a broad

⁶ Edwards, “Gendered Fictions and Chinese Women’s History,” 325.

⁷ Martin W. Huang, *Desire and Fictional Narrative in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2001), 21.

⁸ See Keith McMahon, *Misers, Shrews, and Polygamists: Sexuality and Male-female Relations in Eighteenth-century Chinese Fiction* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995) and Huang, *Desire and Fictional Narrative in Late Imperial China*.

⁹ Mark Stevenson and Wu Cuncun, eds., *Wanton Women in Late-imperial Chinese Literature: Models, Genres, Subversions and Traditions* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017).

range of desire-related topics such as karmic retribution, religious connotations, reflections of sexual trends and thoughts, male homoeroticism, and issues of desire and physical space. In the case of studies specialising in erotic fiction, a lot more attention has been paid to more prominent texts, such as *Rou putuan* 肉蒲團 (The Carnal Prayer Mat), *Ruyijun zhuan* 如意君傳 (The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction), *Huanxi yuanjia* 歡喜冤家 (Enemies Enamoured), for specificities of individual texts or as comparative studies. While the texts drawn for relevant studies can differ significantly in narrative style and stance towards the suppression/indulgence of desire, these studies have collectively both provided more clues and suggested more room for the exploration of the complex world of desire in different literary works. For example, could the research findings in the more famous texts apply to texts that are lesser-known or written with lower literary creativity and quality? For the sexual trends identified, were they always part of late imperial China sex culture, or have some aspects been falling in and out of fashion? When discussing female desire, who was considered to be a part of women discussed and where did female servants and men assuming female roles or forms stand in relevant discussions?

On the more general elements of erotic stories, it has been noted that the private sphere like the boudoir is central to the performance and exchange of desire, in which privacy is not absolute due to house servants' presence.¹⁰ We have also learnt about the religious elements that are sometimes blended into the erotic narratives, one stream being the sexual and the other — the didactical.¹¹ In case studies dedicated more to a text than a theme, Paola Zamperini, in

¹⁰ Huang Ko-wu 黃克武, *Yan buxie buxiao: jindai zhongguo nanxing shijie zhong de xiexue qingyun yu shenti* 言不褻不笑: 近代中國男性世界中的諧謔、情慾與身體 [No Laughs if Words Are Not Vulgar: Satire, Lust and Bodies in the Modern Chinese Male's World] (Taipei: Linking Publishing, 2016), 293–299. In her work, Lin Wei-shu has further separated the analysis of private spheres' different functions and implications into the boudoir, casks, doors and windows, balconies, attics and secret corners of gardens; see Lin Wei-shu, 林偉淑, *Ming-Qing jiating xiaoshuo de shijian yanjiu* 明清家庭小說的時間研究 [A Study of Time in Family Novels in Ming-Qing Dynasties] (Xinbei: Huamulan wenhua chubanshe, 2013), 280–287.

¹¹ There was a prevalence of licentious Buddhist monks or Daoist adepts in erotic fiction as sexual villains and mystical masters of sex, which likely stemmed from suspicion towards complete celibacy, impressions of

her reading of *Chipozi zhuan* 癡婆子傳 (Tale of An Infatuated Woman), noted that “women are like a two-gear car when it comes to sex,” always infatuated once intercourse commenced, irrespective of their initial willingness.¹² In a similar vein, Wu Yenna suggested that erotic fiction generally tends to portray the female protagonist as a licentious woman always hungry for sex — a nymphomaniac or a femme fatale.¹³ While some texts like *Rou putuan* and *Xiuta yeshi* 繡榻野史 (Unofficial History of the Embroidered Couch) do not give licentious females an easy ending, Wu Cuncun noticed the short erotic stories compilation *Huanxi yuanjia* judges morality not simply based on the chastity of a female as did fiction in the past, but on whether the adulterous affair contained any issues of intentional gain or harm to other people.¹⁴

In the studies of the literary representation of females, it was noted that “more overarching, categorial expressions for women exhibiting traits resistant to patriarchy did not gain wide

Vajrayāna teachings and association of magic and the roaming nature of these people. See Li Mingun 李明軍, “Se yu Kong: Ming–Qing yanqing xiaoshuo hong de zongjiao guannian he shisu shenghuo lunli 色與空：明清艷情小說中的宗教觀念和世俗生活倫理 [Lust and Emptiness: The Religious Concept and Temporal Ethic in the Erotic Fiction in Ming and Qing Dynasties],” *Linyin shifan xueyuan xuebao* 臨沂師範學院學報 [Journal of Linyi Normal College] 30 no. 2 (Apr 2008): 52–56, and Wai Cheuk Yee, “Portrayal of Buddhist Characters in Late Imperial Chinese Erotic Novels: A Case Study on *Fengliu heshang*, *Wutong ying* and *Dengcao heshang*” (MPhil thesis, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2017). On the other hand, most erotic stories also end with a religious tone — usually harmonious ascension/Daoist for a rewarding ending or the character(s) deciding to become a Buddhist monk or facing karmic retribution for a cautionary ending. See Liu Shu-cheng 劉書成, “Yanqing yu wushu gongtong yunyu de yige guaitai: *Dengcao heshang zhuan de zongjiao wenhua xingtai jiegou* 艷情與巫術共同孕育的一個怪胎：《燈草和尚傳》的宗教文化形態解構 [Sexual Plot and Witchcraft Breed a Strange Baby — Analysis of Religious Culture Formation about *Story of Monk Dengcao*],” *Tianshui shifan xueyuan xuebao* 天水師範學院學報 [Journal of Tianshui Normal University] 23, no. 6 (Dec 2003): 29–31.

¹² Paola Zamperini, “Canonizing Pornography: Norm and Transgression in *Chipozi zhuan*,” in *Chongdu jingdian: Zhongguo chuantong xiaoshuo yu xiqu de duochong toudi* 重讀經典：中國傳統小說與戲曲的多重透視 [Re-reading the Classics: Multiple Perspectives on Traditional Chinese Fiction and Drama], eds. Zhou Jianyu 周建渝, Cheung Hung-nin Samuel 張洪年, and Chang Song-hing 張雙慶 (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2008), 284.

¹³ Wu Yenna 吳燕娜, “Zhongguo seqing xiaoshuo zhong de funü xingxiang yu xingjiaoyu 中國色情小說中的婦女形象與性教育 [Women’s Images and Sex Education in Chinese Erotic Novels], *Zhongguo funü yu wenzue lunji* 中國婦女與文學論集 [Critical Essays on Chinese Women and Literature], vol. 1 (1999), 43.

¹⁴ Wu Cuncun 吳存存, “Cong *Huanxi yuanjia* zhong de tongjian gushi kan wan Ming chengshi putongren de jiazhiguan he daodeguan 從《歡喜冤家》中的通奸故事看晚明城市普通人的價值觀和道德觀 [Ordinary Urban People’s Values and Morality in Late Ming Society as Seen in Tales of Adultery from *Enemies Enamoured*],” *Zhongguo wenhua* 中國文化 [Chinese Culture] 2 (2014): 77.

currency until the appearance and growth of vernacular writing.”¹⁵ As outlined by Stevenson, the idea of women being a source of disorder could be traced as far back to *Shijing* 詩經 (Book of Odes). Also, descriptions of women with negative traits as a standalone category can be found in *Lienü zhuan* 列女傳 (Categorised Biographies of Women), written into a companion section after six chapters of presentation of exemplary women. It says, “the most serious crime committed by women selected for inclusion in this section... are very closely aligned with adultery, or even with what was simply assumed to be the dissolute influence of beauty.”¹⁶ With the increasing popularity of writings about female figures who did not conform to the moral ideal, different categories of these challenging females also emerged and provided glimpses to the society behind the literature. Anne McLaren identified a group whom she dubbed “the Chinese femme fatale” and suggested the stories of such women could be “a reflection of the increased status of women.”¹⁷ In the course of adapting such stories to suit a “realistic milieu,” feminine frustration became a vital element in giving the characters’ motivation in their actions.¹⁸

Despite the different stances of individual erotic fiction, there is no doubt that the popularity of fiction, on the whole, provided a platform for writers to explore the topic of sexual desire, from which females and their sentiments could take centre stage and show defiance against the prescribed social expectation. Erotic fiction provided ample examples of females admitting their sexual desire, some licentious and insatiable, and some still adhering to certain rules. However, these females under the spotlight are not the only females featured in erotic fiction. Female characters of high prominence in their respective story usually have a female

¹⁵ Mark Stevenson, “Wanton Women in Late-Imperial Chinese Literature: Models, Genres, Subversions and Traditions,” in *Wanton Women in Late-Imperial Chinese Literature: Models, Genres, Subversions and Traditions*, eds. Mark Stevenson and Cuncun Wu (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017), 7.

¹⁶ Stevenson, “Wanton Women in Late-Imperial Chinese Literature,” 9.

¹⁷ Anne E. McLaren, *The Chinese Femme Fatale: Stories from the Ming Period*, *The University of Sydney East Asian Series No. 8* (Canberra: Wild Peony, 1994), 2.

¹⁸ McLaren, *The Chinese Femme Fatale*, 14.

companion, be it a maidservant, a *pozi* or a neighbour. Even in shorter stories such as the ones collected in *Huanxi yuanjia*, female characters do not exist as an isolated entity to be pursued but have female companions who, more often than not, were also part of the illicit affairs presented. These *other women* were, in fact, indispensable to erotic stories, especially as they shouldered the important function of swaying the main female characters into illicit affairs. The main interest of this thesis is their interactions and relationships; in particular, how these female characters of different roles and backgrounds interacted, and the nature of their relationship when co-conspiring illicit affairs.

Stories in late imperial Chinese erotic fiction mostly narrate heterosexual and male homosexual relationships, many simultaneously. Male protagonists were often seen engaging in sex with both males and females, with the exceptions of *Longyang yishi* 龍陽逸史 (The Forgotten Tales of Longyang) and *Bian er chai* 弁而釵 (Wearing a Cap but also Hairpins) that focus solely on male homosexual relationships. Many of these stories centre around a male protagonist's string of erotic encounters with multiple females and males, occasionally with a supporting male character who acts as the sexual interest of both the male protagonist and the female protagonist(s). As a result, often, the difference between the number of male and female characters is rather vast, even when supporting characters, who are not directly involved in sexual affairs, are considered. For example, the fiction *Langshi* 浪史 (Chronicles of the Libertine) has two main male leads and four supporting male characters. Furthermore, one of the male leads serves as the subordinate male lover to the protagonist, as opposed to thirteen main female characters (nine of whom sexually engaged with the male protagonist(s)) and twenty-three named female characters, who function either as supporting characters or are named as one of the many concubines or maidservants of the same male protagonist. This illustrated that female characters in erotic fiction are usually presented in two streams: those who are sexually engaged with the male protagonist and those who are involved by providing

service to facilitate the affairs. Specific depictions of the former group of female characters are numerous. Writers of these stories rarely fail to introduce readers to each female character, presented as sexually appealing, or at least acceptable for the male protagonists, engaged in sexual acts. The descriptions may not always be elaborative, especially when the female character has a comparatively lesser role. Yet, at least the approximate age, social status (such as the familial background of the natal family and husband's family if applicable), and physique (in particular the genitals, facial features, and sometimes also the bound feet) of the female characters concerned are always revealed to the readers. More importantly, female characters are at times presented with corresponding poems or writings as a feature of their social/cultural appeal.

Thieves of pleasure — *tou* 偷¹⁹ and *touqing* 偷情

Of all the appeals incited by erotic fiction, the essence of it falls on its nature as the forbidden. Of all the detailed accounts of sexual acts, most of them are set specifically in the situation of *touqing* (having secret sexual affairs): between people who are not supposed to have any sexual contact, in situations where the affair must be concealed and is basically a criminal offence.

Wives are not as good as concubines; concubines are not as good as maidservants; maidservants are not as good as prostitutes; prostitutes are not as good as the stolen;²⁰ the stolen are not as good as those you could not steal.

妻不如妾，妾不如婢，婢不如妓，妓不如偷，偷得著不如偷不著。²¹

Recorded by Jiang Yingke 江盈科 (1553–1605), a Ming dynasty officer, this is claimed to be a quote from young country thugs as their commentary on the “fun of the wind and moon (風月之趣).” The core spirit of this quote is very simple: the appeal increases with illegitimacy

¹⁹ The word *tou* 偷 is stylised as *tou*^a in order to differentiate from another word discussed later, which shares the same pinyin spelling. To avoid confusion, this only applies to this particular section.

²⁰ The term *stolen* refers to the women reached via illicit affairs. On the usage of the word, see section 1.3.

²¹ Jiang Yingke 江盈科, *Xuetao xiaoshuo wai sizhong* 雪濤小說外四種 [Xuetao Novel: Four Other Types] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2000), 50.

and peaks at unattainability. *Tou^a* 偷 (to steal) is one of the most common verbs used in fiction to describe the action of having illicit sexual affairs, which in itself was a term commonly used in popular culture, but not as an official legal term.

Like many Chinese characters, *tou^a* has multiple meanings and usages as various parts of speech. In the traditional dictionary *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 (Explanations of Characters), the word *tou^a* did not exist in the written form as *tou^a* 偷 but only as *tou^b* 媮, meaning ‘being cunning’ (*qiaoxia ye* 巧黠也). The written form *tou^a* 偷, which was the style normally used in erotic fiction, was recorded in *Zihui* 字彙 (Collection of Characters), a dictionary composed in the 43rd year of the Wanli 萬曆 reign (1615) by Mei Yingzuo 梅膺祚. The Wanli period (1573–1620) also happens to be the period where the texts regarded as erotic fiction today began to emerge.²² However, the character *tou^a* 偷 did not appear in an independent entry, but rather as a customary variation of *tou^b* 媮, which at the time had multiple definitions, one of which being:

“Stealing men” ... also “cunning”; also “stealing;” commonly written in the form of *tou^a* — this is incorrect.

偷漢...又巧黠也；又盜也；俗作偷，非。²³

By late Ming, the variant characters *tou^b* 媮 and *tou^a* 偷 were recorded as separate entries in another dictionary, *Zhengzitong* 正字通 (Mastery of Standard Characters). The older written form *tou^b* retained its meaning and pronunciation. The compiler also added “joy” to the word’s meaning, with the word treated as a variant of another character *yu* 愉 (joy).²⁴ For the variant *tou^a*, the compiler reintroduced the meaning “to muddle along (*gouqie* 苟且)” from *Shuowen*

²² The earliest known text regarded as erotic fiction, *Ruyijun zhuan*, is believed to be completed no later than by 1540, which is around thirty-three years before the beginning of the Wanli reign; subsequent examples of erotic fiction after *Ruyijun zhuan*, such as *Chipozi zhuan*, *Langshi*, and *Xiuta yeshi*, were all likely published and circulated during the Wanli reign.

²³ Mei Yingzuo 梅膺祚, *Zihui* 字彙 [Collection of Characters] (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 1991), 107.

²⁴ Zhang Zilie 張自烈, *Zhengzitong* 正字通 [Mastery of Standard Characters] (Beijing: Zhongguo gongren chubanshe, 1996), 244.

jiezi, while also defining this variant with meanings of “flippant (*tiao* 佻);” “to steal (*dao* 盜);” and “frivolous (*bo* 薄).” By Qing time, the written style *tou* 偷 officially separated from its former style, bearing more specific meaning. The later *Kangxi jidian* 康熙字典 (The Kangxi Dictionary, 1716) adopted the two variants from *Zhengzitong* as separate word entries and added “indifference (*ansi* 安肆)” to the meanings of *tou*^a 偷.²⁵

When used in compound terms or as an adjective, *tou*^a has the implication of something done with the intention of avoiding being caught. As an everyday word, *tou*^a has various uses, from indicating theft and secret actions to illicit affairs. For example, *toukan* 偷看 could be translated literally as “to secretly watch.” When referring specifically to affairs, it is often paired with the word *qing* 情 (sentiments) to refer to having a secret sexual affair (*touqing*) or used singularly to refer to affair-related actions, such as *touren* 偷人 or *touhan* 偷漢, as in secretly having an affair with someone. In addition, *tou*^a often indicates “to secretly have affair with” as a verb alone. Much like a code-word, referring to someone in the act of stealing *tou*^a in the context of the object being a human would normally mean “approaching someone for a secret affair.”

The influential novel *Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅 (The Plum in the Golden Vase) directly addressed the use of the term *touqing* as referring to the action of having a secret, illicit affair through the medium of Wang po’s mouth:

Wang po said, “Sir, listen to me, generally the words ‘leaning against the light’ (*aiguang*) are the most difficult. What is ‘leaning against the light’? Similar to what is commonly referred to as the ‘stealing of *qing*’ (*touqing*). [It] requires five things all readied [for the illicit affair] to be possible.”

王婆道：「大官人，你聽我說，但凡挨光的兩個字最難。一怎的是挨光？似如如今俗呼偷情就是了。一要五件事俱全，方纔行的。」²⁶

²⁵ *Kangxi zidian* 康熙字典 [Kangxi Dictionary] (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian chubanshe, 1985), 114.

²⁶ Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng 蘭陵笑笑生, *Mengmei guan jiaoben Jin Ping Mei cihua* 夢梅館校本金瓶梅詞話 [The Plum in the Golden Vase *Mengmei guan* Edition], ed. Mei Jie 梅節 (Taipei: Liren shuju, 2014), vol. 1, 39. The word *aiguang* is translated as ‘garnering the glow’ by David Tod Roy in *The Plum in the Golden Vase or, Chin P’ing Mei Vol. 1: The Gathering* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 62.

This quote suggests that the term *touqing* was a comparatively recent popular term for having an illicit affair, at the time when *Jin Ping Mei* was written, which was approximately in the mid-Wanli reign. Comparing this segment in *Jin Ping Mei* to its origin in *Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳 (The Water Margin) (with its origin likely dating back to the fourteenth century):

Wang po said, “Sir, listen to me. Generally, the words ‘leaning against the light’ (*aiguang*) are the most difficult. [It] requires five things all readied [for the illicit affair] to be possible.”

王婆道：「大官人，你聽我說。但凡捱光的兩個字最難，要五件事俱全，方才行得。」²⁷

The speech of Wang po is nearly identical in both texts, with the term *aiguang* 挨光 (leaning against the light) used to refer to illicit affairs. The middle sentence, explaining *aiguang* as something commonly referred to as *touqing*, was, however, a new addition in *Jin Ping Mei*, unseen in *Shuihu zhuan*. Considering the term was described as a “commonly known” alternative “nowadays” to *aiguang*, the usage of *tou^a* to refer to sexual affairs is likely a slang term that only became popularised around late Ming. In more official contexts, such as in the legal sphere, sexual offences were generally termed as *jian* 姦, with the character itself having multiple usages as “a noun, a transitive verb, and a modifier.”²⁸ The word *jian* is, however, not as commonly used as *tou^a* when referring to both the sexual actions and incidents in erotic fiction, especially since *jian* has the undertone of emphasising criminality.

Looking into acts of *touqing* in erotic fiction is the starting point of this thesis. The act of *tou^a* is as much a core of erotic fiction as the explicit sexual elements. Echoing the previous quote, the “stolen” is superior to other females, second only to the unattainable, except that the acts of *tou^a* would usually be successful in the fiction to provide gratification to readers and introduce subsequent sex scenes. The explicit description of sex crimes is considered one of

²⁷ Shi Nai’an 施耐庵 and Luo Guanzhong 羅貫中, *Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳 [Outlaws of the Marsh] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1988), 345.

²⁸ Matthew H. Sommer, *Sex, Law and Society in Late Imperial China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 30.

the challenges erotic fiction poses against social customs, as nearly all the content would be prohibited by law and the descriptions of such stories may be viewed as a serious threat to the governing rules and customary orders.²⁹ For instance, most of the female characters, irrespective of their marital status, are usually from a household other than that of the male protagonist: it is always someone else's wife, concubine, widow or mother that is treated as the desirable sexual object. They are evaluated using their respective category standard and are then approved as the attractive female to be included in the story as one of the many women welcoming their pleasurable loss of chastity. When exceptions exist, such as the male protagonists' wives, they very likely have their own illicit affairs with other men. Nevertheless, this research has no intention of judging the (im)morality of sex expressed in erotic fiction; instead, the focus is more on the depiction of *touqing* itself, in particular, the actions and emotions of the females involved.

1.2 Of the wind and the moon: desire and erotic fiction in late imperial China

“There are in fact no ‘eternal’ or ‘natural’ sex laws. What is contrary to nature for one group can be a blessing for others”³⁰ — it is an important reminder from Eric Berkowitz of the necessity of not imposing one's values, regardless of how universal they may seem in discussing sexual matters. Not only do differences exist among different cultures and between classes of the same culture, but changes in viewpoints are inevitable as time progresses.

For example, while Gayle Rubin's “sex hierarchy”³¹ has been a useful tool to outline the problem of charmed and condemned sex, it is a product shaped by its own time and cultural background. Comprised of “the charmed circle (good, normal, natural, blessed sexuality)” at the centre and “the outer limits (bad, abnormal, unnatural, damned sexuality)” surrounding the

²⁹ Huang Ko-wu, *Yan buxie buxiao*, 244.

³⁰ Eric Berkowitz, *Sex and Punishment: 4000 Years of Judging Desire* (London: The Westbourne Press, 2013), 29.

³¹ Gayle S. Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in *Culture, Society and Sexuality: A Reader*, eds. Peter Aggleton and Richard G. Parker (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 1999), 143–178.

centre, the sorted judgement against different types of sexuality may apply to the society where Rubin lived when she composed the text. If one attempts to compare it to the late imperial Chinese society, one will inevitably find the need to reshuffle items due to a different value system. For instance, “homosexual” might be accepted into the “charmed circle;” “married” was not a guarantee of being “blessed” unless arranged according to proper customs; and “commercial” would quite certainly not be damned at all. It is, therefore, important to review how sex and relevant matters were understood around the late Ming to early Qing times to comprehend the world painted in the contemporary erotic fiction.

The understanding of late imperial China’s concept of sex and desire is largely built upon the bulk of extant materials, including written materials, illustrations, and material objects, with various expressions of romantic sentiments, erotic desire, and physical lust that at times seem contradictory. In terms of written materials, while more orthodox texts such as legal rules, court cases and edicts provide information on boundaries between accepted and punishable actions and works written by officials or for pedagogical purposes may reflect expectations and definitions of propriety, the bulk of literary works such as fiction has provided a great variety of reflection of people’s imagination and its trend, some of those likely on the extreme end in terms of sexual transgressions. In her attempt to summarise the trends in sex and sensibility, specifically in Ming and Qing society, Wu Cuncun proposed a summary of three characteristics of *qing* and *yu* 欲 (desire) in Ming and Qing China:

1. There were two sexual trends at the time, one being the orthodox, conservative, celibate trend of female and the indulgent, excitement-seeking trend of male;³²

³² Wu Cuncun 吳存存, *Ming-Qing sehui xing'ai fengqi* 明清社會性愛風氣 [Sex and Sensibility in Ming and Qing Society] (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2000), 5.

2. *Qing* and *yu* were inseparable in the traditional Chinese culture of sex, while the concept of chastity was related to the concern for *li* 禮 (rites) rather than emotion or sexual desire (or the lack thereof);³³
3. Male and female were fundamentally unequal socially, but female sexual desire was treated equally to male sexual desire.³⁴

Wu's observation of the separate treatment of "female" and "female sexual desire" is particularly important, especially as a reminder that the acceptance of the latter does not equate to leniency to the former in the pursuit of their desire. In cases of sex crimes committed by females, it is their action of breaking rules that is condemned. The unfulfilled sexual desire of females is treated as a valid need, but the observance of female conduct remained the more important duty not to be superseded.

The proposed idea of the different approaches to sex between females and males, however, may be more a fashionable ideal for those who can afford such a lifestyle than a universal trend, as both the supposed hedonistic inclination of the males and the requirement of isolation for the females' call for the support of a financial background where spare money can be obtained and spent. Rather than a dual trend, I would propose that they are a constructed impression serving as an ideal, especially when considering the prevalence of passionate female images across different literary genres, which may be representative of some orthodox values, but with bold outspokenness that is far from only an embodiment of the 'conservative.'

Wu's publication has adopted the word *xing'ai* 性愛. If one is to understand the character *ai*, commonly associated with romantic affection nowadays, her choice of words seems to suggest sexual activities to be involving affection rather than separating the physical and

³³ Wu Cuncun, *Ming-Qing sehui xing'ai fengqi*, 11–13.

³⁴ Wu Cuncun, *Ming-Qing sehui xing'ai fengqi*, 14–15.

emotional aspects of sex. For the understanding of the character *ai*, Paolo Santangelo has outlined in his study that

In traditional China the term *ai* 愛, which now expresses the concept of “love” in most of its meanings, including sexual attraction, love-affection, and love-liking, was rather used in philosophical and moral texts, with the meaning of empathy toward other people, from Mozi’s “universal love” to the Confucian virtue of humaneness; in certain cases it can thus be compared with the Greek term *philia* (affection, friendship), sometimes it corresponds to the meaning of “family affection” (*caritas*), sometimes to an attachment mainly based on the sense of duty (*pietas*) or liking. Basically, *ai* 愛 and *qing* 情 cover the meaning of various affections, virtues, vices and bonds, included love-passion, love-affection, love-liking, and desires.³⁵

As seen in his summary, the term *ai* likely denotes a different meaning in late imperial China that differs from modern usage. The word *ai* was used in late imperial Chinese erotic fiction, commonly in situations where affection towards someone else is expressed and could be translated to “I like him (*wo ai ta* 我愛他).” Despite the underlying sexual tension, considering the context, whether the emotions those stories expressed lean more toward sexual desire, romantic affections or a mixture of both is not immediately clear. As such, I would like to propose that the idea of *xing'ai* or *qingyu* should be treated separately, not as one combined entity.

While potentially highly erotic, the element of romance does not seem to be the main theme in stories with a greater emphasis on sexual elements. The sentiments expressed are better summed up with the vague terms *qing* and *yu*, which were the terms popularly used at the time when discussions and expressions of sexual desire appeared to spread across different mediums, including fiction. *Qing* and *yu*, while at times used in conjunction, could be roughly translated to “sentiment” and “desire/lust,” respectively. The human feelings that these two characters symbolise were not viewed equally. In the preface written for Feng Menglong’s 馮

³⁵ Paolo Santangelo and Gábor Boros, *The Culture of Love in China and Europe* (Leiden and London: Brill, 2019), 18.

夢龍 (1574–1646) *Qingshi* 情史 (History of Sentiments), this collection of *qing*-related stories was praised as such:

Those competent at reading may broaden their *qing*; those incompetent at reading would at least not be led to *yu*.

善讀者可以廣情，不善讀者亦不至於導欲。³⁶

This statement made a clear distinction between *qing* and *yu* and gave a value judgement on the two. On the one hand, broadening *qing* is viewed as positive and leading *yu* is negative; on the other hand, there seems a presumption that *qing* is by default possessed by the intellectual and well-versed, as his word choice “broaden” suggests expansion instead of development of *qing*. On the contrary, *yu* is regarded as a result of incompetent reading, seemingly suggesting the commonality of having *yu* evoked due to individual incompetence.

Reviewing existing studies on the authorship of erotic fiction, many believed the materials circulated between Ming and Qing were produced mainly, if not solely, from a male perspective, for male pleasure, expressing men’s view towards women’s life, with suggestions such as “all literature about sex was completely male-centred and almost no female voices were heard.”³⁷ Indeed, many of the erotic stories are highly in favour of the idealised young male protagonist, treating female characters as mere sexual objects who are more than willing to participate in the affairs despite any female who follows suit, in reality, would face grave consequences. However, occasional examples of female voices and sentiments, though largely limited to the sexual aspect and facilitating further sexual scenes in the story, do exist and should be acknowledged. Also, despite defying the expected conduct and ethics in the aspect

³⁶ Feng Menglong 馮夢龍, *Qingshi xu* 情史序 [*Qingshi*: Preface] *Feng Menglong quanji* 馮夢龍全集 [Full Collection of Feng Menglong], vol. 7 (Nanjing: Fenghuang chubanshe, 2007).

³⁷ See Wu Cuncun, *Ming–Qing sehui xingai fengqi*, 7; Cai Yaping 蔡亞平, *Duzhe yu Ming–Qing shiqi tongshu xiaoshuo chuanguo, chuanbo de guanxi yanjiu* 讀者與明清時期通俗小說創作、傳播的關係研究 [A Study on Relations between Readers and the Creation and Transmission of Popular Novels in the Ming–Qing Dynasties] (Guangzhou: Jinan University Press, 2013). A suggestion of female readers, albeit limited, was also raised in Huang Ko-wu 黃克武, “Gender and Spatial Transgression: Desire and Space in Ming–Qing Erotica 暗通款曲：明清豔情小說中的情欲與空間,” in *Yu yan mi zhang Zhongguo lishi wenhua zhong de ‘si’yu ‘qing’*: *Si qing pian* 欲掩彌彰—中國歷史文化中的私與情：私情篇 [Concealing to Reveal: ‘Privacy’ and ‘Sentiments’ in Chinese History and Culture—The Private Sentiments Volume], ed. Hsiung Ping-chen 熊秉真 (Taipei: Hanxue yanjiu zhongxin, 2003), 244.

of sexual activities, the majority of erotic fiction still finds a way to fit itself under mainstream societal values, such as warning against the unhealthy pursuit of sexual pleasure and hinting at karmic consequences of illicit activities. While most stories have an idealised portrayal of sexual activities with a heavy emphasis on the maximised pleasure of the male protagonist, it might be more patriarchal value-based than merely male-centred.

The original usage of *xiaoshuo* 小說 as a term certainly does not refer to texts that would generally be understood as *fiction* or *novel* nowadays. In *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*, Lu Xun introduced *xiaoshuo*'s earliest meaning as “chit-chat of no great consequence,” and only later referred to “legends and dabbles having no basis in historical fact and counter to the Confucian tradition.”³⁸ The more contemporary usage of *xiaoshuo* as a genre was likely framed in the late nineteenth century, and this understanding of *xiaoshuo* has often been translated as *novel* or *fiction*, although it is problematic to equate the *xiaoshuo* genre with fiction/novels in the English literary tradition.³⁹ On the theory of the origins of the novel in Western and Chinese literary traditions, Andrew H. Plaks suggested that the absence of epic narratives in the Chinese literature “immediately cancelled out” the usefulness of said theory to be applied to the Chinese context, and further elaborated that:

The fact that the term *hsiao-shuo* is extended to apply to both the shorter and the full-length forms (while continuing to bear its original reference to classical-language anecdotal fiction and quasi-fictional writings of various sorts) bears out the conception of the generic commensurability of the short story and the novel, an understanding based on the common use of the simulated rhetoric of the oral storyteller in both forms, and emphasised in the use of the term *chang-hui hsiao-shuo* 章回小說 for the latter.⁴⁰

³⁸ Lu Xun 魯迅, *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*, trans. Yang Hsien-yi 楊憲益 and Gladys Yang (Peking: Peking Foreign Languages Press, 1976), 1.

³⁹ For an overview of the translation of the term *xiaoshuo*, see Carlos Yu-Kai Lin, “The Rise of *Xiaoshuo* as a Literary Concept: Lu Xun and the Question of ‘Fiction’ in Chinese Literature,” *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China* 8, no. 4 (2014): 631–651.

⁴⁰ Andrew H. Plaks, “Full-length *Hsiao-shuo* and the Western Novel: A Generic Reappraisal,” in *New Asia Academic Bulletin* I (1978), 165.

The style of Ming and Qing *xiaoshuo* was also evolving rather than staying static, albeit maintaining some similar traits such as certain structures and an aesthetic of realism. The groups of texts to be studied in this thesis, with their interest in depicting the sexual affairs of everyday people, certainly also fall under the fiction genre in such forms and will be referred to as such.

While *xiaoshuo* slowly evolved into a form closer to fiction since late Ming and gained popularity as a commodity, its nature as entertainment did attract criticism, especially because the contents quickly developed into directions deemed inappropriate. In *Zaiyuan zazhi* 在園雜誌 (Miscellaneous Notes of Zaiyuan), Liu Tingji 劉廷璣 (1653–1716) commented that:

Up to the present *xiaoshuo* has extremely overflowed, almost on par with the number of works composed on the six classics and on the historical books, yet most are vulgar and unbearable to the eyes. For the name of *xiaoshuo* is the same, yet the differences [in its meaning] between past and present is vast as heaven and earth.

小說至今日濫觴極矣，幾與六經史函相埒，但鄙穢不堪寓目者居多。蓋小說之名雖同，而古今之別則相去天淵。⁴¹

These vast numbers of novels produced were later categorised by literary critics and scholars under a variety of labels such as *shenmo xiaoshuo* 神魔小說 (fiction of gods and demons), *renqing xiaoshuo* 人情小說 (fiction of human sentiments) etc.,⁴² or at times with alternative category names such as *lingguai* 靈怪 (instead of *shenmo*) or *yanfen* 煙粉 (instead of *renqing*) based on the preferences of bibliographers.⁴³ Erotic novels were generally categorised under *renqing xiaoshuo* or *yanfen xiaoshuo*. The genre is also sometimes referred to as *xing'ai*

⁴¹ Liu Tingji 劉廷璣, *Zaiyuan zazhi* 在園雜誌 [Miscellaneous Notes of Zaiyuan] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2005), 82–83.

⁴² See Lu Xun 魯迅, *Zhongguo xiaoshuo shilue* 中國小說史略 [A Brief History of Chinese Fiction] (Taipei: Le Jin Books Ltd., 1999[1992]) and Sun Kaidi 孫楷第, *Zhongguo tongyu xiaoshuo shumu* 中國通俗小說書目 [A Catalogue of Chinese Popular Novels] (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 1982).

⁴³ It was also noted that the terminology of alternative labelling was based on an older system and had “no fundamental differences in [their] meanings (意義本無差別).” Sun Kaidi 孫楷第, “Fenlei shuoming 分類說明 [Explanation of Categorisation],” in *Zhongguo tongyu xiaoshuo shumu* 中國通俗小說書目 [A Catalogue of Chinese Popular Novels] (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 1982).

xiaoshuo 性愛小說 (fiction of lovemaking),⁴⁴ *seqing xiaoshuo* 色情小說 (fiction of erotic sentiments)⁴⁵, or more derogatively as *yinhui* 淫穢 (excessive and dirty) or *weixie* 猥褻 (indecent and blasphemous) *xiaoshuo* by Sinophone researchers. In the past decades it became however more common to refer to the genre as *yanqing xiaoshuo* 豔情小說 (fiction of glamorous sentiments), while English researchers tend to use either “erotic” or “pornographic,” or “narrative of desire/*qing*.” Often, the texts are categorised under different names based on the judgement of aesthetic or literary values, which further complicates the study with biased treatment.⁴⁶

During the late Ming to early Qing period, this group of texts was generally referred to as *yinshu* 淫書 (licentious books)⁴⁷ or alluded to with terms like *fengyue zhi shu* 風月之書⁴⁸ or *fengyue bimo* 風月筆墨 (books or writings of the wind and moon).⁴⁹ Bearing the meaning of *excess*, the character *yin* 淫 denotes a negative value judgement with an additional edge of implying the sexual aspect. While the term *yinci xiaoshuo* 淫詞小說 (verses and novels of excess) was used as an umbrella term without a clear definition, *Shuihu zhuan* named a *xiaoshuo yinci* 小說淫詞 (novels and verses of excess) in an edict even though it was not

⁴⁴ Ding Fengshan 丁峰山, *Ming-Qing xingai xiaoshuo xuba ji pingdian xulun* 明清性愛小說序跋及評點敘論 [Erotic Novels in Ming-Qing: Preface and Comments], *Ningxia daxue xuebao renwen shehui kexue ban* 寧夏大學學報人文社會科學版 [Journal of Ningxia University: Humanities and Social Sciences Edition] 30, no. 3 (2008):74–79.

⁴⁵ See Wu Yenna, “Zhongguo seqing xiaoshuo hong de funü xingxiang yu xingjiaoyu.”

⁴⁶ For example, it is not uncommon to see lengthy discussions on or praises of *Jin Ping Mei* as a classic text of high literary value, with a brief and dismissing statement of other late imperial erotic texts.

⁴⁷ For example, a family manual written by Wang Huizu contained an entry titled “*Jia shang buke you yinshu* 架上不可有淫書 (Bookshelves Should Not Contain Licentious Books)” specifying *yinshu* (licentious books) as items that may corrupt the mind of youngsters and should “definitely not stored on the shelf 斷不可存此等書籍.” See Wang Huizu 汪輝祖, *Bingta menghen lu* 病榻夢痕錄 [Traces of Dreams on a Sick Man’s Bed]/*Shuangjie tang yongxun* 雙節堂庸訓 [Teaching of *Shuangjie Tang*]/*Wuzhong pandu* 吳中判牘 [Wuzhong Judgments] (Nanchang: Jiangzi renmin chubanshe, 2012), 149–150.

⁴⁸ Huang Qiang 黃強 and Guo Di 郭迪, eds., *Rou putuan jiaozheng* 肉蒲團校證 [Critical Edition of *The Carnal Prayer Mat*] (Taipei: Kuo Chia Publishing Co., 2019), 75.

⁴⁹ Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹 and Gao E 高鶚, *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢 [Dream of the Red Chamber], ed. Yu Pingbo 俞平伯 (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 2002), 4.

centred on sexual themes like *Jin Ping Mei* was.⁵⁰ The word *yin* was also often used as an adjective describing sex-related objects, such as *yinfu* 淫婦 (licentious women), *yinshui* 淫水 (licentious water, referring to vaginal discharge). While the use of *yinfu* is mostly derogative, there are also occasions where the term signified a sexual endearment, such as in exchanges between Ximen Qing 西門慶 and Pan Jinlian 潘金蓮 in *Jin Ping Mei*.

Elements that could be considered erotic can be seen across different genres. The determining factor of whether the text is considered fiction with erotic elements or erotic fiction largely depended on whether the erotic elements served more as secondary plotlines or as the overarching theme of the text. Much like the genre labels in general, there is no exact definition of what defines an erotic novel, nor does a commonly agreed list of erotic texts has ever existed. In fact, one may argue that some of the erotic novels may be more appropriately termed obscene or pornographic fiction. The word choice is essentially an attempt to suggest a distinction between the artistic and thus excusable and the vulgar and thus condemnable. As Ding Naifei's review of the study of *Jin Ping Mei* showed, the question of whether the text is obscene or not seems to suggest the mutually exclusive categories of "literary therefore not (truly) obscene" and "obscene therefore necessarily common and base."⁵¹ The separation depends on the value judgement as well as aesthetic preferences of individuals, and on somewhat universally agreeable criteria that was rarely explicitly defined. For instance, both concerning explicit sexual indulgence and misconduct, *Jin Ping Mei* was regarded by Robert van Gulik as "erotic," while *Rou putuan* was regarded as "pornographic."⁵² Similarly, Patrick Hanan suggested the

⁵⁰ Wang Liqi 王利器, *Yuan–Ming–Qing sandai jinhui xiaoshuo xiqu shiliao (zengding ben)* 元明清三代禁毀小說戲曲史料 (增訂本) [Historical Materials of Novels and Plays Banned and Destroyed in the Yuan, Ming, and Qing times (revised edition)] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1981), 19.

⁵¹ Ding Naifei, *Obscene Things: Sexual Politics in Jin Ping Mei* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 4.

⁵² R. H. van Gulik, *Sexual Life in Ancient China. A Preliminary Survey of Chinese Sex and Society from ca. 1500 B.C. till 1644 A.D.; with a New Introduction and Bibliography by Paul R. Goldin* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 287–306.

former is “only a partial member” of erotic fiction, and the latter is “the classic example” of the genre.

Attempts to distinguish a book from acceptably erotic to obscene beyond acceptance were also conducted by scholars and critics from as far back as Qing times. In Liu’s *Zaiyuan zazhi*, he recorded commentaries regarding several novels known to him approximately in 1715:

Recent novels like *Pingshan lengyan*, *Qingmeng tuo*, *Fengliu pei*, *Chunliu ying*, *Yujiao li* etc., are similar to *jiaren caizi* [fiction, while] desiring beauties and talents already are rooted in inappropriateness, [they are] not quite yet a big blow to the social customs; the likes of *Yulou chun* [and] *Gonghua bao* are closer to the erotic [types, but] similar to *Pingyao zhuan*’s wildness, *Fengshen zhuan*’s fantasy, [and] *Pomeng shi*’s peculiarity; they all are worth a laugh. When it comes to *Dengyue yuan*, *Rou putuan*, *Yeshi*, *Langshi*, *Kuaishi*, *Meishi*, *Hejian zhuan*, *Chipozi zhuan*, [they are] instead corrupting with no bounds; even worse are *Yichun xiangzhi*, *Bian’er chai*, *Longyang yishi*, which all should be destroyed from the roots, taking all the printed and circulated copies, and all burnt in the flames of our ancestral dragon, then to bring joy to everyone. 近日之小說若平山冷燕、情夢柝、風流配、春柳鶯、玉嬌梨等，類佳人才子，慕色慕才，已出之非正，猶不至于大傷風俗；若玉樓春、宮花報，稍近淫佚，與平妖傳之野、封神傳之幻、破夢史之僻，皆堪捧腹；至燈月圓、肉蒲團、野史、浪史、快史、媚史、河間傳、痴婆子傳，則流毒無盡；更甚而下者，宜春香質、弁而釵、龍陽逸史，悉當斧碎棗梨，遍取已印行世者，盡付祖龍一炬，庶快人心然。⁵³

His remarks ranked several types of sensuous/erotic fiction according to their potential harm to social customs, with the more sexually explicit ones deemed either “venomous” or “should be burnt.” The two groups deemed harmful were not compared to other novels to justify their value; they were simply denounced outright. Nor was there any explicit reason explaining why these few homoerotic novels called for eradication.

Written at a time when erotic fiction had been circulating and growing in popularity/notoriety, the writer of *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢 (Dream of the Red Chamber) was highly self-conscious about the text’s potential to be considered inappropriately *yin*. The following excerpt of the preface reflects both the writer’s awareness of erotic fiction and his conscious distancing of his work from the genre, which he explicitly disapproved of:

⁵³ Liu Tingji, *Zaiyuan zazhi*, 84.

There are also the writings of the wind and moon, whose filthy obscenities and venomous writings corrupt the youngsters in uncountable amounts. As to the books of beauties and talented men... in the end, they inevitably involved with excessive licentiousness.

更有一種風月筆墨，其淫污穢臭，荼毒筆墨，壞人子弟，又不可勝數。至若佳人才子等書...終不能不涉于淫濫。⁵⁴

The *caizi jiaren* 才子佳人 (scholar and beauty) genre that Liu tolerated was also considered inevitably excessively licentious in Cao's opinion. Shortly further into the story, further differentiation of *yin* was made — *yiyin* 意淫 (lust of the mind) and *piyin* 皮淫 (skin-deep lust) — showing an appreciative tone towards the former, considered superior to the latter:

Although lust is just one principle, there are different meanings to it. What the world calls lustful, for instance, are those seeking pleasure in fair looks, music, or dancing; those who indulge endlessly and indiscriminately in flirtations and lovemaking; those who wish that all the beautiful women in the world would be at their disposal to satisfy their whim of the moment — those are mere sensualist brutes. But your nature has been endowed from birth with this obsessive longing, what we call “lust of the mind.” The words “lust of the mind” can be intuitively understood but not spoken of, apprehensible with the spirit yet not communicable through language.

淫雖一理，意則有別。如世之好淫者，不過悅容貌，喜歌舞，調笑無厭，雲雨無時，恨不能盡天下之美女供我片時之趣興，此皆皮膚濫淫之蠢物耳。如爾，則天分中生成一段癡情，吾輩推之為「意淫」。惟「意淫」二字，可心會而不可口傳，可神通而不可語達。⁵⁵

This elaboration on *piyin* and *yiyin* has made clear the author's view on a two-fold “*yin*”: those in the former group are foolish (*chunwu* 蠢物), while *yiyin* is unexplainable on a spiritual level, like *dao* 道. Such differentiation is described by Li Wai-ye as a myth invented by Cao Xueqin to “charge the idea with new power and broaden its scope,”⁵⁶ as the idea of the distinction between “desire and the object of desire.” “The distinction between biological impulse and desire of the mind” was, in fact, raised by Ji Kang 嵇康 (223–262), and later explored in *Mudan ting* 牡丹亭 (The Peony Pavilion).⁵⁷ The desire in question is believed to be inexhaustible, and the statement made in *Honglou meng* explicitly imposed value judgement to the different types

⁵⁴ Cao Xueqin and Gao E, *Honglou meng*, 4.

⁵⁵ Cao Xueqin and Gao E, *Honglou meng*, 59. Translation cited from Li Wai-ye, *Enchantment and Disenchantment: Love and Illusion in Chinese Literature* (Princeton University Press, 1993), 203.

⁵⁶ Li, *Enchantment and Disenchantment*, 203.

⁵⁷ Li, *Enchantment and Disenchantment*, 52.

of desire. For this thesis, it is, however, the venomous *piyin* fiction narrating “filthy obscenities” that form the core of the texts to be studied.

Late Ming is a period which many recognise as the time of the sudden growth of commercial book publishing. With the lower cost of paper production and improved efficiency of book production, printed books as a commercial product became more accessible, especially in urban areas, which, in turn, created an environment fostering the growth of private publishing along with an expanding number of book consumers. Common processes of fiction production included the collation of stories circulated for generations before being edited in prints, such as *Sanguo yanyi* 三國演義 (The Romance of the Three Kingdoms) and *Xiyou ji* 西遊記 (Journey to the West); also individual creations, such as *Jin Ping Mei*;⁵⁸ sequels of previous novels; adaptations of previous novels; and compilations by publishing houses. The adaptation style was common among erotic novels, especially through the expansion of existing stories, edited reorganisation of existing materials, and abridging stories with minor changes (e.g. location and character names). While some methods were adopted to avoid book censorship, the previous two were suggested to have stemmed from the loss of creative force among erotic writings, resulting in the standardisation of characters, language, and plots.⁵⁹ Similar scenes exist in various erotic fiction; while some are more subtle, others are simply blatant plagiarisms. Nevertheless, a number of erotic fiction books remain identifiable as individual works, each with their own characteristics and viewpoints.

The precise authorship of almost all known erotic tales remains unknown, as the printed name of author, editor, and commentator are often fictional as well as stylised in pseudonyms, if available at all. Evidence suggesting the writer as an identifiable individual only exists for a

⁵⁸ Parts of *Jin Ping Mei* is also an example of adaption of previous novels, in this case to *Shuihu zhuan*.

⁵⁹ Dang Yueyi 黨月異 and Zhang Tingxing 張廷興, *Ming-Qing xiaoshuo yanjiu gailun* 明清小說研究概論 [Introduction to the Research of Novels of Ming and Qing Dynasties] (Beijing: zhongyang bianyi chubanshe, 2011), 161–194.

handful of erotic novels, including *Rou putuan* and *Xiuta yeshi*. However, the majority of evidence originates from secondary sources from the presumed period of the book's publication; however, their credibility is also challenged rather than being definitive. Keith McMahon suggested that the unknown writers were likely part of the "members of lower elite." i.e., literati who may or may not have had examination degrees, and have not been part of the official class as literati traditionally would.⁶⁰ It has also been suggested that the writers, editors, and commentators cited in erotic fiction were possibly the same person despite holding various names.⁶¹ Most researchers did not make alternative suggestions, especially since some of the erotic novels were of low quality and originality. Even though the quality and maturity of writing may reflect the writers' background and potential social status, this is by no means the sole determining factor. As an example, *Xiuta yeshi* was noted as the work of an accomplished playwright as his "playful writing when young;" *Rou putuan* was believed to have been written when the author was in his sixties. Despite both allegedly being the work of successful playwrights, the likely difference in the writers' age at the time of writing their erotic stories certainly had an effect on the subjective literary accomplishment of respective texts.

Considering the various official attempts to wipe out books deemed indecent, the extant collection of erotic fiction may not be fully reflective of what was actually published. While the popularity of certain texts may be reflected in the frequency of mentions, the number of multiple extant editions, numbers of alternative titles (which suggest the frequency of reprints/piracy), the number of copies, and their circulation of the lesser-known texts remain unknown. Some texts currently exist only as unfinished manuscripts or fragments, and some only as a title discovered without any text body. Whether their modern-day obscurity is a reflection of their previous unpopularity or is simply a result of the lack of surviving copies

⁶⁰ McMahon, *Misers, Shrews and Polygamists*, 19–20.

⁶¹ Wang Qiang 王强, *Zhebi de wenming: xing guannian yu gu Zhongguo wenhua* 遮蔽的文明：性觀念與古中國文化 [Shadowed Civilization: Concept of Sex and Ancient Chinese Culture] (Taipei: Wen chin chubanshe, 2003), 264.

may never be known. Due to the forbidden nature of these texts as both illegal and immoral, it is also possible that the extant manuscript copies of some texts are unpublished drafts or hand-copies of lost published books unless proven otherwise.

In terms of readership of erotic fiction, a general assumption is that it consisted of the increased amount of people who obtained literacy to various degrees, especially since schools were established to educate and prepare males for public examinations.⁶² While the levels of literacy varied, the less-educated social group, consisting of merchants, shopkeepers, shop assistants etc., was suggested to be part of the potential audience.⁶³ While some scholars believe that readers were likely to be literati and merchants mostly of middle-to-lower class,⁶⁴ or that they were mainly youngsters,⁶⁵ the fact that literati of the considerable social class wrote about their resentment against the contents of the genre may be an indication that they were also readers.

Despite the general assumption of erotic fiction being essentially a product catering to male audiences and likely written by males, some believed in the possibility of females being part of the demographic of erotic fiction readership.⁶⁶ Recent research reviewed our understanding of female literacy in late imperial China, discovering the scattered records of female education by means of hired teachers, parents, and religious institutions, so that the more affluent females were able to publish poetry within their social circles.⁶⁷ There was also *tanci xiaoshuo* 彈詞小說 (plucking rhymes fiction), a genre favoured by female readers; some

⁶² R. E. Hegel, *The Novel in Seventeenth Century China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 11–22.

⁶³ Patrick Hanan, *The Chinese Vernacular Story* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 11.

⁶⁴ Huang, “Gender and Spatial Transgression,” 244.

⁶⁵ Li Mingjun 李明軍, *Jinji yu fangzong: Ming–Qing yanqing xiaoshuo wenhua yanjiu* 禁忌與放縱：明清艷情小說文化研究 [Taboo and Indulgence: A study on the Culture of Erotic Novels in Ming–Qing] (Jinan: Qi Lu shushe, 2005), 129–134.

⁶⁶ Huang Ko-wu, “Antong kuanqu,” 244; and Li Mingjun, *Jinji yu fangzong*, 129–134.

⁶⁷ Zhao Cuili 趙崔莉, *Bei zhebi de xiandai xing: Ming–Qing nüxing de shehui shenghuo yu qinggan tiyan* 被遮蔽的現代性：明清女性的社會生活與情感體驗 [Shaded Modernity: Social Life and Emotional Experience of Women in Ming–Qing] (Beijing: Zhishi chanquan chubanshe, 2015), 49–58.

also written by females who managed to get them published.⁶⁸ While a completely different genre, those who were able to read and compose fiction might be able to read also erotic fiction if circumstances brought the materials to them. Records of people reading erotic fiction were mostly warning statements of the harm caused by erotic fiction, some official statements calling for the restriction of such materials, and several literati writings where commentaries of the books were made.

Interestingly, a segment of *Rou putuan* describes the reading of erotic fiction, with details that may reflect reality given its ordinariness in the story:

Weiyangsheng wants to induce her licentious interest, [thus] again went to the bookstores and bought many books of wind and moon (books about sexual desire), such as *Xiuta yeshi*, *Ruyijun zhuan*, *Chipozi zhuan*, et cetera, totalling ten to twenty types. The books are bound in set and placed on top of the desk for her to read as desired.

未央生要助他淫興，又到書鋪中買了許多風月之書，如《繡榻野史》、《如意君傳》、《癡婆子傳》之類，共有一二十種，裝訂成套，放在案頭，任他翻閱。⁶⁹

If we treat this segment as a quick glimpse of sexual life at the time, it suggests that erotic fiction was in abundance and likely both affordable and accessible, at least to someone like Weiyangsheng, a young male character who likely had connections to other men who could read and spend money on leisure books. This also suggests a possibility of females being given access to erotic fiction by people with access to such materials — the husband in this case.

This scene of easily accessible erotic fiction certainly could not reflect the situation of purchasing erotic fiction in later times. As part of the literary works considered *xiaoshuo yinci* 小說淫詞 (licentious verses and novels), prohibition of books deemed indecent was repeatedly

⁶⁸ See Hu Siao-chen 胡曉真, "Cainu cheye weimian — qingdai funu danci xiaoshuo zhong de ziwo chengxian 才女徹夜未眠—清代婦女彈詞小說中的自我呈現 [Burning the Midnight Oil: The Self-manifestation of Women in *Tanci* Novels in Qing]," *Jindai zhongguo funushi yanjiu* 近代中國婦女史研究 [Research on Women in Modern Chinese History], vol. 3 (1995): 51–76, and Hu Siao-chen 胡曉真, "Yuedu fanying yu danci xiaoshuo de chuanguo: qingdai nuxing xushi wenxue chuantong jianli zhi yiyu 閱讀反應與彈詞小說的創作: 清代女性敘事文學傳統建立之一隅 [Reading Response to and Creation of *Tanci* Novels: A Glance of the Development of the Female Narrative Literature Tradition in Qing]," *Zhongguo wenzhe yanjiu jikan* 中國文哲研究集刊 [Bulletin of the Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy], vol. 8 (1996): 305–364.

⁶⁹ Huang Qiang and Guo Di, eds., *Rou putuan jiaozheng*, 75.

proposed since early Qing during the Kangxi reign (1662–1722). In an edict recorded in the 26th year of the Kangxi reign (1687), this group of materials was considered items that corrupt the mind and destroy morality, and novel enthusiasts were believed to achieve little in life:

Liu Kai proposed to prohibit licentious verses and novels, [and] the request shall be granted. [The proposal] stated: “People like to read licentious verses and novels. This can corrupt morality and bewitch the mind.” I, the Emperor, see that those who like reading novels are mostly unable to achieve much; therefore not only [do these texts] lack benefits, [but they are] also harmful.

劉楷條奏，請禁止淫詞小說，應如所請。上曰：「淫詞小說，人所樂觀。實能敗壞風俗，蠱惑人心。」朕見樂觀小說者，多不成材。是不惟無益，而且有害。⁷⁰

Such a view evolved in a few decades. In the 53rd year of Kangxi reign (1714), another edict concerning the prohibition of novels was justified by maintaining the righteousness of people’s minds:

Recently in the marketplace, many sell novels and licentious verses. They are absurd and crude, [and] definitely not righteous. Not only do they seduce the foolish commoners, even the gentries inevitably place their eyes [on them] and their hearts become spellbound. Their influence on custom is no small [issue].

近見坊間，多賣小說淫辭，荒唐俚鄙，殊非正理。不但誘惑愚民，即縉紳士子，未免遊目而蠱心焉。所關於風俗者非細。⁷¹

Within twenty-seven years, in addition to the “foolish” and those with little achievements, gentry was also listed as readers who may be seduced by these texts. Subsequently, the later part of the edict pledged for the complete destruction of these texts as they were deemed a threat to morality:

Whoever sells these novels and licentious verses in the market... [has to] be strictly prohibited. The print blocks and prints shall be simultaneously destroyed completely.

凡坊肆市賣一應小說淫辭... 嚴查禁絕。將板與書，一并盡行銷毀。⁷²

Despite such a pledge, accompanied by strict punishments involving caning and exiling, it was not fully successful, as erotic novels published prior to the Kangxi reign were again listed in the late Qing book censor as proposed by Ding Richang 丁日昌 in 1868. This implicates the

⁷⁰ *Shengzu Renhuangdi shilu* 聖祖仁皇帝實錄 [Veritable Records of Emperor Shengzu Ren], *Qing Shilu* 清實錄 [Veritable Records of the Qing Dynasty] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986), 26 [1687], vol. 129, 385.

⁷¹ *Shengzu Renhuangdi shilu*, 53 [1714], vol. 258, 552.

⁷² *Shengzu Renhuangdi shilu*, 53 [1714], vol. 258, 552.

failure of the eradication attempt despite the supposed complete destruction of both prints and print blocks after almost two centuries.

1.3 Methodology and framework

This thesis focuses on the presentation of the respective characteristics of different types of erotic females and their interrelationships in erotic fiction. In order to maintain the scope of the analysis within the pool of comparable erotic fiction, the research will not include exclusively homosexual texts. The criteria of erotic fiction for this thesis is fiction that features the protagonist's sexual endeavours as the central storyline, with explicit descriptions of sexual activities and organs. In other words, as quoted previously, the type of texts considered “venomous” by Liu Tingji that narrated skin-deep “filthy obscenities” as defined in *Honglou meng*.

The main texts to be discussed in this thesis are *Langshi* 浪史 (Chronicles of the Libertine), *Xiuta yeshi* 繡榻野史 (Unofficial History of Embroidered Couch), *Rou putuan* 肉蒲團 (The Carnal Prayer Mat), *Taohua ying* 桃花影 (Shadow of Peach Blossoms), and *Dengcao heshang zhuan* 燈草和尚傳 (Legend of the Candlewick Monk).⁷³ The texts are all mid-length novels written in vernacular language, with the estimated publishing time spanning from 1572 to 1730.⁷⁴ The selected texts share a similar choice of protagonists' background, which is set to be of the *wenren* type — men who are literate and follow the pathway of life of education-examination-expectation of official position. This limits the variance of background, wealth,

⁷³ Listed according to approximate published time, from oldest to latest; details of each text will be discussed later in this section. The process of text selection is heavily indebted to the *Siwuxie huibao*, the critical reprint of selected Ming–Qing fiction that largely falls into the category of erotic fiction, which was greatly helpful by providing important information of individual texts and serving as the main companion reference to manuscripts. I have also consulted Zhang Tingxing's *Zhongguo gudai yanqing xiaoshuo shi* 中國古代艷情小說史 [History of Ancient Chinese Erotic Novels] (Beijing: Zhongyan bianyi chubanshe, 2008), Sun Qin'an's *Zhongguo xingwenxue shi* 中國性文學史 [History of Chinese Literature on Sex] (Taipei: Guiguan tushu gufen youxiangongsi, 1995), Sun Kaidi's *Zhongguo tongsu xiaoshuo shumu* as well as relevant research papers to finalise the texts to be compared for the purpose of this research.

⁷⁴ See Sun Kaidi, *Zhongguo tongsu xiaoshuo shu mu* and Zhang Tingxing, *Zhongguo gudai yanqing xiaoshuo shi*.

lifestyle, values of the protagonists (or at least the social expectation of them), and, in some cases, of their respective female counterparts. Erotic fiction known to be largely a copy of previous works, such as *Yiqing zhen* 怡情陣 (Pleasure Array) (as a copy of *Xiuta yeshi*) is omitted due to duplication. Several of these texts have been studied individually or together from a comparative approach before, noting elements that are more common than novel.⁷⁵

The research adopts a reader-centred interpretation approach focusing on the contents of fiction without interpretation through the understanding of the author's background. While this is partially due to the lack of concrete evidence on author identity, this is also central to the research's goal in investigating the representations of erotic fiction as a collective. This thesis uses fiction as a source to understand, in Louise Edwards's words, "the personal, the private and the pornographic," especially with "the pornographic" that is otherwise absent in genres other than fiction.⁷⁶ Bearing in mind Edwards's analysis of the pros and cons of using fiction to inform the understanding of Chinese women's history, this research does not treat fictional representation as reality, but rather a gateway to the further understanding of it.

Most sexual scenarios depicted in the main texts are conducted with mutual consent after observations and flirtatious exchanges and sometimes they lead to recognised relationships. While male protagonists may have a homosexual lover, almost all sexual experiences of female characters are heterosexual or mimicry of it. There are few cases where the concerned sexual woman was in a solitary situation with no female companion. The affairs are almost always known to multiple females, with the most common example being the illicit affair of a mistress

⁷⁵ See Chen Jun-Hong 陳俊宏, "Wanming yanqing xiaoshuo Xiuta yeshi yu Langshi jiejian qingxing zhi yanjiu 晚明豔情小說繡榻野史與浪史借鑒情形之研究 [*Xiuta yeshi* and *Langshi*: The Connection between the Two Pornographic Stories in the Late Ming Dynasty]," *Shumu jikan* 書目季刊 [Bibliography Quarterly], 40, vol. 1 (2006), 75–95;

Jiang Jiajun 姜家君, "Wanming yanqing xiaoshuo de qingyu xushi 晚明豔情小說的情欲敘事：以《繡榻野史》《浪史》為例 [Erotic Narrative in Late Ming's Erotic Novels: Case Studies on *Xiuta yeshi* and *Langshi*]," *Ludong daxue xuebao Zhexue shehui kexue ban* [Ludong University Journal Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition 魯東大學學報哲學社會科學版] 5 (2014), 64–68; and Huang Ko-wu, "Antong kuanqu," 243–278.

⁷⁶ Edwards, "Gendered Fictions and Chinese Women's History," 316–326.

being known to the maidservants or other servicewomen. Even though illicit affairs were an offence, in fiction, such activities are always depicted as only semi-private, with a small circle of women involved facilitating the affair and keeping it secret. The depiction of women's relations in such situations is the main concern of this thesis: what constitutes this female network within a supposed forbidden affair? How does this reflect the perceived characteristics of women from different backgrounds and statuses? And what can we learn from the collective narrations of women networks in the context of illicit affairs?

The variety of female characters in fiction represented different types of females in society that functioned almost as if they were specific categories of collectables. Typical female character types include unmarried girls, maidservants, widows, Buddhist nuns, and a large group of wives. In order to reflect the characters' real-life counterparts, the wedded women in erotic fiction would be further categorised into specific groups for discussion, as these women lived different lives corresponding to their social identities. While they share the similarity of being (once) wedded and thus no longer part of her natal family, the presence or absence of husband and/or offspring played a significant role in their stories, if not also dictating their roles in the erotic stories as leading or supporting female characters. To facilitate the discussions, the following terms and definitions will be used in this thesis:

Table 1: Terms and definitions for female characters' categorisation

Category	Role	Definition
Mistress	Wives	Wedded with a living husband, no living offspring.
Mistress	Concubines	Wedded with a living husband, no living offspring, inferior to wives.
Mistress	Widows	Wedded but husband deceased, no living offspring.
Mistress	Mothers	Husband's mortality less important, with living offspring.
Mistress	Daughters	Unmarried and living with parent(s) or guardian.
Assistant	Maidservants	Female servants of lower social class and subordinate to mistresses; further divided into handmaids (close relationship with mistresses) and housemaids.
Assistant	<i>Pozi</i>	Females providing various services to mistresses; external to the household.
Assistant	Female kin/ neighbour	Females relatives or neighbours of the mistresses; could be relatives or external to the household.

This categorisation is influenced by the organisation scheme of the Ming text *Guifan* 閩範 (Models for the Boudoir), a text that served as one of the popular didactic texts for women, in which the virtuous women were organised in three groups of the female life cycle, namely the daughter, wife, and mother.⁷⁷ Each category will be discussed separately for their common traits, followed by an analysis of their interrelationships in subsequent sections. Such categorisation is no doubt a far cry from the categories of tales of women as noted by Dorothy Ko from the influx of stories of women.⁷⁸ While inevitably simplified, this style of categorisation is crucial in indicating respective female characters' status in terms of social expectation on their role and to whom they are legally liable: whether it was their father, their husband, or the paternal seniors of deceased husband. When overlaps of identity exist, the behaviour and function of the character also shift according to their primary identity in specific scenes. For example, a widow may serve as the temptress when presented alone, but her primary role would be a mother whenever her daughter appears in the same scene.

Overview of primary sources

Langshi 浪史 (*Chronicles of the Libertine*)

*Langshi*⁷⁹ is one of the earlier surviving erotic novels. The text is also printed under alternative titles such as *Qiao yinyuan* 巧姻緣 (Opportune Fate of Love), *Meimeng yuan* 梅夢

⁷⁷ Li-hsiang Lisa Rosenlee, *Confucianism and Women: A Philosophical Interpretation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 99.

⁷⁸ According to Ko's survey of Ming and Qing literary works that described and classified women, in particular, the works attributed to Deng Zhimo (fl. 1596), Chen Jiru (1558–1639), and an encyclopaedia compiled by a Yangzhou man, categories of women include those behaviour-based types (e.g. women martyrs, wise women, feisty women, virtuous women, man-like women, she-husband etc.), appearance-based types (e.g. beautiful women, ugly women), and ability-based types (e.g. talented women, women scholar, singing or dancing girls, prostitutes etc.). See Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, 116–117. Most female characters in erotic fiction may all be loosely considered "beauties," however, they may not be on the same criteria as in other literary works and have different levels of beauty in erotic fiction. A more applicable description for the majority of female characters in erotic fiction may be "licentious women (*yinfu*)," however, this term contains a much deeper negative implication beyond the world of erotic fiction instead of being comparatively neutral or even potentially having a playful undertone.

⁷⁹ Title translated to "A History of Debauchery" by K. F. Wong in "The Anatomy of Eroticism: Reimagining Sex and Sexuality in the Late Ming Novel *Xiuta Yeshe*," *Nan Nü* 9 (2007): 293.

緣 (Fate of Mei's Dream), or *Langshi qiguan* 浪史奇觀 (The Spectacle of the Chronicles of the Libertine). Likely a work produced around the mid-to-late Wanli time,⁸⁰ Youxuanzi of Fengyue xuan 風月軒又玄子 (The extremely mysterious teacher of the Pavilion of Wind and Moon) was credited as the author of *Langshi*.⁸¹ Though not credited in the preface or on the cover, end-of-chapter commentaries by Youxuanzi, Tongchi 童痴 (child-like folly) and Zaji 雜集 (miscellaneous collection) could be found scattered in the text. Certain passages of *Langshi* are highly similar to *Haining yishi* 海陵佚史 (Lost History of Hailing) in terms of plots and choice of words, and it has been suggested that the writer made references directly and indirectly to contents and characters of other fiction of its contemporary.⁸² The edition referred to in this thesis is the manuscript from the Sōkōdō 雙紅堂 collection from the Institute for Advanced Studies on Asia, the University of Tokyo,⁸³ which was also the selected base edition reprinted in the *Siwuxie huibao* 思無邪匯寶 series.

The story centres on one idealised young unmarried literatus (the protagonist) and his encounters with different beauties. The most socially ideal became his consort, with whom he eventually ascended as immortals. While the male and main female protagonists exhibit qualities fit for *caizi jiaren* romances, the tale did not feature much of the typical romantic elements of that genre.⁸⁴ Rather than having a subplot of scheming enemies and a quest for examination success, the secondary storyline is the protagonist's cousin's exploration of sensual pleasure as a maiden. This text also differs from the chaste romance for its explicit

⁸⁰ *Langshi*, in *Siwuxie huibao*, vol. 4, 15–16; Zhang Tingxing, *Zhongguo gu dai yan qing xiao shuo shi*, 274.

⁸¹ Later versions of the text often credited the author as *Ruxuanzi* of *Fengyue xuan* 風月軒入玄子, a change likely due to copy mistake, as the initial author name was retained in other parts of the later editions. See Introduction to *Langshi*, *Siwuxie huibao*, 15.

⁸² Chen Bing-Nan 陳秉楠, *Xiuta yeshi yanjiu* 繡榻野史研究 [Study of *Xiuta yeshi*] (Xinbei shi: Huamulan chubanshe), 81–82.

⁸³ Previously known as the Institute of Oriental Culture of Tokyo University, as referred to by Patrick Hanan.

⁸⁴ Regarding the typical scholar-beauty romance elements, Hessney had made the following summary: “Scholar meets beauty, falls in love, overcomes obstacles, passes official examinations, marries her, and they live happily ever after.” Richard C. Hessney, “Beautiful, Talented, and Brave: Seventeenth-century Chinese Scholar-Beauty Romances” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1979), 32.

details throughout, and that the beauties who had liaisons with the protagonist are no maidens but married women.⁸⁵ It also displays elements potentially catering for the literati fashion, such as the use of *jítang* 集唐詩 poems, details of garden scenes, fashion objects, and a segment of Cui Yingying asking help for justice.

The story displays exceptionally smooth and harmonious circumstances for the young scholar protagonist, who acquired his beautiful and talented wives from their former husbands without much hindrance and in compliance with social norms. It is one of the few erotic stories where the protagonist has two wives of equal status. The ending was also highly idealised, with both main wives living in harmony with the whole household, including other unmentioned concubines, enjoying immortality in the end. In general, most females in *Langshi* are depicted to have been first charmed by Langzi's appearance and then impressed by his sexual prowess. While the storyline centres on Langzi's sexual pursuits, the character of Langzi is greatly paled in comparison to the various female characters throughout. His role could arguably be that of a beautiful human phallus whose only purpose is to charm and bring sexual satisfaction to lustful women, while the women he encountered seduce him by their own means. The description of the women's thoughts and flirtatious actions are both graphic and detailed. In this respect, Sun Qin'an commented that "the description of the sexual psychology of Li Wenfei was rather too vulgar, but very realistic."⁸⁶ While I would suggest that it was tame when compared to some other erotic novels, the text indeed provides a glimpse of the women's reflection on their marriage life and meticulous arrangement of illicit affairs, which evokes some level of sympathy rather than easy condemnation.

⁸⁵ Differentiation between the chaste versus erotic scholar-beauty romance and further elaboration could be found in Keith McMahon's chapter on this topic in his book. See McMahon, "The Erotic Scholar-Beauty," in *Misers, Shrews, and Polygamists*, 126–149.

⁸⁶ Sun Qin'an 孫琴安, *Zhongguo xingwenxue shi* 中國性文學史 [History of Chinese Literature on Sex] (Taipei: Guiguan tushu gufen youxian gongsi, 1995), 293.

Xiuta yeshi 繡榻野史 (*Unofficial History of the Embroidered Couch*)

Xiuta yeshi was written under the pseudonym Qingdian zhuren 情顛主人 (The host of the peak of sentiments) with multiple extant editions. It has been mentioned in Wang Jide's 王驥德 *Qulü* 曲律 (Rules of Songs) that *Xiuta yeshi* was written by the Ming playwright Lü Tiancheng 呂天成 (1580–1618) as “his teenage writing for fun (其少年游戲之筆).”⁸⁷ Considering the lifespan of Lü Tiancheng, the mention of “*daming* 大明” (the great Ming dynasty) and criticism towards the Jurchen, it is suggested that the story was written and published around the 25th year of the Wanli reign (1597).⁸⁸ The edition referred to in this thesis is the *Zuimiange edition* 醉眠閣本, identified as the most complete extant edition, with references from *Ruyijun zhuan* and the Ming erotic print *Huayin jinzhen* 花營錦陣 being noted.⁸⁹ The edition is currently not in a public collection, but a critical reprint version is published in *Siwuxie huibao*.

The story of *Xiuta yeshi* centres on a single household of Dongmensheng 東門生, which later incorporated the small household of his boy lover and his widowed mother. Instead of a string of sexual adventures of a young male protagonist, this story strings most of the members of the household together sexually. The story begins with Dongmensheng's sexual relationship with his boy lover, whom he introduced to his wife for sexual pleasure. As the wife was injured by the boy's wilful sexual exploitation, in revenge, she tricked the boy's mother into having sex with Dongmensheng and broke her observance of chastity. This, however, evoked the insatiable appetite of the widow, and the four indulged in sex along with their maidservants. Their activities became known to the neighbours, prompting them to relocate. The foursome

⁸⁷ “鬱藍生，呂姓，諱天成... 世所傳《繡榻野史》、《閒情別傳》，皆其少年游戲之筆。” Wang Jide 王驥德, *Qulü zhushi* 曲律注釋 [The Annotated Rules of Songs] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2012), 337.

⁸⁸ *Xiuta yeshi*, *Siwuxie huibao*, vol. 2, 15–21.

⁸⁹ *Xiuta yeshi*, *Siwuxie huibao*, vol. 2, 17–18.

died one by one except for Dongmensheng, who later encountered their tortured ghosts; repented, he became a monk.

Compared to the other texts, *Xiuta yeshi* is more graphic in some rather violent scenes and includes rare depictions of mother and son being involved in illicit affairs simultaneously. The circulation and influence of this text are considerable, as the story was copied extensively in a later erotic fiction *Yiqing zhen* and was noted as one of the erotic tales imported to Japan in 1754.⁹⁰ References to *Xiuta yeshi* could also be found in *Rou putuan*. The text was also repeatedly listed on the censor list in 1837, 1844, and 1868.⁹¹ It also attracted comments from critics for being “like old provincial prostitutes — [it] makes one want to vomit upon sight (如老淫土娼，見之欲嘔)” along with *Langshi*.⁹²

***Rou putuan* 肉蒲團 (*The Carnal Prayer Mat*)**

Rou putuan, also titled *Juehou chan* 覺後禪 (Zen after Enlightenment), was repeatedly proposed to be banned during Qing, which contributed to using various alternate titles such as *Zhongqing lu* 鍾情錄 (Records of Affection), *Yesou qiyu* 野叟奇語 (Strange Words of a Wild Elder), *Xunhuan bao* 循環報 (Cycle of Retribution), etc. in a bid to escape censorship. Publishing under the pseudonym Qingchi fanzheng daoren 情痴反正道人 (the accomplished of sentiment’s follies reversely righted) as the editor,⁹³ many scholars, including Sun Kaidi, Patrick Hanan, and Tatsuo Ota believed the author of *Rou putuan* to be Li Yu 李漁 (1611–1680). The most popular evidence cited includes the Qing publication *Zaiyuan zazhi* by Liu

⁹⁰ Luo Wanling 羅莞翎, “Jianghu shiqi Ming–Qing yanqing xiaoshuo zhi chuanru ji qi yuedu xingzhi — yi *Ruyijun zhuan* Heben, tongsuben, kaozhengben weili 江戶時期明清艷情小說之傳入及其閱讀性質—以《如意君傳》和本、通俗本、考證本為例 [The Introduction of Ming and Qing Erotic Novels to Edo Japan: A Case Study of Different Editions of *Ruyijun zhuan*],” *Han Xue Yan Jiu* 漢學研究 [Chinese Studies] 35, no. 4 (2017): 244.

⁹¹ *Xiuta yeshi*, *Siwuxie huibao*, vol. 2, 23.

⁹² Luo Guanzhong 羅貫中, *Sansui pinghyao zhuan* 三遂平妖傳 [The Three Sui Quash the Demons’ Revolt] (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1983), 144.

⁹³ The editor is also referred to as *Qingyin xiansheng* 情隱先生 (Teacher of Hidden Passion) in the preface and as the editor’s title in a Japanese copy (肉蒲團二十回寶永二年江戶青心閣刊本).

Tingji,⁹⁴ as well as comparisons and cross-references with Li Yu's other literary works.⁹⁵ In their study of Li, Chun-shu Chang and Shelley Hsueh-Lun Chang questioned such view and proposed that such attribution was not conclusive because the main evidence, namely *Zaiyuan zazhi*, was itself questionable. Despite a mere thirty-five-year gap between Li's death and Liu's book, there was no suggestion of Li's association with the pseudonym Qingyin xiansheng, nor was there any new evidence raised during the Qing dynasty.⁹⁶ In regard to the text's publication time, the earliest extant copy was dated *kuei-yu*, which could be converted to 1633 or 1693. Huang Qiang proposed the time frame to be between 1655 and 1660 according to evidence found in the imprint and the assumption of Li Yu being the writer.⁹⁷ The text had already been circulated to Japan in the Hōei reign (1704–1711).⁹⁸

Among late imperial Chinese erotic fiction, *Rou putuan* is, without doubt, one of the most famous texts both in its time and at present times. The text was officially banned at least four times by the Qing government and is currently one of the few erotic novels with multiple known extant editions and copies, translated and published in several languages,⁹⁹ and had been adapted in popular culture.¹⁰⁰ The story of *Rou putuan*, as observed by Patrick Hanan, featured almost all “typical qualities” of erotic fiction while often in an exaggerated form, which include relentless quantification of sex, fascination with women's sexuality, emphasis on penis size, etc.¹⁰¹ The story begins with a prelude explaining how sex should be treated, emphasizing that

⁹⁴ Liu (1653–1716) was active during Kangxi's reign (1662–1722) as a government official from the 27th year of Kangxi reign (1688).

⁹⁵ *Rou putuan*, *Siwuxie Huibao*, vol. 15, 16–17.

⁹⁶ For their view on the questionable authorship of Li, see Chu-shu Chang and Shelly Hsueh-lun Chang, *Crisis and Transformation in Seventeenth-Century China: Society, Culture, and Modernity in Li Yu's World* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1992), 234–238.

⁹⁷ Huang Qiang and Gou Di, eds., *Rou putuan jiaozheng*, 379–413.

⁹⁸ Chang and Chang, *Crisis and Transformation in Seventeenth-Century China*, 262–263.

⁹⁹ The text was translated and published as early as in 1959 to German by Franz Kuhn (*Jou Pu Tuan*), in 1962 to French by Pierre Klossowski (*Jeou p'ou t'ouan ou la chair comme tapis de prière*) and in 1990 to English by Patrick Hanan (*The Carnal Prayer Mat*).

¹⁰⁰ For example, the 3D Hong Kong movie “3D Sex and Zen: Extreme Ecstasy” (2011), whose producer had previously produced another movie loosely based on *Rou putuan* in the early 90s.

¹⁰¹ Patrick Hanan, “Introduction” in Li Yu, *The Carnal Prayer Mat* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1990), 11.

the story was meant for enlightening lustful minds; it ends with wrongdoers either dying or turning to Buddhist cultivation to remedy their faults. Aside from moralistic claims, the story has, however, brought the fetishisation of the phallus to the extreme by making the protagonist undergo extreme surgery to enlarge the size of his penis simply for the pursuit of carnal pleasure. Most characters, regardless of gender, appear to be lust-driven with little interest in romantic relationships; in turn, vengeful feelings and same-sex friendships take a higher priority. One of the plots that best illustrates female friendship would be one woman's voluntary sharing of an affair with her two close friends. Echoing the tone of the prelude, female desire is occasionally addressed with a more realistic approach. Instead of a near nymphomaniac image, female desire is actually naturalised as a product of social regulation, to be discussed as follows. Aside from portraying women as essentially lascivious, the story also features a female character who is groomed to change from frigid to lascivious. A product of her husband's doing, the development of her life is especially tragic, as she faced not only death but great humiliation, not for her own doing but as a result of her husband's fling and her father's meanness.

For this text, I referred to the latest edition published in 2019 by Huang Qiang and Guo Di, which is based on the Sōkōdō collection manuscript and *Qing keben* (Qing woodblock print). This text was previously translated and published by Patrick Hanan in 1990 based on the two manuscript versions that Huang and Guo used. As Hanan's translation was edited rather than a direct translation of one specific manuscript, translations quoted in this thesis are my own unless specified, though without doubt greatly influenced by Hanan's work.

***Taohua ying* 桃花影 (*Shadow of Peach Blossoms*)**

Taohua ying was published under the pseudonym Zuili yanshui sanren 樵李煙水散人 (The leisured man of smoke and water from Zuili) as the editor; some, such as Sun Kaidi 孫楷第, have suggested the author to be Xu Zhen 徐震, and the text is believed to be a produced

during the Kangxi reign (1661–1722). This text was also one of the erotic novels imported to Japan in 1754.¹⁰² While this text differs from other selected texts in terms of having a subplot common in *caizi jiaren* fiction in addition to the typical sexual endeavour, it is included as a representative of a specific stream of erotic fiction that falls in between standard *caizi jiaren* fiction and erotic fiction. The choice of *Taohua ying* is also based on the (supposed) writer having produced other similar fiction after *Taohua ying*'s success, which indicates both the potential popularity and subsequent influence of the novel. The edition referred to in this thesis is the Qing print version from the Sōkōdō 雙紅堂 collection from the Institute for Advanced Studies on Asia, the University of Tokyo.¹⁰³ Based on the descriptions provided, it is likely to be the same edition selected as the base version in the *Siwuxie huibao* series' critical reprint; while it is unlikely the original edition, it is considered the most complete version among extant copies.

Regarded as one of the examples of departing from the chaste romance (as categorised by Keith McMahon), in which the protagonists were not shown to have sex (hence *chaste* in the name of the genre) and only either monogamy or two-wife polygyny is practised,¹⁰⁴ *Taohua ying* was analysed by McMahon as an example demonstrating “contagious promiscuity” of the male protagonist.¹⁰⁵ Nonetheless, the text still reflects elements of chaste romances with the inclusion of the protagonists' quest to undergo examination and career advancement, jealous male peers who tried to sabotage the protagonist's pursuit while having minor conflicts of sexual interest, and a female protagonist who remained a virgin (though more by circumstances than a firm stance) before marriage.

¹⁰² Luo Wanling, “Jianghu shiqi Ming–Qing yanqing xiaoshuo zhi chuanru ji qi yuedu xingzhi,” 244.

¹⁰³ Previously named the Institute of Oriental Culture of Tokyo University, as referred to by Hanan.

¹⁰⁴ McMahon, *Misers, Shrews, and Polygamists*, 100.

¹⁰⁵ McMahon, *Misers, Shrews, and Polygamists*, 140-146.

Dengcao heshang zhuan 燈草和尚傳 (*Legend of the Candlewick Monk*)

Dengcao heshang zhuan is also titled *Denghua meng* 燈花夢 (Dream of the Candle Snuff), *Heshang yuan* 和尚緣 (Serendipity of the Monk) or *Qi seng zhuan* 奇僧傳 (Legend of the Peculiar Monk). Most scholars agree that the attribution of authorship to Gao Zecheng of Lin'an in the Yuan Dynasty 元臨安高則誠 is fabricated. There are no related sources that could allow us to pin down any biographical information about the editor Yunyou daoren 雲遊道人 and the commentator Qu Zhouqiu 趨周球, whom both were said to be from the Ming dynasty. While extant copies of the text do not provide a concrete hint to its time of composition, the novel was mentioned in *Guwangyan* 姑妄言 (Preposterous Words), which contained a preface dating back to the eighth year of Yongzheng 雍正 reign (1730).¹⁰⁶ The text was also mentioned in some versions of *Guisi cun gao* 癸巳存稿 [Manuscript Written in the Gui-si Year] as one of the texts censored in the fourteenth year of Jiaqing reign (1810), though was later removed from the list for an unknown reason.¹⁰⁷ *Dengcao heshang zhuan* is noted for its incorporation of supernatural elements and was compared to *Chipozi zhuan* by Martin W. Huang for the vindication of female desire.¹⁰⁸ The edition referred to in this thesis is the manuscript version currently collected in the British Library, known as “*su baizhi chaoben* 素白紙抄本 (plain white paper manuscript)” in *Siwuxie huibao*,¹⁰⁹ and likely the base version reprinted by Tianyi chubanshe.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ *Guwangyan* 姑妄言 [Preposterous Words], *Siwuxie huibao* 思無邪匯寶, vol. 36, eds. Chan Hing-ho Chan 陳慶浩 and Wang Ch'iu-kuei 王秋桂 et al. (Taipei: Taiwan dayingbaike gufen youxiangongsi, 1995), 15.

¹⁰⁷ Yu Zhengxie 俞正燮, *Guisi cun gao* 癸巳存稿 (Shenyang: Liaoning Education Press, 2003), 268-269; 491.

¹⁰⁸ See Huang, *Desire and Fictional Narrative in Late Imperial China*, 111-136.

¹⁰⁹ *Dengcao heshang zhuan* 燈草和尚傳 [Legend of the Candlewick Monk], *Siwuxie huibao* 思無邪匯寶, vol. 22, eds. Chan Hing-ho Chan 陳慶浩 and Wang Ch'iu-kuei 王秋桂 et al. (Taipei: Taiwan dayingbaike gufen youxiangongsi, 1995), 15.

¹¹⁰ The reprint did not cite its origin and contained one photocopying error that does not exist in the British Library copy. See *Dengcao heshang* 燈草和尚 [The Candlewick Monk], *Ming-Qing shanben xiaoshuo congkan chubian: yanqing xiaoshuo zhuanji* 明清善本小說叢刊初編: 艷情小說專輯, ed. Guoli zhengzhi daxue gudian xiaoshuo yanjiu zhongxin 國立政治大學古典小說研究中心 (Taipei: Tianyi chubanshe, 1994).

Similar to *Xiuta yeshi*, *Dengcao heshang zhuan* centred within a single household, in which a supernatural monk brought the disruption of the sexual relationship as a punishment for the household head, Magistrate Yang, for his handling of another officer's household sexual dispute that was deemed inappropriate. Instead of a tale about the male protagonist's sexual adventure, a typical formula for longer erotic fiction, this story is instead closer to a tale of an episode of the female protagonist's life, which follows her encounter with different males instead of the candlewick monk. It was one of the erotic stories featuring supernatural elements, but unique in featuring a spirit in the guise of a Buddhist monk rather than the more common Daoist characters or spirits of nature. While the male protagonist is non-human, he resembles erotic fiction protagonists by being coveted by the female because of his superior stamina and skills. Although the main protagonist in the women's affair is non-human, their tactics in negotiating space for the affair remained similar to other erotic texts set chiefly within a domestic setting.

Thesis structure

Based on the analysis of the five main texts, chapter two focuses on the image and characteristics of the group of female characters considered as mistresses, that is females who were the main target of sexual affairs and belonged to the gentry social class. To provide the relevant background necessary for understanding the logic behind the stories of adulterous females, the chapter will begin with an overview of the legal regulation imposed on females involved in illicit sexual activities at the time the core texts were composed and circulated. In the main discussion of the mistresses-type characters, they will be further categorised into wives, widows, mothers, and daughters for individual analysis, as these female familial roles were pivotal to their circumstances in life and likely affected their storylines. By comparing similar characters from different texts, this chapter also will investigate whether there exists an

archetype for each female type, hence providing more insight into the female characters in an erotic context beyond a generalised faceless and sexualised “female” image.

Chapter three will shift the focus to the other female characters, namely the female assistants and on the operation of female networks in the situation of illicit sexual affairs. This chapter begins with a review of the respective characteristics and social background of the three main types of female assistants, namely the *pozi*, the maidservants, and the group of female neighbours and kin. The chapter will then look into the exchanges between the mistresses and female assistants in the circumstances of illicit affairs: first, on the actions done by female assistants to the mistresses to forge the bonding and then on the actions done by mistresses to the female assistants to secure their relation.

After identifying the more strategic aspects of the relationship between the two groups of females, the next chapter will move on to the emotional aspect of female relationships that operates beyond the prescribed social hierarchy. While investigating the interactions between female characters, the main concern of this chapter is the nature of the female relationship on the basis as being *sisters in crimes* rather than the serviced mistress and service-providing female assistants.

With the recurring feature of female collaboration in illicit affairs, this research looks to examine the operation of such female networks: what are the roles of different female characters? What bonded them together? How does such collaboration work on facilitating successful illicit affairs and allowing them to collectively benefit from unpermitted sex, including those who stayed out of the sexual activities? This thesis argues that a regrouping of the archetypal female characters may produce a clearer picture of their collaboration and, in turn, reveal the underlying factors operating beneath the network of these sisters in crimes, who benefits from each other’s need for their desire behind the watch of the society.

Chapter 2: Mistresses in erotic fiction

In the erotic novels examined, the male protagonists often display either heterosexual or bisexual desire. The ultimate sexual fantasy they pursue was always female, but not just any female: the coveted females tend to embody specific qualities, if not also from a specific social class, and of specific status. This chapter is dedicated to female characters in erotic fiction who play the role of the mistress in their household, highlighting the personal characteristics and stereotypical plots associated with them to outline the common traits of each mistress type. Attention will be paid not to “mistresses” as a whole, but on how their various social-familial statuses were made a feature contributing to their desirability and stereotypical reaction to sexual desires. Through looking into these stories, the following sections will first outline the common traits of individual female types, followed by the analysis of the perceived circumstances that led women to risk the comfort of their current life for sexual gratifications, their different approaches towards affairs, and how these activities were conducted through the loopholes of the system of gender segregation.

Despite the idealised separation of the inner and outer spheres, there are always possibilities for cloistered women to surpass the boundaries and engage in liaisons that were not supposed to take place. These liaisons are chiefly facilitated by the help of women, usually maidservants or service-providing women (more generally referred to as *pozi* 婆子), sometimes also nuns or female neighbours, who were not as strictly bound to the inner quarters with a lesser concern for a ‘proper’ reputation. These women, especially the maidservants and *pozi*, are often portrayed as the mediator between cloistered females and the wandering males. On behalf of either side’s request, they are commonly described to be the deliverer of messages and items such as poems, letters or gifts in exchange of favours and/or material gains. The way

in which this system of interdependence worked may differ according to the social class of those involved, but it is nonetheless chiefly a women-exclusive business.

The group of female characters to be examined in this chapter are the “mistresses,” i.e., women who possess certain status and authority within a household. The majority of them are married, sexually experienced, and can be further categorised as the wife (*qi* 妻) and the concubine (*qie* 妾). Widows who have not remarried and unmarried daughters also form part of the mistress group. The mistresses belong roughly to the same social class of literati/gentry families of middle to upper class, free from the social and financial extremities of the social elite and the struggling poor.¹¹¹ The most prominent mistresses’ age ranges from fifteen to slightly older than the male protagonist, usually within three years of age difference. The wives of others are mostly in their early twenties, sometimes slightly older than their lover. Virgin daughters are normally aged around fifteen or sixteen and younger than their corresponding male protagonist. Mothers are generally at least ten years older than most other female characters engaging in sexual affairs. Although they are categorised into the same group, these mistresses are by no means equals, whether in terms of social expectation, desirability, and power over each other within and beyond the fictional world. The identity and role of the characters, instead of the characters themselves, will be highlighted in the discussion. This is intended to better address their role-based differences both in the realm of fiction as well as their corresponding real-life circumstances in their respective era.

In the novels studied, female characters are far from passive objects immune to sexual advances; not only are they described to embrace their desires, but some of them also conducted explicit and direct seductive acts to lure the male protagonists. The stories to be discussed all took place within the woman’s domain, the private “inner” area of the house. The variation in

¹¹¹ The social class background of erotic texts has a considerable impact on the stories, in which the character types and also sentiments would also be different. Some examples will be discussed in the later section.

their background, action, and role within their residence are however different. Such interrelations and differences are especially prominent in *Langshi*, in which the male protagonist encountered numerous women of different social status and class.

2.1 Regulations and fantasies of licentious women

Prior to the discussions of the stories of lustful women, the legal regulations imposed on them in the corresponding era should not be overlooked. While the legal regulations may not necessarily reflect their lived experience in real life, especially when influences of social class and bureaucratic effectiveness are considered, they could reflect the social expectation towards their conducts. By comparing the stories to the supposed proper and/or permitted conducts, the prescribed law could also act as the reference point of reasoning to some common plots, a reflection of the level of defiance of the stories, hence the understanding of the possible reception and level of titillation of the novels in the time of their circulation.

Chinese women prior to and after participating in the rituals of marriage were considered under the possession of different households: to her paternal household pre-marriage, and to her husband's paternal household post-marriage. Once married, a woman's membership of a family both before and after death is finalised with little further change, unless she became divorced or remarried. The boundary of the household, with the gate separating the inner/outer sphere, marks a clear line indicating where proper, and usually comparatively wealthy women should stay within. In *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China*, Francesca Bray has pointed out both the social and ideological function of such physical gendered segregation:

In late imperial China, all levels of society considered the seclusion of women and the segregation of the sexes inside and outside the house to be not simply a sign of respectability but an essential factor in maintaining public morality. Spatial and social segregation was an expression of a doctrine of separate spheres dating back to classical times. This doctrine was not a simple charter for female subordination; rather it

represented the sexes as fulfilling complementary roles of equal dignity (if not equal power).¹¹² Seclusion and dignity of a woman were equated in late imperial China. “Any participation in the outside community,” Vincent Goosaert wrote, “was conceived as treason against a woman’s duties towards family and home.”¹¹³ Eyebrow raising public activities participated by women such as outings during festivals, plays, or group visits to temples, or actions as minimal as staying too close to doors or windows, were considered problematic as they allowed interaction between male and female.¹¹⁴ In other words, it is already morally questionable to some people if a respectable woman is visible in the public realm; engaging in illicit sex was surely nothing but outrageous. The anxiety of females becoming “corrupted” through entering the public realm are evident in novels as well as in legal regulations. The former often tell tales of women breaking their chastity, voluntarily or not, when they left the private realm of the household; the latter contain calls for prohibition of public activities involving women.¹¹⁵ Both suggested the vulnerability of females in face of the danger and temptation once they set foot beyond the private household, with great anxiety and/or assumption for inevitable corruption.

The majority of sexual activities described in erotic fiction are conducted between people who were not in legitimate marriage with each other. Those included affairs between a male and someone else’s wife, concubine and widow, between servants and their mistresses, and between unmarried young people. All of these are in fact both illegal and amoral, as “for

¹¹² Francesca Bray, *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1997), 128.

¹¹³ Vincent Goosaert, “Irrepressible Female Piety: Late Imperial Bans on Women Visiting Temples,” in *Nan Nü*, 10 (2008): 215.

¹¹⁴ Li Guotong 李國彤, *Nüzi zhi buxiu: Ming-Qing shiqi de nüjiao guannian* 女子之不朽：明清時期的女教觀念 [Immortality of Women: The Concept of Women’s Education in the Ming and Qing Dynasties] (Gweilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2014), 119–124.

¹¹⁵ For example, women were discouraged both socially and legally from visiting temples despite their religious beliefs. See Chen Yuh-neu 陳玉女, “Mingdai funü xinfu de shehui jinzhi yu zizhu kongjian (shang) 明代婦女信佛的社會禁制與自主空間（上） [Social Restriction and Independence of Female Buddhism Believers in Ming Dynasty (I)],” in *Chengda lishi xuebao* 成大歷史學報 [Cheng Kung Journal of Historical Studies], vol. 29 (June 2005): 121–164 and “Mingdai funü xinfu de shehui jinzhi yu zizhu kongjian (xia) 明代婦女信佛的社會禁制與自主空間（下） [Social Restriction and Independence of Female Buddhism Believers in Ming Dynasty (II)],” in *Chengda lishi xuebao*, 成大歷史學報 [Cheng Kung Journal of Historical Studies], vol. 30 (June 2006): 43–90.

heterosexual intercourse to conform to morality, it had to take place within legitimate marriage, sanctioned by the appropriate rites”; anything not covered shall be considered a crime.¹¹⁶ In the Ming and Qing Codes, though punishments towards such activities were modified after time, the basic illicit sex statutes were similar:

Whoever commits consensual illicit sex (*he jian*) shall receive 80 blows of the heavy bamboo; if the woman has a husband, then the offenders shall receive 90 blows of the heavy bamboo; if a man lures a woman to another place in order to have illicit sex (*diao jian*), they shall receive 100 blows regardless of whether the woman has a husband... In cases of consensual illicit sex (*he jian*) or illicit sex in which a man lures a woman to another place for that purpose (*diao jian*), the male and female shall receive the same punishment.¹¹⁷

Regardless of marriage status, sex is illicit and considered a breach of chastity if not conducted within marriage, and shall be punished more harshly if the woman concerned is married.¹¹⁸ If a wife was found guilty of adultery, unless the affair caused relevant casualties, her fate was to be determined by her husband, and she can be sold in marriage or kept by her husband depending on his will.¹¹⁹ However, the husband would be punished along with the adulterer if he sold his wife to the latter. In such cases, the adulteress would be returned to her natal family, and the bride-price would be confiscated.¹²⁰ Further to the husband’s legal ‘ownership’ of his wife, impunity could be granted to the husband for homicide of both his adulterous wife and the adulterer following his discovery of the affair.¹²¹ For concubines, when compared to the wives, they receive harsher punishment for offending her household master or mistress, while her household master receives less punishment for harming her than in harming his wife. One example is that the punishment for men for killing their main wife as opposed to their concubine

¹¹⁶ Sommer, *Sex, Law and Society in Late Imperial China*, 34.

¹¹⁷ Sommer, *Sex, Law and Society in Late Imperial China*, 325.

¹¹⁸ Gomi Tomoko 五味知子, “Kon'in to `teisetsu' no kōzō to hen'yō 婚姻與「貞節」的結構和變化 [The Structure and Transformation of Marriage and “Chastity”],” trans., Liang Wen 梁雯, in Masako Kohama, Wataru Shimokura, Megumi Sasaki, Kō Takashima and Sachiko Egami eds., *Bei maimo de zuji: Zhongguo xingbieshi yanjiu rumen* 被埋沒的足跡：中國性別史研究入門 [Buried Footprints: Introduction to Gender History in China], (Taipei: Guoli Taiwan daxue chuban zhongxin, 2020), 203.

¹¹⁹ Sommer, *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China*, 325–326.

¹²⁰ Sommer, *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China*, 325–326.

¹²¹ M. J. Meijer, *Murder and Adultery in Late Imperial China: A Study of Law and Morality* (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 41.

was death by strangulation for the former, and three years' banishment and 100 strokes for the latter.¹²² In short, the value of a wife's life and a concubine's life greatly differs, with the latter having little rights. As Qu Tongzu suggested, the concubines were not exactly a family member, and their positions in the household was actually rather similar to house servants.¹²³

Termed in general as crimes of *jian 姦*, sex crimes may be handled publicly by the *yamen* 衙門 (local administrative office) if reported. The basis of judging sex crimes was more about maintaining the practice of proper rites than on whether the people involved were voluntary or coerced. In the Ming dynasty, cuckolded husbands could be pardoned from executing their wives and her adulterer under specific circumstances.¹²⁴ During the reign of Yongzheng 雍正 (1723-1735), basic penalties for consensual illicit sexual intercourse were increased, while punishments for husbands killing adulterous wives were relaxed; wife-selling became defined as a form of adultery, and the revised imperial criteria of chaste women “involved a further reduction of different female roles into ‘wife’.”¹²⁵

In other words, adulterous acts were regarded as a crime worse than the common crime of killing, as immediate family member were legally permitted to kill of adulterous household member(s) under certain circumstances. It should however be noted that the regulation and expectation of female chastity was not uniform across social class, nor did the common marriage practice. From the wealthiest to the struggling household, marriage style could range from polygyny with one wife and numbers of concubines, to monogamous household, up to economic-driven polyandry, which may result in different attitudes in opposition to the universal legal rules. In the various examples examined by Lai Hui-min, it is also shown that consequences of female adultery are sometimes connected to involvement of the family, with

¹²² Meijer, *Murder and Adultery in Late Imperial China*, 53–54.

¹²³ Qu Tongzu 瞿同祖, *Zhongguo falü yu zhongguo shehui* 中國法律與中國社會 [Chinese Law and Chinese Society] (Hong Kong: Longmen shudian, 1967), 103.

¹²⁴ Meijer, *Murder and Adultery in Late Imperial China*, 40.

¹²⁵ Sommer, *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China*, 9–10.

examples of the dispute being settled within the family by the clan leader, or that the parents decided to kill their daughter to protect the family's name.¹²⁶

In short, females are subject to a different level of expectation on sexual conduct. Committing sex crimes normally could lead to severe punishment, to the extent that specific people can kill them without being punished by law under specific circumstances. They may however avoid such a fate even after being found guilty of a sex crime if the incidents were mediated within the family or clan. This background of legal regulation over female sexual misconduct is highly important to the reading of erotic fiction, or any fiction that contained plots where females breached the expected sexual conduct. As will be revealed later, many plots and descriptions of female fictional characters' thoughts and behaviour are in fact highly relevant to the concern of consequences in 'reality.'

Literary works expressing topics of sexual desire in connection to females (or the manifestation of the female form) prior to the popularisation of plays and fiction existed in various forms, but more likely to be alluding to female immortals, supernatural spirits, and female ghosts. In cases of mortal females, those being written about for their sensuality were most likely famous royal consorts or de-facto rulers. "Women rulers around the world," as suggested by Keith McMahon, "were commonly rumored to have illicit secret lovers."¹²⁷ When it comes to the fictional adaption of such stories, McMahon commented that "in contrast to polyandry in historical reality the form it takes in fictional texts, especially in Ming and Qing pornography, yields sexually voracious women."¹²⁸ A combination of historical figure, mystified femme-fatale, and inevitably a product of a political agenda, these royal women were both closer to ordinary women by being mortals and "real," but also more distant with mystery

¹²⁶ Lai Hui-min 賴惠敏, "Qingchao fuquan dui funü de yingxiang" 清朝父權對婦女婚姻的影響 [The Influence of Paternal Power on Married Women in the Ch'ing Dynasty], in *Zhongguo jiating ji qi lunli yantaohui lunwenji* 中國家庭及其倫理研討會論文集 [Summary of Papers Delivered at the Conference on the Chinese Family and its Ethics] (Taipei: Hanxue yanjiu zhongxin, 1998), 177–201.

¹²⁷ McMahon, "The Polyandrous Empress," 31.

¹²⁸ McMahon, "The Polyandrous Empress," 45.

due to their high social status and disengagement with ordinary life. Two of the most notable examples of such a type of erotic fiction include the tales of Zhao Feiyan, the consort-turned-Empress of Emperor Cheng of Han, in *Zhao Feiyan waizhuan* 趙飛燕外傳 (The Scandalous Tale of Zhao Feiyan), and Wu Zetian, the only Empress regnant throughout imperial China, in *Ruyijun zhuan*. For the former, Olivia Milburn suggested the text to be one of the earliest surviving erotic works that established a new type of prose literature, for which she named “silk pillow literature,” which she defines as a genre that “covers a variety of... invented histories, including texts with a significant erotic or pornographic component,” with narratives centred on the female characters, most notably using the names of emperor’s consorts.¹²⁹ While the text is a far cry from later erotic fiction in terms of explicitness, it indeed contains certain features that are commonly found in later erotic fiction. Those include detailed descriptions of the desired female character, voyeurism, aphrodisiacs use, and death from excessive pursuit of pleasure.

Published latest by the Jiajing reign period (1522-1567), *Ruyijun zhuan* was often referred to as the first erotic fiction that Charles R. Stone described as such: “the descriptions of sex in the [fiction] are explicit and unprecedented in Chinese fiction... [which] invented a new vocabulary of obscenity that would set that standard for a new genre of erotic fiction that proliferated during the remainder of the sixteenth century.”¹³⁰ Later erotic novels such as *Sengni niehai* 僧尼孽海 (Monks and Nuns in a Sea of Sins), *Xiuta yeshi* and *Nongqing kuaishi* 濃情快史 (Heart-throbbing History of Powerful Passions) are all suggested by Stone to have used vocabulary as well as copied from *Ruyijun zhuan*. Focused on the Empress’s romance with Xue Aocao, the image of Empress Wu does not greatly differ from female characters in

¹²⁹ Olivia Milburn, *The Empress in the Pepper Chamber: Zhao Feiyan in History and Fiction* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2021), 5–7.

¹³⁰ Charles R. Stone, *The Fountainhead of Chinese Erotica: The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction (Ruyijun zhuan), with a translation and critical edition* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2003), 3.

later erotic fiction despite her extremely different circumstance as an empress, which easily placed her socially above anyone else, including the male she is having sex with. The story begins in Empress Wu's seventies, and by the end of the story, there is mentioning of her declining health, which is another rare feature that is rarely seen in later erotic fiction. However, aside from these two aspects, the image of Empress Wu remains deliberately visually appealing and feminine. Appearance-wise, the writer emphasised on her appearance to be like the youths despite her age:

At this time the empress was already seventy years old. But although she was of advanced age, her teeth and hair were not in decline and her ample flesh and attractive demeanour were just like those of a young woman.

時后已七十。春秋雖高，齒髮不衰，豐肌艷態，宛若少年。¹³¹

The historical Empress Wu's infamous purge of rear palace and political opponents is also mentioned in the story, but the Empress Wu in the novel is also depicted as a woman who dotes on her boy lover, and treated her previous toyboys nicely despite their disingenuous feelings towards her. In short, against the background of her controversial political tactics, she was chiefly portrayed to be affectionate and feminine in the story, to the point where she took the advice from her love interest and made critical political decisions regarding her successor. Despite her superior status and exaggerated sexual elements, this fiction emphasised the tenderness and loyalty of Wu Zetian, a trait that is usually seen on female characters, despite her exceptionally superior status as the empress. Most importantly, while *Ruyijun zhuan* may have contributed to shaping later erotic fiction, it was certainly not the only main inspiration of the many erotic fiction to follow. However, once the sensual females in erotic stories gradually became more ordinary and seeming attainable, the common characteristics of them also changed accordingly.

¹³¹ Stone, *The Fountainhead of Chinese Erotica*, 164. Translation cited from Stone, *The Fountainhead of Chinese Erotica*, 139.

For popular romances out of the fiction genre, *Xixiang ji* 西廂記 (The Story of the Western Wing) and *Mudan ting* are two classics that have placed a high focus on the female protagonist's emotion and desire. For *Mudan ting*, it was significant in being “no longer centred on the scholar's choice between passion and career, as in the earliest versions of the *Xixiangji*, but on the heroine's choice between passion and life.”¹³² Such focus of the woman's choices can also be seen in erotic fiction. Same applies to elements crucial to the romance in *Xixiang ji*, serving almost as the prototype for secret affairs with elements of desire. Those includes secret meetings, the competent handmaid-confidant, and uncontained female passion, especially when the female character concerned is an unmarried girl. Challenges of family pressure is however rarely featured in erotic fiction, except for those leaning towards to the *caizi jiaren* genre. Female protagonists in erotic fiction often embody the ghost of their predecessors like Cui Yingying, Du Linjiang and Wang Jiaoniang. Embodying “the aesthetics of *qing*” by being “young, delicately beautiful, passionate, and sensitively intelligent,”¹³³ they may differ in personality, but also possess highly similar traits and background, such as determination to remain loyal to their chosen lover in face of parental pressure, shaping a basis for later *caizi jiaren* stories as well as their eroticised counterparts.

However, the writers of erotic fiction did not fixate on such passionate-beauty type. Among the pool of extant erotic fiction, there is a range of other types of sexually desired women which corresponds to the background and occupation of respective male protagonist. Earlier erotic fiction, when strictly defined by the inclusion of explicit sensuality, that featured ordinary women in oppose to royals, immortals or supernaturals could be traced to *Chipozi zhuan*. This text itself is unique in style as a story narrated by the female protagonist, which is not adapted by later erotic fiction. On the other hand, reflections of the female characters' inner

¹³² Maram Epstein, *Competing Discourses: Orthodoxy, Authenticity, and Engendered Meanings in Late Imperial Chinese Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), 93.

¹³³ Epstein, *Competing Discourses*, 93

thoughts expressed through words and inner monologues became more common. The general image of the female protagonists remains unsurprisingly always pleasing to the eyes, such as the following excerpt from *Langshi*:

Amongst them is a woman in white around her twenties. [Her] eyes contained the Autumn streams and [her] brows stood the Spring hills, with hundreds of thousands styles of unexplainable charm, and thousand kinds of undepictable slenderness. [She is] like the female immortal at the *yaotai* in heaven, [and] like the *chang'e* in the moon.

內中一個穿白的婦人，近二十多年紀，眼橫秋水，眉插春山，說不盡萬種風流，描不出千般窈窕，正如瑤臺仙女，便似月裡嫦娥。¹³⁴

Since many stories has multiple female interest for the male protagonists, their visual images also varied, usually depending on their social status. In oppose to the expectation of women's avoidance to interaction with the outside world, the bulk of erotic fiction collectively featured transgression of the gendered space of 'inner versus outer' as the essential prelude to female sexual misconduct. Description of ordinary real-life occasions, such as chatting with neighbours, visiting temples or passing by the window or door of one's own house are often used in fiction as the loopholes between the inner and outer world that led women to adulterous affairs. Such loopholes are at times created or embodied by working class female such as the maidservants, *pozi* and sometimes female peers. These loopholes often functioned as the crucial turning point of life for the women directly involved. For example, a widely adapted plot from *Huanxi yuanjia* is about the abduction of females into maonasteries, in which the female protagonist was only misfortunate enough to be trapped by the rain and had to seek shelter. Another much copied plot is about a woman accepting a female guest to her bedchamber to show her a "secret tools of desire", yet ended up breaking her chastity as the "tool" was a genuine phallus because the female guest was a male in disguise.

¹³⁴ *Langshi sishi hui* hand-copied manuscript edition 浪史四十回抄本 [Manuscript of *Chronicles of the Libertine* in forty chapters], Sōkōdō Bunko zenbun eizō shiryōko 東京大學東洋文化研究所所藏雙紅堂文庫全文影像資料庫 [Sokodo Bunko Full-text Facsimile Database, Tokyo University Institute of Oriental Culture Collection], vol. 1, ch. 8.

As such, women, well behaved or not, were commonly depicted as being drawn into affairs from such breach of the supposedly “safe” boundary. Rather than challenging these social norms, they were described to participate in affairs in secret, some of which without leaving their prescribed domain of the inner household at all. In real-life cases, they are usually exposed by none other than their own family members, and at times the affairs were also committed between family members. Nevertheless, there were opportunities to surpass the idealised boundary of inner and outer sphere in ordinary settings, and women other than the main beauties are heavily involved as the loopholes, in turn bringing them into the group of erotic females as they not only participated in the stories, but usually were given a voice in fiction to express insights of female desire.¹³⁵

Through looking into these stories, the following sections will display the perceived circumstances that led women into risking their comfort of proper life for sexual liaisons, their different approaches towards affairs, and how these activities were conducted through the loopholes of the system of gender segregation. Regarding the differences of women’s social status, I have opted to categorise female characters according to their marital status, namely the unmarried, women in marriage, and the widows. The category of female character to be looked into in this chapter specifies on women in marriage, i.e. women who were officially acknowledged as a spouse, and in a theoretically functional marriage with a husband who is alive. This group of married female characters will be further categorised by their household status as the wife (*qi* 妻) or the concubines (*qie* 妾). Only women married to the household head would be categorised by their marital status, therefore servant women sexually engaged with their masters are excluded regardless of marriage status. Among relevant novels, a few examples featured plots of women’s extramarital affairs with the explicit acknowledgement, if not encouragement, of her husband. Since the circumstances of such liaisons were different

¹³⁵ Huang Ko-wu, *Yan buxie buxiao*, 270.

from conventional secretive affairs, these examples will be discussed separately. While widows were in practice also married women, who normally lived apart from their maternal family and some burdened with their own children, they tended to have different living circumstances as well as forms of social regulation, thus they shall also be discussed separately.

2.2 Married mistresses: most coveted female for illicit affairs

The category investigated in this section is married women, specifically, those in a theoretically functional marriage with a husband who is alive. This group of married female characters are further categorised by their household status as the wife (*qi* 妻) and the concubine(s) (*qie* 妾). Servant women are all considered female assistants regardless of marriage status due to their subordinate status. Unlike their male counterparts, women in marriage were prohibited from having lovers or sexual partners other than their spouse.¹³⁶ The wealthier the household, the less opportunity these women may have to encounter men outside of her husband's immediate circle. In the world of erotic fiction, however, such a limitation always fails to keep married women from having sexual affairs with other men. While widows are technically also married and normally live apart from their maternal family, and some are burdened with their own children, they tend to have different living circumstances as well as forms of social regulation, thus they will be discussed separately in the second section of this chapter.

It is in the nature of erotic fiction to seek out forbidden territory to explore. In China that was likely to mean adultery, not defloration as in the corresponding European genre. (In Europe adultery was left to the bourgeois novel.) The reason is clear enough: adultery violated the husband-wife ethic, one of the key Confucian social obligations. In a family-centered morality, it was a natural choice as the crucial sin...¹³⁷

¹³⁶ Among relevant texts of the era, there are a few examples featuring plots of women's extramarital affairs having explicit encouragement from her husband, including *Langshi*, *Taohua ying*, and *Xiuta yeshi*. In these cases, the other male is always the husband's male lover, essentially his subordinate. As such, these extramarital affairs are arguably not exactly "forbidden," nor were they a threat to the husband's authority over the household and his wife.

¹³⁷ Hanan, "Introduction to Li Yu," *The Carnal Prayer Mat*, 8–9.

This remark by Patrick Hanan on Chinese erotic fiction is apt in more ways than one. First, it addresses the fact that erotic fiction, despite their universal similarities in theme and social taboo, have concerns unique to their origin. Second, the violation of familial order is the worst lust-related crime for Chinese. It is not uncommon to see adulterous wives in erotic novels, some condemned as femme fatales with no regard towards morality, but that does not apply to all erotic novels. The condemnation of men/husbands who break their own or others' familial order to slake their lust is unsurprisingly mild, if ever present, in most texts, especially since the husband-wife ethics in Confucian teaching require wives to obey their husband but not vice versa. As the majority of the stories tend to be a sexual adventure from the viewpoint of a lustful male protagonist, the storytellers often put more focus on the thoughts and activities of the female characters, showcasing their different characteristics and individual attractiveness, while descriptions of the male protagonist appear shallow in comparison. Women depicted in such stories are not mere fantasies of male desire: the texts suggest possibilities of a women's world beyond the prescribed ideal, on various aspects such as physical boundaries, relationships between females in the realm of desire, their attitudes towards sexual liaisons and responses to different practices and circumstances.

Though its status as an "erotic novel" remains largely dependent on individual stance and viewpoint,¹³⁸ *Jin Ping Mei* is no doubt one of the most famous and most studied texts that focuses on human desire, with its protagonist Pan Jinlian 潘金蓮's name "almost synonymous with *yinfu* 淫婦 (lascivious woman)"¹³⁹. First appearing in *Shuihu zhuan*, Pan Jinlian earned her notoriety as a lustful woman who first tried to seduce her brother-in-law, and later took part

¹³⁸ For example, Robert H. van Gulik has specifically distinguished "erotic novels" from "pornographic novels" in his work *Sexual Life in Ancient China*, with *Jin Ping Mei* as the representative of "erotic novels" and *Rou putuan* as an example of the "pornographic novels." Aside from the issue of defining what is "erotic" and not, the idea of "erotic fiction" is arguably a modern definition of the literary category, *Jin Ping Mei* has often been given more credit in terms of literary and moral values than other "erotic" fiction, which could be traced as early back as in 1715. See Liu Tingji, *Zaiyuan zazhi*, 82–85.

¹³⁹ Huang, *Desire and Fictional Narrative in Late Imperial China*, 111.

in murdering her first husband only to have sexual affair with her lover without hindrance. Derived from the plot in *Shuihu zhuan*, Pan Jinlian was introduced to readers in *Jin Ping Mei* as a clever, beautiful woman forced into unsatisfactory marriage with a grotesque husband of a social status she considered unworthy of her. The first detailed account of her seduction of another man remained the same plotted private moment with Wu Song, her brother-in-law, a character symbolizing righteousness and masculinity—the opposite of Pan Jinlian. Her later remarriage to Ximen Qing and later sexually exploited him to death, as well as a sexual affair with her son-in-law all contributed to positioning Pan as the licentious and feminine. Her character has also since become a symbol of *yinfu* that lasts until present days.¹⁴⁰

Pan, of course, is far from the only wanton female character in late Ming to early Qing texts, especially among the group of works that is usually considered to be erotic novels, and she was not even a main wife, but a concubine, of Ximen Qing's. The distinction between wives and concubines in traditional China was immense. Men typically looked for different qualities in wives and in concubines; these women and their offspring would enjoy different social reception as well as legal protection depending on their household status. In short, the value of their lives greatly differed, as evidenced by the fact that the punishment for men for killing their main wife was death by hanging, compared to three years' banishment and 100 strokes if they had killed their concubine.¹⁴¹ Nevertheless, main wives having affairs is not rare in erotic fiction. Erotic fiction generally portrays most people to be greatly motivated by the quest for sexual pleasures and the indulgence in them, as if sexual satisfaction is their only concern in life. Often portrayed to be sexually insatiable, female protagonists in these texts are shown to desire, enjoy and often also actively seek sexual pleasure regardless of their marital status, to the extent that their desire would surpass their concern for consequences in breaking

¹⁴⁰ Mark Stevenson has made an overview of Pan Jinlian's image in contemporary culture and its relationship to related recent studies in his article "Wanton Women in Late-Imperial Chinese Literature: Models, Genres, Subversions and Traditions." See *Wanton Women in Late-Imperial Chinese Literature*, 18–22.

¹⁴¹ Meijer, *Murder and Adultery in Late Imperial China*, 53–54.

both social taboo and the law. For example, in *Rou putuan*, nearly all women who had affairs with Weiyangsheng 未央生 were already in a functional marriage, where their husbands were neither dead nor sexually dysfunctional, nor painted in an unappetising light as was Wu Da in *Jin Ping Mei*, Pan's first husband. Theoretically, these main wives' adulterous activities appear less justified when compared to widows; they also face greater difficulties. This also leads to different circumstances for them to be convinced to partake in adulterous affairs. Yet, the fascination with the adulterous wife remains a common feature in erotic tales, who perform as the most sought-after type of woman. It is also common in these stories that the writers would rationalise these lustful wives' desire and actions by emphasising the shortcomings of their husbands. While the setting may be a reflection of the writer's taste for women, the choice of having only main wives as the target also shows the desirability of women with such social status as the wife in a proper family.

Supposedly the sole chief mistress of the household, wives are theoretically in charge of the private matters of the household and have authority over other female family members and servants, unless there are superior co-habiting females such as the mother-in-law. Wives likely lived in and maintained the household in their husband's family residential setting; they were also subject to higher social expectations for their propriety of background and conduct, especially when compared to concubines. As the mistress of the inner chamber, they possess the power to create their own space for affairs within their controlled domain. However, they were also more cautious about preserving their reputation, likely wanting to avoid gossips and thus retaliation from their husband, so as to maintain their social status and livelihood as the wife. This is especially true of those married into comparatively comfortable and respected families. It should be noted that women in marriage portrayed in the core texts, if not also in most erotic novels, usually either had not given birth, or resided with a single young daughter of sexually available age; this applies to most widow characters as well.

Considering that adulterous wives of comfortable families live not just with their husband but also servants and, most probably, the extended family, how did erotic fiction create a space where married women could arrange and conduct sexual liaisons under the eyelid of their husbands? Their tactics to ensure both desire and reputation are safeguarded will be discussed here. In order to better reflect the adulterous women’s journey through the illicit affairs, the examples will be discussed in accordance to the flow of how such liaison are normally laid out in fiction: firstly, the women’s thoughts upon the possibility of having an affair; secondly, the overview of how affairs are orchestrated in accordance with their living circumstances; and thirdly, how these wives continue their life as their husband has become less, if ever, attractive.

First of all, who are the “wives” in erotic fiction? The following table lists some details of the female characters whose main identity in the selected texts falls into the “wife” category:

Table 2: “Wife” characters in selected erotic novels

Text title (abbr.)	Character name ¹⁴²	<i>Sui</i> ¹⁴³	Medium(s)	First point of encounter with male lover
LS	Li Wenfei 李文妃	19	<i>Pozi</i> , maid	Family tomb-sweeping
LS	An’ge 安哥	22	Husband, maid	Home
RT	Yanfang 艷芳	N/A	Neighbour	Husband-owned shop
RT	Xiangyun 香雲	20+	None	Family temple visit
RT	Ruizhu 瑞珠	20+	Cousin	Family temple visit
RT	Ruiyu 瑞玉	17-18	Cousin	Family temple visit
TY	Hua <i>shi</i> 花氏	18	Husband	Home
XY	Jin <i>shi</i> 金氏	21	Husband	Home

The age range of these coveted wives falls closely around eighteen to twenty. As the main sexual interest of the male protagonist, none of these wives had given birth, which indicates the praised physical quality of a tight vagina.¹⁴⁴ While also a wife, *Dengcao heshang zhuan*’s

¹⁴² For character names like Hua *shi* (meaning “of the Hua family”) and Jin *shi* (meaning “of the Jin family”), their name stylised as “surname+*shi*” will be retained to reflect the writers’ choice in character naming.

¹⁴³ The age in this paper is expressed in *sui* 歲 as indicated in the texts, which is one year older than the “-years old” expression.

¹⁴⁴ In erotic fiction, the tightness of the vagina is emphasised with praise. Childbirth and experiences with bigger phalluses are attributed as the main causes of looseness.

Wang *shi* is more a mother (a rare example of a non-widowed mother in erotic fiction), and her daughter was initially introduced as a maiden; both are thus excluded from this section. All females on the list are unsurprisingly depicted as beautiful and somewhat bashful, or at least briefly feigned to be. They are all innocent in their initial encounter with the male in the sense that they were only seen while roaming within the legitimate private sphere of their household or during family activities.

Although female characters in erotic fiction are generally and typically portrayed as nymphomaniacs in fulfilment of the male fantasy,¹⁴⁵ lead female characters, in particular the wives, were often depicted in ways to emphasis not only their physical appeal, but also their artistic talents (e.g., poetry) as well as good family background. The wives in *Langshi*, *Rou putuan* and *Dengcao heshang zhuan* are all lawful wives of men of letters, mostly literati without major official roles; all the wives are also literate. Personality-wise, these wives were not portrayed as lustful women craving for extramarital sexual gratification at the beginning of the story. Rather, they were passively presented with the physical appeal of the male protagonist and suggestion of potential liaison, and their piqued interest gradually escalated from casual curiosity to genuine desire.

Additionally, the wives are often presented as having extra motivation due to dissatisfaction with their husband. For example, Xiangyun, Ruizhu and Ruiyu's husbands are all away from home for extended periods of time, and known to be indulging sexual pleasures with other women. The husband of An'ge is of older age and not very interested in sex, and the husband of Hua *shi* is sexually interested chiefly in males. Li Wenfei's husband is young and functional but was too drunk on the day when she was under influence of a wandering mind; he has also soon died due to poor health. Combined with the male protagonist's appeal, the

¹⁴⁵ Huang Ko-wu, "Antong kuanqu," 257.

husbands' absence and the women's sexual dissatisfaction constitute the common reason/cause of these women's eventual decision to pursue their desire.

As a result, despite their subsequent breach of proper conduct, their image was nonetheless shaped to fit the feminine ideal—beautiful, talented, proper, somewhat pure, with sexual frustration awaiting fulfilment by the male protagonist.

Before affairs: Hesitation and disappointment

While older stories of adulterous women like *Hejian zhuan* 河間傳 (The Story of the Woman from Hejian) and *Jiangxingge chonghui zhenzhushan* 蔣興哥重會珍珠衫 (Jiang Xingge Reencounters His Pearl Shirt) show stories of wives being forced or fooled into adultery, the wives in erotic fiction instead show interest in having adulterous affairs and actively considered, consented to and even planned for the affairs. Before participating in extramarital affairs, the married women reasonably did not immediately act upon the feelings of arousal, but instead went through the process of self-convincing, making safety planning and securing help from others before approaching or agreeing to meet the male. In *Langshi*, the two main wives did not leap immediately into the affair despite being attracted by the male protagonist. As the story develops, they gradually changed their mind. First curious after being attracted by the face of the male protagonist, they were moved by others' words encouraging them to consider having an extramarital affair; and after satisfactory sexual intercourse, both proclaimed their love for Langzi and expressed their intention to become his wife. Such a change of mind was not unique to this text; however, the length of this novel allows for greater detail in showing such development.

Upon seeing the beautiful Langzi the first time, Wenfei's interest was first stimulated by his visual appeal, likely enhanced by the suggestive remarks of her trusted female hairdresser, and mixed with her grudges against her own husband:

Her mouth questioning her heart, her heart questioning her mouth, thinking, “Such adorable little gentleman, so delicately pretty, [if I can] just be with him in bed and hug for a while, cuddle for a while, frolic for a while, then [I] will be ecstatic; what is the point of keeping this husband of mine?”

口問心，心問口，想到：「有這樣可愛的小官家，嬌滴滴的，與他被窩裡，摟一會、抱一會、弄一會，便愛殺了；我這丈夫要他甚的？」¹⁴⁶

At this point of the story, Wenfei’s desire for the young man appeared solely physical and for mere momentary pleasure. Her sentiments were shown to progress along with the story. Hearing from the elder lady about Langzi’s admiration for her, Wenfei’s desire continued to grow as she began considering ways of seducing Langzi, as well as continuously sitting by the window for the spectacle:

Retrieving the curtain and returning [to the bedchamber] that night, [Wenfei] failed to sleep, thinking, “How to hook him? Putting this thing here for a pump would be good.” The next day after breakfast, the elder woman also arrived, [and] the red curtain is hung up again... [Wenfei] thought to herself, “Even though I am fond of him, [I] wonder if he knows about me or not?” Because of this Langzi, the woman no longer retrieves the curtain, and saw him for five consecutive days.

當晚收簾進去，一夜睡臥不着。想道：「怎能勾得他？這話兒放在這個裡抽一抽也好。」次蚤飯畢，婆子也到，又掛起朱簾... 自想道：「我便愛他，知他知我也不知呢？」那婦人因為這浪子，卻再不把簾子來收，從此連見了五日。¹⁴⁷

This episode of secret observation ended with Wenfei watching Langzi urinate, in which the sight of Langzi’s “asset” (i.e., his penis) alone made Wenfei feel orgasmic. Such description was commented by Huang Ko-wu as a sign of male-imagined nymphomaniac female image, where women’s desire was easily triggered at once.¹⁴⁸ While his comment on the transplant of male experience onto female characters is quite true, the subtle changes of Wenfei’s feelings about Langzi should not be overlooked. As the reader follows closely Wenfei’s mind and viewpoint, the changes in her feelings, from mere fantasy to real interest and thorough arousal, were unfolded one after another as the story progressed. While Langzi was also following the elder woman’s instructions in displaying his beauty and talent, it was Wenfei’s change of heart that made the affair plausible. The author even injected a brief scene between the affair

¹⁴⁶ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 3.

¹⁴⁷ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 3.

¹⁴⁸ Huang Ko-wu, “Antong kuanqu,” 15.

invitation and the night of the affair, in which Wenfei was disappointed by her husband and left in sorrow:

That night scholar Wang was not at home [and was] drinking at a friend's house, and did not return until the time of *er geng*. That woman endured for half a day waiting for the husband's return to sweep her desire. Unexpectedly, the husband was drunk and could not do it... Langzi walked out in anger. Feeling anxious, the woman hurriedly embraced [him] with both arms. Upon opening the eyes to see, it was just a dream. [She was] embracing the husband who was in a drunken stupor. Wenfei shook her husband twice, [but he] just would not wake. Wenfei sighed, besotted, and passed the night half asleep and not sober.

那日王監生不在家裡，在朋友家飲酒，直至二更方回。那婦人熬了半日，正待丈夫歸來，掃一個興。不意丈夫吃醉，行不得了...浪子發怒望外便走，婦人急了，雙手連忙擁住。睜開眼看時，卻原來一夢也。擁的便是痴醉不醒的丈夫。文妃把丈夫搖了兩搖，只是不醒。文妃嘆了一口氣，痴痴迷迷，半睡不醒的過了一夜。

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This scene both explains Wenfei's lust despite being in a proper marriage—her husband was not of considerably older age—and makes a point in showing Langzi as a better match for Wenfei. The fateful timing of this scene also appears to suggest the husband's role in affecting the wife's determination in maintaining her chastity. Wenfei's counterpart An'ge went through a similar process of attraction–hesitation–determination. After discovering Langzi having sex with other concubines, An'ge was aroused and, similarly, first turned to her husband to satisfy her physical need. After her husband's playful tease of her sudden desire and later suggestion of gifting her to Langzi, An'ge replied:

The lady [An'ge] said, "What are these words? I only love you. Even if you give me to him, I will not go." Sinong [the husband] said, "You don't love him?" The lady said, "Even if I loved him, it would only be about the talent and the face, not that I have any private feelings of loving him."

夫人道：「說那裡話來？吾只愛你，你便將吾與他，吾只是不去。」司農道：「你不愛他？」夫人道：「吾便愛他，不過才貞耳，不是有甚私心私意愛他。」

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Even though An'ge did not deny the attraction, she gave a proper reply that would be expected from someone like her; her loyalty to her husband is reiterated. The words are however more of a performance, as An'ge proceeded to initiate sex with Langzi the day after. Similarly, in

¹⁴⁹ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 4.

¹⁵⁰ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 34.

Taohua ying, upon her husband's request in using her body to pacify the drunk-raped male protagonist, Hua *shi* also feigned refusal before gleefully obliged:

Hua *shi* refused and said, "You are only drunk-joking. Who would use his wife as an exchange?" [The husband] could only request again four times... [she] laughed and walked out.

花氏推卻道：「君乃醉后戲言，豈有將妻與人相換？」只得再四懇求... 一頭笑，一頭走出去了。¹⁵¹

While both Wenfei and An'ge began considering an affair after having their interest piqued by a desirable man, Yuxiang in *Rou putuan* began to consider having affair out of sexual frustration. Groomed to be lustful and soon abandoned by her newly-wed husband, Yuxiang was left alone longing for physical satisfaction. Her frustration was only enhanced by the erotic novels her husband bought her, which later made her secretly wish for the death of her strict father to enable chances for sexual affairs. Instead of being persuaded by a female companion, Yuxiang's mind was persuaded by none other than the erotic novels her husband bought to groom her lust:

[Yuxiang] deliberated (to herself), "I've seen from these books that not a single person does not mingle with a few men. Evidently it is nothing for a woman to take a man in secret. I have misbehaved in my last life to become married to such a cold-hearted man... Assumedly for someone lustful like him, there is no reason he would not have strayed to the evil path. If he has strayed to the evil path, I can also open the back door. Even if (I) mingle with another man, it wouldn't be a fault."

[玉香] 心上思量道：「我看見這些書上，再沒有人不相處幾個男子的，可見婦人偷漢不是事。我前世不修，嫁著這樣狠心男子...料他那樣好色的人，再沒有熬到如今不走邪路之理。他既走得邪路，我也開得後門。就與別個男子相處，也不為過。」¹⁵²

Her frustration was further emphasized by the following remark showing the desperation of this once frigid woman:

Thus, when she set eyes on Honest Quan, (Yuxiang) was like a ravenous eagle spotting a chicken or a gluttonous cat coming upon a mouse—rough or smooth, good-looking or ugly, anything that can be gobbled will be eaten.

¹⁵¹ *Xinjuan piping xiuxiang Taohua ying kuaishi shier hui qing kanben* 新鑄批評繡像桃花影快史十二回清刊本 (Newly Engraved, Commented and Illustrated Qing Print Edition of *Taohua Ying Kuaishi* in Twelve Chapters), Sōkōdō Bunko zenbun eizō shiryōko 東京大學東洋文化研究所所藏雙紅堂文庫全文影像資料庫 [Sokodo Bunko Full-text Facsimile Database, Tokyo University Institute of Oriental Culture Collection], ch. 6, 6a–6b.

¹⁵² Huang Qiang and Guo Di, eds., *Rou Putuan jiaozheng*, 233. Translation cited from Li Yu 李漁, *The Carnal Prayer Mat*, trans., Patrick Hanan (London: Arrow Books Limited, 1990), 304 with amendments.

及至看見權老實，就像餓鷹見雞，饑貓遇鼠。不論精粗美惡，只要吞得進口。就是食了。¹⁵³

Yuxiang's reasoning, based on her reading of erotic fiction and the understanding of her husband's definite infidelity, displays a great contrast to her initial image as the "the puritan maid"¹⁵⁴ who reads only *The Lives of Virtuous Women* and *The Girls' Classic of Filial Piety*. Rather than accepting her fate as an abandoned wife, Yuxiang rebelled against the expected conduct of a wife, and reasoned it to be fair for her to have her own "strayed" ways like her husband expectedly did. This approach of reasoning not only dismissed women having a secret lover as something casual, it also mocked the inequality between the two sexes. It is a rather unique and liberal response to the unfair social expectations towards abandoned wives.

Planning of the affair

After the women have made the decision to take a chance with the potential affair, the most immediate challenge is to ensure that the affair remains unknown to others. Exposure of such scandals could result in public shaming, divorce and return to maternal family, imprisonment, being killed by the husband and more.¹⁵⁵ As women of decent households, an exposed affair could cost them more than the comfort of their lives; dignity of themselves, her maternal family, and her husband's family would also be risked. However, their social status also provided them the luxury of privacy within the residence (compared to poorer women in small houses), maids and servants to order and discharge, as well as wealth to bribe others when necessary.

The most common occasion for a wife to engage in sexual affairs is when the husband is away from home, such as travelling for examination, business, or participating in other social events, often for extended period. While the absence of the husband lead to greater freedom as

¹⁵³ Huang Qiang and Guo Di, eds., *Rou putuan jiaozheng*, 234. Translation cited from Li Yu, *The Carnal Prayer Mat*, 305 with amendments.

¹⁵⁴ Li Yu, *The Carnal Prayer Mat*, trans., Patrick Hanan, 70.

¹⁵⁵ More detailed consequences, especially concerning the legal aspect, have been discussed in Meijer, *Murder and Adultery in Late Imperial China*.

the women were no longer physically occupied, they were still cautious as the household was inhabited by at least also servants with neighbours living nearby. Even unproven suspicion and gossip could be damaging to their reputation. Regardless of the degree of sexual frustration the female characters were described to be experiencing, their careful and patient planning of the affair is another crucial plot a complete erotic story could not lack. The details of such accounts also display the individual characteristics of each female involved, which often also reflect the writer's stereotypical perception of a specific class or ethnicity.

In *Langshi*, the male protagonist Langzi acquires two wives of equal status, Wenfei and An'ge. After becoming attracted to Langzi, both women first made flirtatious letter and gift exchanges before explicitly inviting Langzi to enter a sexual liaison, but their methods greatly differed in style. In the case of Wenfei, upon receiving Langzi's love letter, she had already spent days observing Langzi, and become attracted to his appearance and fashion taste and aroused by his physique. The turning point marking Wenfei's decision to have an affair is when she read a letter from Langzi confessing his love, handed to her by her trusted hairdresser Zhang pozi 張婆子, who immediately asked about the content of the letter. With the suggestive letter and her forbidden desire liable to being exposed, Wenfei decided to confess her secret feelings to her chosen female confidants:

Wenfei grabbed (at the letter) and was unwilling to let go. She said, "Ma'am, this is not a place for talking. I shall go inside the room with you, and (I will) return (the letter) to you by then." The two dragged on each other as they walked into the room. Wenfei asked all the servants to go out, leaving only one trusted maid Chunjiao; together with the elder woman, the three stood together. Wenfei said, "I have secrets to tell you two. If you can make it, there will naturally be hefty rewards." The two replied, "Tell it. What is that?" Wenfei said, "This gentleman Mei, I have set my eyes on him, and he has set his eyes on me. This invitation is a private letter." The old woman said to Chunjiao, "What is difficult about this? The reward should be very hefty. We two will guarantee your success." Wenfei said, "Ma'am, I will just follow you."

文妃搶住死不肯放，道：「婆婆，這裡不是說話去處，吾與你到房裡去，那時還你。」兩個拖拖拽拽走到房裡去，文妃卻喚走使的都出去，只留一個心腹使女春嬌，與那婆子三人立著。文妃道：「吾有心腹事，對你兩個說，你若成得，自有重賞」。兩個道：「你說出來，卻是甚的？」文妃道：「這個梅相公，吾也看上了他，他也看上了我。這封柬帖，是一封私書。」婆子對著春嬌道：「這事有何

難處？但要重重賞賜，我兩個保你成就。」文妃道：「乾娘，只依著你便了。」
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This scene is exemplary in showcasing a number of elements that are commonly found in accounts of illicit sexual affairs, despite being just a few lines. First, the mistress usually shares her secret desire only to one or two female confidants, in most cases either her closest maid or an elder woman, who are of a lower social rank but have established long-term relationships with her and can help in arranging matters on her behalf. Secondly, these female companions are usually the ones responsible for giving instructive advice to the mistress, who is usually less experienced and will listen to them, and sometimes promises future rewards for their loyalty and efficiency. After Zhang pozi had obtained a promise from Wenfei that she would do as she would be told, Zhang pozi instructed Wenfei to reply to the letter and set up a date for a meeting. The young maid also contributed to the affair by suggesting, with comprehensive reasoning, a safe place for Langzi to hide and to sneak in from, displaying her value as a trustworthy help to her mistress.

Although in previous parts of the story, Wenfei is described to be a smart woman, she is depicted to be totally passive after voicing her desire to meet Langzi. In the later part of the plot, the author also sets the scene by describing how Wenfei exercised her authority as the mistress of the household to ensure her affair is kept secret. Her meeting with Langzi was set on days when her husband was out of town, leaving her the sole authority in the household:¹⁵⁷

That night, Wenfei ordered the servants, “Tonight my husband is not at home. You shall rest accordingly: men are not allowed to trespass to the middle hall; women must not leave the inner chamber. None is allowed to mingle in private.” All obeyed.

且說當夜，文妃吩咐奴僕道：「相公不在家，汝等各宜安歇：男人不許擅入中堂，婦人必須不離內寢。毋得擅便私自往來。」眾皆聽命。¹⁵⁸

Ironically, the very reason why her improper affair could be conducted smoothly was the application of the proper rule of gender segregation within the household. In her second

¹⁵⁶ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 4.

¹⁵⁷ There was no mention of the parents of her husband in the fiction, even during the plot when Wenfei's had to obtain permission to remarry.

¹⁵⁸ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 5.

meeting with Langzi, a similar house order was mentioned again through the handmaid Chunjiao's words, showing that the wife could control the household order to facilitate her secret liaisons when her husband was away:

Chunjiao said, "Our master has gone to the capital. A few important [servants] have followed. Female servants at home dare not enter without being summoned, except for one old lady, [who] is mistress' wet nurse, [but] would not sabotage the business; [and] four to five maids, bribed and ordered; within the middle hall, boy servants taller than three *chi* all dare not enter. The house is deep like the ocean, all yours, Sir, to take pleasure inside!"

春嬌道：「相公已往京中，有幾個要緊的都跟隨去。家中走使的婦人，非呼喚都不敢進來；只有一人老嫗，又是娘娘的乳母，卻不壞事的；四五個丫鬢，已都買囑了；中堂以內，三尺童子都不敢進去。門深似海，憑著相公在裡邊快活哩。」¹⁵⁹

Compared to the previous passage, this further illustrates how a household would be run in the absence of its patriarchal master. While most male servants, including young boys, were forbidden from the inner chamber, female servants were also made to stay away, with the exception of an elder female servant with special status (in this case, the wet nurse) and a select few housemaids properly bribed and instructed to stand by and serve as their mistress enjoyed her illicit engagement. The propriety attached to such a house order also made for comical effect, where the most proper of house rules ironically served to facilitate the most improper of household activities.

Unlike the detailed household management Wenfei underwent to ensure her safety, An'ge appeared to have much less concern and preparation. The difference is due to Langzi being already under the same roof as An'ge, and the two being officially introduced as "family" by An'ge's husband, as he calls Langzi his 'younger brother'. Also, she had already witnessed Langzi's enthusiasm for sex with other women in the same household. Despite this and having interacted with Langzi, An'ge was still hesitant in taking further steps, and sought her maid confidant's advice like Wenfei did:

¹⁵⁹ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 12.

An'ge plotted with Chunying in the bedchamber one day and said, "I am fond of gentleman Mei, and have the desire to see him, but I'm shy; a plan is necessary to make him steal¹⁶⁰ me, wouldn't that be good?"

安哥一日在房中與春鶯計道：「吾愛梅相公，有心對他，卻自害羞，必得一計等他來偷我，兀的不好？」¹⁶¹

Deciding to offer poems and gifts to Langzi, An'ge sent her maid to deliver the message. Upon the maid's return with his positive response, An'ge then decided to conduct their liaison that same night, and delivered a highly flirtatious item as an invitation:

An'ge said, "Say no more. You go again, tell him to come tonight." Chunying said, "Without some token, how would he be willing to come?" Madame said, "Indeed." Then [she] stripped off a pair of pink pants [and] gave Chunying, said, "Quickly deliver this to him, and ask for the pants on him as reply."

安哥道：「不要說了。你再去走一遭。今夜叫他便來。」春鶯道：「沒有甚的印信，他怎肯便來？」夫人道：「也說得是。」便去脫下一條粉紅袴兒，與春鶯道：「你快去送與他。也要他隨身的袴兒回答。」¹⁶²

Similar to the case of Wenfei, although the mistress is shown to be intellectual and cultured, this is juxtaposed with her depiction as inexperienced and naïve in such sexual affairs. This creates a dual image of licentiousness and innocence, clever yet simple, while her trusted maids in turn appear more powerful and knowledgeable, taking the active role in facilitating their mistresses' desire.

A slightly different staging of female pretence of modesty can be found in *Rou putuan*, when Yuxiang intended to seduce the house servant Quan Laoshi. While this text featured little mistress-maid interaction, Yuxiang's performance of modesty-masked desire is also indirectly delivered to her targeted male: upon hearing Quan's cough during her bath when, supposedly, no one was around, Yuxiang intentionally announced:

I'm taking a bath here. Who is outside? Don't come in.
我在這邊洗澡，外面是那一個？不要進來。¹⁶³

¹⁶⁰ The word *tou* 偷 could be translated as a verb "to steal," while it could also be used as an adjective indicating sneakiness or a secretive nature of actions. Regarding affair-related actions, such as *touren* 偷人 (having someone in secret), the word could mean both sneaking in a person or having an affair with someone; in this case, it refers to the latter. For a more detailed explanation of *tou*, see chapter one.

¹⁶¹ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 35.

¹⁶² *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 35.

¹⁶³ Huang Qiang and Guo Di, eds., *Rou putuan jiaozheng*, 235. Translation cited from Li Yu, *The Carnal Prayer Mat*, trans., Patrick Hanan, 307.

Upon sensing a shadow by the window, Yuxiang began displaying her body for the voyeur, to the extent that it was purely for show with no resemblance to having a bath. When Quan intruded, Yuxiang still pretended to be in shock despite her acts of seduction. Her warning was obviously an invitation in disguise.

Unlike Wenfei, An'ge and Yuxiang, Yanfang was a working woman who had to help operate her husband's business. She was also different in that she was in her second marriage, with a clear understanding of her own preference in men: physical desire over a pretty face and fame. However, she was also an educated woman like the previous three females discussed. Her initial meeting with her potential affair was face-to-face in proximity, without the comfort of hiding behind other female servants or a wall. In fact, it was in her husband's store, a public extension of her household, which made the exchange even more dangerous. Therefore, the flirtatious hinting and invitation between the two were even more indirect:

As he took the silk, he took the chance to squeeze her hand. Although the woman pretended not to notice, she scratched his hand with a fingernail... The woman said, "Even if it [the silver]'s in full ingots, I'm afraid it may simply look good on the outside but is worthless inside." Weiyangsheng said, "Ma'am, if you're worried about it, I will leave both the silk and the silver here. How about breaking open one of the ingots to try it out this evening? I'm not exaggerating. Our silver is as good as we are, the same on the inside as on the outside." The woman said, "That won't be necessary, if it's indeed all right, we can do business again. Otherwise, we could only do business for once."

未央生接絲的時節，就趁手把婦人捏了一把。婦人只當不知，也把指甲在未央生手上兜了一下...婦人道：「銀子便成錠，只怕是中看中不中用的。」未央生道：「大娘若不放心，我把絲與銀子都放在這邊，今晚就夾開一錠，試他一試，何如？不是誇嘴說，我們的銀子與人一樣，都是表裏如一的。」婦人道：「也不消如此。若果然不差，下次還好交易。不然，只好做一遭主顧罷了。」¹⁶⁴

Yanfang was comparatively much more mature and experienced with men compared to the other female characters discussed so far. Having to face the man in public on her own, she made a codified conversation with Weiyangsheng without promising or denying anything. While she also hinted at an affair, she left no trace that might lead her into trouble, but rather made it sound like it was about their silk business. She also retained the upper hand by

¹⁶⁴ Huang Qiang and Guo Di, eds., *Rou putuan jiaozheng*, 151. Translation cited from Li Yu, *The Carnal Prayer Mat*, trans., Patrick Hanan, 195 with amendments.

demanding satisfaction or expelling the man after one encounter—a highly confident attitude that is not seen in the previous examples.

Post-affair struggles

It is common in the stories that after a taste of the other men, the wives would become obsessed with their affair and newfound pleasure, especially since most were said to be in an unsatisfactory marriage to begin with. Since women had no choice other than continue their life as usual or to elope outright, their husband thus became a problem. Among stories about adulterous wives, it is common that their husbands are described as older, sexually less competent, or both. Dissatisfaction in bed, either due to the husband being physically incompetent, or lack of intimacy due to long journeys away from home or disinterest in women, are common reasons that encourage women to participate in extramarital affairs.

With some exceptions in which the liaisons are short-lived, many stories go with the wife becoming addicted to the affair. Some of them even declared their love for the lover and planned to marry their new love interest instead. Such a setting often rationalises the women's disregard of their own reputation and sexual craze, while also putting youth, phallus size, appearance, and the sexual skills of the male on a pedestal. The older male, often the husband, thus sometimes become the target of ridicule. One harsh but practical comment regarding the incompetent husband from *Langshi* reads:

It is known that despite the husband's uselessness, it is still good to keep him at home to halt the fire [of desire] after all.

迺知丈夫雖不中用，留他在家煞火也好。¹⁶⁵

Referring to the relationship between the young An'ge and her old husband, this statement was spoken from the standpoint of the wife, reducing the “useless” husband to a tolerated item for use. Circumstances in both *Langshi* and *Dengcao heshang zhuan* helped the women get rid of their husband without effort or moral dilemma, but that did not happen overnight, and the

¹⁶⁵ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 34.

women involved all experienced a period when they were still living with their undesirable husband. In such cases, both the husband and the affair are positioned as a tool for sexual satisfaction in the world of female desire, disposable when a better option is available.

Echoing the previously quoted commentary, both Wenfei and An'ge were first aroused by Langzi, then used their own husband to ease their desire whilst thinking of him. The scenes about them and their husband are comparatively hasty for contrasting effect. Wenfei's husband was first too drunk to entertain her, and next appeared to have died from one night of over-indulgence. An'ge's husband, on the other hand, was more interested in Daoist cultivation and was considerably older, with An'ge as his second wife (*xuxian* 續弦, literally "the succeeding string"). An'ge's husband even proposed to hand her over to be Langzi's wife, as he intended to become a recluse for religious cultivation, and eventually did.

The least extreme way the wife adopted to face her husband with a changed mind is to return to normal life as if nothing had happened. Wenfei in *Langshi*, Wang *shi* and Zhanggu in *Dengcao heshang zhuan* did the same, but with slightly different attitudes. After two meetings, Wenfei was infatuated with Langzi. Despite having once made a confession of love, she continued her life as usual, closing her eyes in bed and imagining her husband to be Langzi. The other female protagonist An'ge did not even go through the same process, as her husband soon decided to gift her over and become a recluse. In *Dengcao heshang zhuan*, Wang *shi* also continued her life as usual upon her husband's return from a trip, despite becoming more interested in the candlewick monk than her own husband. While her husband noticed the suspicious change in the tightness of her vagina, hinting at a possibility of her affair being exposed, Wang *shi* retorted by first blaming, if not humiliating, her husband saying his phallus had possibly shrunk, then distracted him by suggesting the possibility of pregnancy and expelled him from their bedchamber:

Magistrate Yang said, "How strange, why is your vagina so much wider?" Madame said, "Nonsense! There's a saying that 'A vagina without work stinks, and nuts without work

itch'. [I] think you are bored of this, therefore finding me wide. Wait, since the day before, my menstruation somehow didn't come, [and] I'm afraid I might be pregnant. You'd better live in the study. My body is important, don't come to mess with me."

楊官兒道：「真怪，為何你的陰門寬綽了許多？」夫人道：「胡說！常言道：『綽不弄要臭，卵不弄要癢』。想是你弄的煩了，故覺的我的寬綽。且住，自從前日，月經竟不來了，怕得有喜。你還不若在書房裡住住。我身子要緊，不要來纏我。」¹⁶⁶

While this excuse served obviously as a distraction for the husband, it suggested that it was acceptable for a woman to refrain from sex when she is potentially pregnant. In the same novel, Wang *shi*'s daughter Zhanggu also did the same, while additionally offering the handmaid to ensure her husband was occupied. Both men were successfully diverted away by their wife, believing in the possibility of their pregnancy, and unaware of their wives' infidelity until they were caught in bed with the candlewick monk.

Yanfang in *Rou putuan* is no doubt the most pragmatic and visionary of all female characters in dealing with affairs as she is often delivering her insights and reflection on relevant matters. After a taste of satisfaction and changed feelings towards her husband, she decided to follow her desire rather than living a double life:

If a woman does not soil her honour, fine. But if she does, she might as well be bold and resolute enough to leave her husband and follow her lover, so to avoid having your body surnamed Zhang and your inside surnamed Li. I've often said that a woman can only afford to take a lover if she has Red Whisk's eye for a hero and Zhuo Wenjun's boldness. When you take just one lover in your entire life and stick with him, even the word *take a lover* will be rectified in due course. Eventually you'll receive honours and titles and qualify as a true heroine... If you're going to commit adultery, you have to elope. If you think you'll not be able to elope, you may as well spare yourself from retribution for your sins and remain faithful without swaying. Why barter away honour and life for a moment of joy?

做婦人的，不壞名節則已，既然壞了名節，索性做個決裂之人，棄了家的，跟了野的，省得身子姓張，肚腸姓李。我常說，從來的婦人，有紅拂妓的眼、卓文君的膽，方纔可以偷漢。生平只偷一個，一偷就偷到底，連那個偷字，後面也改正過來，一般做夫人，受誥封，方纔是個女中豪傑... 既要淫，就要奔，若度量後來奔不得，就不如省了那番孽障，做個守貞不二的人，何等不妙？為甚麼把名節性命，去換那頃刻的歡娛？¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ See *Dengcao heshang zhuan, Siwuxie huibao*, vol. 22, 70–71.

¹⁶⁷ Huang Qiang and Guo Di eds., *Rou putuan jiaozheng*, 179–180. Translation cited from Li Yu, *The Carnal Prayer Mat*, trans., Patrick Hanan, 234 with amendments.

True to her character as an insightful and courageous woman, after making up her mind, Yanfang even made the effort to become an abusive wife to Quan Laoshi in order to get rid of him. While her goal was also to remarry the man she desired, her reasoning was rather different from the others. Instead of focusing on her own satisfaction, Yanfang considered the price of the affair and the potential reactions regarding a woman's honour. The choice between life honour and momentary joy was also a precise summary of the nature of female adultery, only that in most other stories the wives were seen becoming dominated by their quest for desire, and had concerns only for their superficial modesty without visionary insight of the same depth. Some writers also conveniently created scenarios where the women simply became eligible for remarriage.

Unlike the process of starting an extramarital affair, occasions where the wives have to face the suspicion of their husbands and think of their post-affair future tend to be described as an entirely solitary experience. Instead of having other women around offering help and persuasion, the main wives' distinct characteristics are most apparent in the scenes where they made their choices on how to face their husbands after the very satisfying affair. The husbands' query would also be presented in plots where they approach the maids—which usually result in a master-maid sexual affair. Aside from providing extra sex scenes in the novel, these plots also bring about the men's intrusion of the female circle. There are, however, limited examples in erotic fiction where the maidservant would decide to side with the master and expose her mistress. In the selected novels, the adulterous wives either later married the male protagonist, eloped, or had unexplained endings.

Despite some slight differences in social background, the wives studied in this chapter reflect several common elements of extramarital affairs actively initiated by women. First, women in marriage are more seduced by the opportunity of an affair, rather than actively seeking extramarital satisfaction out of disappointment and neglect from their husband.

Secondly, regardless of circumstances, the wives would first restrain their desire rather than immediately taking the opportunity for an affair. Thirdly, the sexual experiences and household wealth of the women play a great role in how the wives would approach their desired target of liaison: the wealthier ones from stricter households are often shown to be more naïve, and rely on other females for guidance and to serve as go-between; those from a comparatively humble background would have the opportunity to flirt in person, by performing for the voyeur or face-to-face flirtatious conversation, all of which, as we see in the stories, remained indirect and codified. After the affair, all the wives became more interested in their new partner than in their husband without exception, but most of them endured and suppressed the desire to their lover by self-deception or seeking excuses to avoid their husband instead of trying to leave. While some elements of women in illicit affairs such as sexual frustration and reliance on other women's help are somewhat universal, the common circumstances and relationship with assisting females are distinctive in this "wife" category. In other types of women, as we will discuss in the following sections, these traits vary greatly.

Concubines: decorative extras in erotic fiction

Comparing different types of mistresses, concubines of others are much less featured in erotic fiction as the desired female. While they are also the spouse of a man, they have a much lesser status compared to wives. As Meijer noted, "Chinese society made a fundamental difference between the main wife and a concubine, consequently the legal status of the concubine was low. Concubines could be bought and when they were killed, unless it was a case of murder, the punishment for the master was only three years' banishment and 100 strokes as against strangulation for killing the main wife."¹⁶⁸ With the lower status of concubines in mind, it is not surprising that they are rarely featured as females that attract active pursuit from men in erotic fiction. There is apparent inferiority of these concubine-type female characters

¹⁶⁸ Meijer, *Murder and Adultery in Late Imperial China*, 53–54.

compared to the main female protagonist(s) in terms of beauty, sexual allure, wealth, and attraction to the male protagonist. Writers usually give these characters less attention in terms of background details. These characters' personalities, if showcased at all, are usually less distinctive from each other.

There is no mention of concubines at all in *Rou putuan* or *Xiuta yeshi*, while in *Dengcao heshang zhuan*, only one is mentioned in a quoted story. In *Taohua ying*, concubines of other men are welcomed but not actively pursued. Concubines in *Langshi* are referred to as *shiqie* 侍妾 (concubine) and *shinü* 侍女 (servant girl) interchangeably, making their status as recognised spouse or maidservant ambiguous. Their roles in the story included providing company, providing singing and dancing performance in dinner banquets etc. The two concubines mentioned in *Taohua ying* and the other two in *Langshi* who had sexual relationship with the respective male protagonists are described as alluring, with only one of the four had her age mentioned. All the concubines are described to have actively approached the male protagonists, who happened to be lodging in the same household as a guest. No inner thoughts of these women are described, and they operated without help from other females despite knowledge of each other's existence.

Additionally, in *Taohua ying*, there exist several major differences between the eventual wife and the concubines of the male protagonist. The former never engaged in pre-marital sex with the male protagonist; she refused his sexual advances, and considered committing suicide to resist an unwanted marriage arranged by her family. She was also shown to be disinterested in sex. On the other hand, the group of concubines all had pre-marital or extra-marital sex with the male protagonist. They not only enjoyed sex, but would also joyously engage in orgies with their husband and each other.

To sum up, when compared to other mistresses like wives, widows, mothers and even to female assistants like maidservants, the featuring of concubines appears more as a bonus to the

story, as the character building of such characters is comparatively weak, and their importance to the overall story flow generally limited. The common nonchalant treatment of such concubines in erotic fiction also suggests a lack of interest and appeal of excitement towards females of such status.

2.3 Other mistresses: childless widows, mothers, and virgin daughters

This section investigates the representation of other mistresses engaging in illicit sexual affairs, including childless widows, mothers and their virgin daughters in Ming and Qing erotic fiction. Similar to the previous section, this section will first look into the stereotypical image of the characters in association with the identity of a “widow,” a “mother,” or a “daughter,” namely common settings of their age and family background, actions taken in illicit affairs, points of encounter with the male protagonist, followed by an investigation of how their identity integrates to the narratives of erotic fiction, in particular their specific roles of “widow/mother/daughter” that made the character type irreplaceable in the story.

With regard to widows of Ming and Qing times, Sommer suggested that they were granted “the strongest rights of any women with regard to property and independence”; these rights were not granted freely, but rather depended on chastity, “a status violated by either remarriage or adultery.”¹⁶⁹ Unlike wives with a living husband, widows having illicit sex may not have to risk heavy caning, being sold off, or murdered with impunity. With different living circumstances, the cost to widows in breaking their chastity for an affair is the possibility of losing their property and independence otherwise unavailable to women. However, as Sommer also noted, maintaining chastity was not a viable option for widows without sufficient property, therefore the “chaste widow” actually served as a status symbol for the elite, but not an option for the very poor.¹⁷⁰ For widowed mothers with living unmarried daughter(s), under certain

¹⁶⁹ Sommer, *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China*, 166.

¹⁷⁰ Sommer, *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China*, 167.

circumstances, they also possess a specific authority that serves as the legal basis for what happens later in the stories:

Marriage should be arranged by grandparents and/or parents; for those without grandparents and/or parents, their marriage should be arranged by the remaining relatives; for those whose husband died and with a daughter suitable for marriage, the daughter's marriage should be arranged by her mother.

嫁娶皆由祖父母、父母主婚；祖父母、父母俱無者，從餘親主婚；其夫亡攜女適人者，其女從母主婚。¹⁷¹

Aside from maintaining her chastity in exchange for the right to legally own properties, the widows were also given the authority to decide on their daughters' marriage. Such authority and independence, unusual for other women irrespective of their background, theoretically placed them in the position of the head of a household, replacing her late husband. These rights were not as simply maintained as it sounds, as challenges may arise from tensions with the in-laws and jealousy from surviving brothers of her husband.¹⁷² The pressure of remarriage, such that other family members could take over her inherited properties, also prevailed.¹⁷³ Nevertheless, a widow did seem to have a higher chance of living a more independent life, especially if her husband possessed a good amount of household property inherited from his own father, of which the widow then had the right to control independently—with the condition that she maintained her chastity.¹⁷⁴ Having been freed from the ownership of their husband, widows were also able to purchase property independently.¹⁷⁵ As the principle of selecting model widows in the 1763 edition of the local history of Quanzhou hinted, an ideal widow would have to be able to “resist resolutely the pressure to contract a second marriage, or

¹⁷¹ Xu Ben 徐本, *Santai* 三泰 et al.; imp. ord., *Qinding si ku quanshu Da Qing lili* 欽定四庫全書大清律例 [Complete Collection in Four Treasuries Great Qing Legal Code] (Collected by Zhejiang University Library), vol. 10, 2b–3a.

¹⁷² Sommer, *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China*, 167.

¹⁷³ T'ien Ju-K'ang, *Male Anxiety and Female Chastity: A Comparative Study of Chinese Ethical Values in Ming-Ch'ing Times* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988), 35.

¹⁷⁴ Sommer, *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China*, 172.

¹⁷⁵ Lai Hui-min, *Qingchao fuquan dui funü de yingxiang*, 197.

surmount the ardours of self-preservation when all those about her coveting her inheritance had broken into open hostility” to have her story recorded in its full details.¹⁷⁶

All of these rights and benefits, however, were ultimately linked to the widow’s chastity and ability in maintaining it, as such privileges would be forfeited once her chastity was not intact, regardless of the circumstances. While remarried widows would lose control of their late husband’s property, they could seize control again if their next husband died and that they remained chaste since. In other words, there was no extra punishment if they remarried properly. Adulterous widows, however, were subject to the same punishments as adulterous wives even though their husbands were dead; for widows, their in-laws could sell her into the marriage market in lieu of the dead husband, and they may lose her claims to not just property but also her children.¹⁷⁷ As Sommer’s study reflects, adulterous widows’ eventual fate and finances were highly affected by the stance and existence of in-laws (in particular brothers of the deceased husband).¹⁷⁸ With their livelihood largely tied to their recognised chastity, widows indeed lived with as much challenge as potential independence, a situation which was not easy to sustain emotionally and financially.

Similar to how “wives” and “concubines” were valued differently in Ming and Qing society as reflected in both the legal system and in erotic fiction, widows with and without children were also subject to different expectations, causing even greater differences in stereotypical images and nature of plots in erotic fiction. While the label of “widow” refers to the marriage status of a woman, and the labels “mother” and “daughter” focus on the women’s role in the family, the three are discussed together due to the common overlapping of the “widow” and “mother” character types and the deep interconnectedness of “mother” and “daughter” characters. For the ease of later discussion, the following table outlines the profile

¹⁷⁶ T’ien, *Male Anxiety and Female Chastity*, 35.

¹⁷⁷ Sommer, *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China*, 173–174.

¹⁷⁸ Sommer, *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China*, 174–204.

of the main characters in this section. The categorisation considers the marriage status of the characters when they are first introduced in the texts:

Table 3: Widows and mother characters in selected erotic fiction

Category	Text title (abbr.)	Character name	Age ¹⁷⁹	Length of widowhood	Age of offspring	Relationship to the male protagonist
Childless widows	<i>LS</i>	Pan Suqiu 潘素秋	21	3 years	/	Friend mentioned to the male protagonist by the female protagonist.
	<i>TY</i>	Wang Wanniang 王婉娘	17-18	2 years	/	Daughter of a Monk's friend whom the male protagonist encountered in a nunnery.
Widows with one daughter	<i>TY</i>	Bian Erniang 卞二娘	36	7 years	15	Neighbour of the male protagonist.
	<i>LS</i>	Zhao Daniang 趙大娘	33	N/A	16	Neighbour and dependant of the female protagonist in affair with the male protagonist.
	<i>TY</i>	Ma <i>shi</i> 馬氏 ¹⁸⁰	N/A	N/A	17-18	Mother of Wang Wanniang.
Widows with one son	<i>RT</i>	Hua Chen 花晨	36 ¹⁸¹	10 years	10	Senior relative of one of the women in an affair with the protagonist.
	<i>XY</i>	Ma <i>shi</i> 麻氏	33	13 years	18	Mother of the protagonist's homosexual partner.
Widows with multiple children		None	/	/	/	/
Non-widows	<i>DHZ</i>	Wang <i>shi</i> 汪氏	31	/	16	Mistress of the household, received

¹⁷⁹ The age in this paper is expressed in *sui* 歲 as indicated in the texts, which is one year older than the “-years old” expression.

¹⁸⁰ To avoid confusion with Ma *shi* from *Xiuta yeshi*, in this thesis, Ma *shi* from *Taohua ying* will be specified as Ma *shi* (TY) when appropriate, and Ma *shi* generally refers to Ma *shi* from *Xiuta yeshi*.

¹⁸¹ In the text, Hua Chen's age was speculated from the protagonist's point of view, but not confirmed in the text.

with one daughter						the supernatural protagonist as a gift.
Non-widow with one son		None	/	/	/	/

Amongst these characters, *Ma shi* from *Taohua ying* serves as the only exception of a widow/mother character without a sexual relationship with the male protagonist. Her role as the mother in relation to her daughter’s engagement in an illicit affair, however, is similar to, rather than different from, other mother characters despite the absence of sexual benefits. *Yanfang* of *Rou putuan* and *Li Wenfei* of *Langshi* were both initially introduced as someone else’s wife, but they became a mother and briefly a widow respectively in the middle of the story. While *Li Wenfei* remained the female protagonist despite her change of status as her brief widowhood allowed her to remarry as the main wife of the protagonist, *Yanfang*’s pregnancy marked the acute fall of her role from the female lead to a background figure whose actions and fate became a mere symbolic role. As the characters’ development tend to follow their initial image, intermittent statuses tend to be a device for shifting plots rather than character development, and thus will not be discussed in detail in this section.

Childless widows: the alternative

Among the studied texts, two characters were introduced to readers as the childless widow: *Pan Suqiu* from *Langshi*, and *Wang Wanniang* from *Taohua ying*. Both characters are depicted as young, beautiful, and chaste widows widowed for around two to three years. Neither of them had children. As reviewed previously, “wives” and “concubines” tend to be within the age range of sixteen to early twenties, an age similar to their respective male protagonists. Most of the married women had either no offspring or a daughter of desirable age fit for intercourse. The two widows are also of the same age range as with the “wife” and “concubine” characters,

and are significantly younger than the other “widow” characters with offspring, i.e., the ones whose main identity is more of a “mother” than a “widow.”

The widows’ household differed from those of the wives and concubines in that the presence of a male superior was not absolute; therefore, the composition of household members would greatly affect the plausibility of having illicit affairs without being exposed and hence potential legal consequences. Instead of waiting for occasions where the husband leaves the house or when they can visit the household of other women, the widows are set to live free from legitimate male superiors that they would have to answer to. For example, Pan Suqiu of *Langshi* lived alone with only four servants, with a widowed *pozi* as a neighbour and frequent guest, while Wang Wanniang of *Taohua ying* lived only with her own mother. In short, they lived in a solitary household as their own mistress with little to no external supervision. This setting applies also to the mother-widows, as Bian Erniang of *Taohua ying* and Zhao Daniang of *Langshi* both lived with their daughter and servants and had no male superiors.

Although the widow characters would engage in illicit affairs with the male protagonist, they are often described as being chaste widows until they met the male protagonist. This characteristic applies irrespective of the length of widowhood and individual personalities. The following are some excerpts of the texts that emphasise the chastity of the widows who later engaged in illicit affairs. The first one concerns a relatively young widow:

Wanniang of the Wang family has lived widowed for two years. Although [she] was clean as jade and clear as ice, [she is] inexorably gripped by desire and sentiment.

王氏婉娘，寡居二載。雖則玉潔冰清，未免懷春抱恨。¹⁸²

Being a childless widow, she was described to be sorrowful about her widowhood. The next three examples all concern widows with offspring:

Erniang said, “I have been widowed for seven years, and am rather good at entertaining myself in nights and days.”

二娘道：「妾寡處七年，月夕風晨頗能自遣...」¹⁸³

¹⁸² *Taohua ying kuaishi*, ch. 7, 6a.

¹⁸³ *Taohua ying kuaishi*, ch. 2, 7a.

Hua Chen said, “...I have not seen a man for over ten years...”
花晨道：「...我十幾年不見男子...」¹⁸⁴

Ma *shi*...said, “I have, for over ten years, not had someone to sleep with side by side.”
麻氏...說道：「我十來年沒人同頭睡了。」¹⁸⁵

The duration of widowhood and celibacy is usually longer if the widow is also a mother. While the observation of chastity understandably serves as a fantasy appeal of the female characters, this also functions in exaggerating the burning desire of the female characters, though not necessarily rationalising their swift change of mind against preserving their long-guarded chastity. Some texts tend to be brief in describing the change of mind, with the female becoming aroused due to sexual frustration and seizing the opportunity whenever it becomes available. Female characters of more prominent roles, on the other hand, are often shaped to be more chaste at the beginning, with a more elaborated description of their change of mind.

Taking Pan Suqiu and Wang Wanniang as examples, Pan is one of the three most prominent female characters in *Langshi*, and was given the typical chaste-but-later-gave-in trait in the face of temptation, while Wang is one of the four concubines in *Taohua ying*, has a minor role and is portrayed as a lustful woman with no sign of emotional struggle in engaging in illicit affairs. The story of how they encountered their respective male protagonists differs, but both of them are on the passive end in initiating the affair, especially when compared to concubines.

In *Langshi*, Pan Suqiu is first introduced by her close friend Li Wenfei to the male protagonist, with whom Li is already having an affair, prompting him to go after Pan. As his tactic is to bribe Pan's widowed *pozi* neighbour, Pan remained unaware of the male protagonist when the *pozi* carried out her plan challenging Pan's determination to remain chaste to her late husband. In fact, Pan Suqiu has a very passive role in initiating her affair, if not carefully manipulated into it. Initially having no contact with the male protagonist, her sworn sister

¹⁸⁴ Huang Qiang and Guo Di, eds., *Rou putuan jiaozheng*, 287.

¹⁸⁵ *Xiuta yeshi* 繡榻野史 [Unofficial History of the Embroidered Couch] in *Siwuxie huibao* 思無邪匯寶, vol. 2, eds. Chan Hing-ho 陳慶浩 and Wang Ch'iu-kuei 王秋桂 et al. (Taipei: Taiwan dayingbaike gufen youxiangongsi, 1995), 241.

(*jiebai jiemei* 結拜姐妹) Li Wenfei mentioned Pan to her lover Langzi as a beauty “with ethereal grace and beauty beyond Wang Qiang and Xishi 姿容絕世，勝過王嬙西子，” piquing his interest in Pan. Pan’s close neighbour Qian pozi was bribed by Langzi to produce a plan to seduce Pan, participating in the intricate process of arousing Pan’s desire, consoling her sorrow in her early widowhood, creating the occasion where Pan would get to see Langzi in person, and guaranteeing the affair would be conducted smoothly in secret. Once Pan fell into the elaborate scheme that involved luring her into the pig breeding business, feeling aroused but having no way to be satisfied, she was initially sorrowful:

Unknowingly [her] tears welled up like a spring... after crying, [she] finally fell asleep.
不覺淚如湧泉... 哭了一回，方纔睡去了。¹⁸⁶

After Qian pozi consoled her by showing her sympathy as someone with the same experience and pointing out the unequal practice and attitude of widows and widowers, Pan’s view on widow chastity changed, and she agreed that “those who observe widowhood are indeed foolish (守寡的果是痴了).”¹⁸⁷ Upon further persuasion by Qian pozi, Pan finally became convinced. Her main concern and reason for hesitation was not her devotion to her late husband, but rather her social reputation:

Suqiu said, “If anyone finds out, wouldn’t that damage [my] reputation?”
The *pozi* replied, “[When everything] comes and goes in obscurity, who will know?”
Suqiu lowered her head and did not speak. After a pause, [she] sighed and said, “Fine, if one does not pursue pleasure, life is then a waste.”

素秋道：「倘被人覷破，可不壞了名節？」

婆子道：「暗裡來暗裡去，那個得知？」

素秋便低著頭不語，停了半晌，嘆一口氣道：「罷，不圖快活，枉生在世。」

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In contrast to the lengthy process that Pan had gone through from being hesitant to willing in having illicit affairs, Wang Wanniang, also a young widow of two years, was much more avid in her attempt to induce an affair within her permitted boundary:

¹⁸⁶ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 18.

¹⁸⁷ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 18.

¹⁸⁸ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 19.

A woman stood behind the curtain, dressed in white. Upon seeing Yuqing, [she] pushed up the bamboo curtain, exposing her upper torso and looked intently. Yuqing... walked back again, and the woman was still at the curtain. Seeing Yuqing from afar, [her] upper torso remained exposed. As [he] approached closer, [she] deliberately set one foot out of the door frame.

那簾內立一婦人，渾身穿白，見了玉卿，便把竹簾推起，露出半身，注目而視。玉卿...重新走轉，那婦人猶¹⁸⁹在簾內，遠遠張見玉卿，依舊半身全露，及至眼前，又把一隻腳兒，故意跨出門限。¹⁹⁰

The widows were paid considerable attention by the writers in terms of physique, background and personality, with the childless ones usually having a higher “status” and better appeal in the eyes of the male protagonists, and thus enjoyed a higher degree of affection. While neither Pan nor Wang were the main female protagonist throughout the text, Pan enjoyed a status comparable to the other two female leads until her death in the story, while Wang’s status was similar to other female characters and equally lower than the female protagonist. Both were considered marriageable by the male protagonist, though Pan died prior to a possible marriage and Wang remarried as one of the four concubines. With these two examples, it does seem that while the appeal of widows is above that of other people’s concubines, their status remains inferior to wives in terms of attractiveness in the erotic fiction world.

Sexual mothers

Representations of mothers in literature are not rare. Mothers in classic texts like *Lienü zhuan*, or as mentioned in gentry women’s writings, collectively present to us the image of mothers who dedicated their life to their offspring, who were expected to later take care of their mother in return. In the realm of fiction, we also see the various mother characters in *Honglou meng* and *Yin shi* from *Fengshen yanyi* 封神演義 (Investiture of the Gods), who may not be mothers as exemplary as those hailed in *Lienü zhuan*, but nevertheless function as characters whose main duties lay within their family, with concern over their offspring as their common main interest. The mother characters presented in erotic fiction, however, no doubt is literally

¹⁸⁹ Modified from “尤” according to *Siwuxie huibao* reprint.

¹⁹⁰ *Taohua ying kuaishi*, ch. 6, 3a–b.

another story. They acted not chiefly as caring parents, but one of the many sexual beings to be flaunted. Rather than playing the role as mothers who dedicate their life solely to the prosperity of their offspring, these characters serve rather as sexually experienced women who seek to fulfil their own physical pleasure beyond the permitted boundary imposed by society. The typical story plots involving lustful widows also fall into different streams depending on the existence or absence of offspring.

Similar to widows, mothers are rarely the protagonist in Ming and Qing erotic fiction. In addition to that, they are generally not the most sexually desired compared to other female characters, as evidenced by the comparatively rare plots where the mother characters are actively pursued by the male. One exception is Wang *shi* from *Dengcao heshang zhuan*, who is indeed the female protagonist, but the nature of the male protagonist—a supernatural spirit sent to punish her husband—also marks the story’s fundamental difference from most erotic tales. While the majority of the “mother” characters are also categorised as “wife” or “widow” in terms of marital status, the distinguishing trait is that “mothers” have given birth before. Their experience in childbirth, general physical difference and the existence of their cohabiting, unmarried offspring also mark their primary role as a mother above all else, especially for the widowed mothers.

The following discussions will focus on Zhao Daniang (*Langshi*), Bian Erniang (*Taohua ying*), Hua Chen (*Rou putuan*), Ma *shi* (*Xiuta yeshi*) and Wang *shi*.¹⁹¹ While Ma *shi* from *Taohua ying* and Yanfang from *Rou putuan* also fit into the “mother” category, the former had no direct interaction with the male protagonist, and the latter’s role in *Rou putuan* is primarily a “wife of others.” Thus, they will not be the main focus of this chapter’s discussion.

The mothers who engaged in affairs with the male protagonists share a few commonalities. First and foremost, their age ranges from thirty-two to thirty-six, placing them in an age group

¹⁹¹ See Table 3 for their character setting (age, duration of widowhood etc.) in respective stories.

more mature than most other characters whose age is specified. The male protagonists are chiefly young bachelors aged between seventeen to early twenties, except for the protagonist of *Xiuta yeshi* Dongmensheng, who was thirty and already a widower at the beginning of the story. However, the same novel has a supporting male character Zhao Dali, aged eighteen, who has a significant role in the story as the male who has sexual relationships with most female characters, nearly duplicating that of Dongmensheng, as well as being his primary homosexual partner. He is also the son of Ma *shi*, a widow-mother that became one of the male protagonist's sexual partners and later his wife.

While the male protagonists tend to be of similar age to the wives and slightly older than the virgins (including unmarried daughters and young maidservants), the mothers are generally at least ten years older than most other female characters involved in sexual affairs. Comparing the age of most male protagonists (around seventeen to twenty) and the age of the mothers when they gave birth (seventeen in average), these women are just about to be the same age as the protagonists' mother, and are never considered a potential candidate for marriage. Despite the age gap between these mothers and the male protagonist, the writers were inclined to explain the women's appeal that eventually led to the successful and satisfying trysts.

The appealing appearance of the female characters is a highly common feature in erotic fiction regardless of their prominence in the story, barring a small number of exceptions (such as the unnamed neighbour of Yanfang in *Rou putuan*). The main difference is the level of praise dedicated to their appearance. As with most sexually active female characters, most of the mothers are described to have a pleasant appearance. For example, the writer introduced the young and poor widow-mother Zhao Daniang in *Langshi* as “a flower-like young widow (如花似朵的後生寡婦)” who “was also born beguiling and handsome (也生得風流俊俏).” The emphasis of “also (born attractive)” and “young” can be understood as the two prerequisites in the mother-widow's attractiveness to the male protagonist, if not also the readers: beauty and

youthfulness. However, being in their thirties, their comparative maturity is always emphasised in between the lines. In describing their appearance, the mothers are often specifically described as looking younger than they normally should be at their age. For example, in *Taohua ying*, Bian Erniang is described as such:

Turns out, although Bian Erniang is thirty-six years of age, [she looks] however as if below thirty.

原來卞二娘年雖三十六歲，卻像三十以下的。¹⁹²

Wang *shi* in *Dengcao heshang zhuan* was also praised by the *pozi* for looking like a sister rather than a mother to her teenage daughter (aged sixteen):

The *pozi* said, “What a young lady! Even madame doesn’t look like thirty-one; (you two look) like two sisters.”

婆子道：「好個小姐，就是奶奶也還不相三十一歲的，好像姊妹兩個哩。」¹⁹³

Both Bian and Wang are said to look like they were in their twenties rather than thirties, the mature end of the “wives” category, i.e., the age group considered most appealing to the male protagonists. In *Xiuta yeshi*, when the widow Ma *shi* tried to persuade someone who assumedly had not seen her face into marrying her, she said,

My age is thirty, [but] my appearance is still not old.

我年紀是三十歲了，模樣還不老。¹⁹⁴

Similar to the other examples, thirty appears to be the watershed for youthful beauty. While these descriptions appear to be in line with the conventional praise for beautiful female in erotic fiction, the emphasis on looking youthful in fact reaffirms potential doubts as to the mother’s appeal due to their age, while also hailing youthful-looking qualities latest in the twenties as the ideal physical beauty.

In *Taohua ying*, the novel displaying high resemblance to the *caizi jiaren* genre, the talent of the “old” mothers of decent background was also evaluated as part of her appeal, as with the conventional younger beauties (i.e., women supposed to be married as a wife rather than a

¹⁹² *Taohua ying kuaishi*, ch. 2, 1b.

¹⁹³ The “young lady” refers to Wang’s daughter, who is aged sixteen. *Dengcao heshang zhuan*, *Siwuxie huibao*, vol. 22, 44.

¹⁹⁴ *Xiuta yeshi*, *Siwuxie huibao*, vol. 2, 289.

concubine). Her literary talent served as a compensation for her ‘shortcoming’ of ‘old’ age. The male protagonist was initially uninterested in a tryst, precisely because of his neighbour’s age, yet his attitude later changed, and he made the following comment:

With such fine prose, even if [she is] a few more years older, I would still be fond of her.
有此佳句，縱使再老幾年，我亦愛之。¹⁹⁵

The age of Hua Chen from *Rou putuan* was not confirmed in the text but was suggested to be around thirty-six. Hua Chen, however, was never praised for any youthful appearance as Bian Erniang did, who is of roughly the same age. Her comparatively older age is repeatedly emphasised in her presence, highlighting her lesser physical appeal as opposed to her three younger female relatives:

Even that half-old beauty’s youthful charm has not vanished... Though (her) age is slightly older, beauty is slightly lesser, body flesh is slightly fatter...
就是那個半老佳人，也不減少年風致... 年紀雖然略大了些，姿色雖約略減了些，身體肌肉雖然略胖了些...¹⁹⁶

This comment itself is rather sarcastic, as the ‘beauty’ is in fact ‘slightly’ dissatisfactory in all aspects. Disdain towards more mature women was reiterated when the three younger relatives of Hua blatantly called her “that old thing (那個老東西)” in her back, and become angry for getting the same level of written praise by Weiyangsheng. Even Hua Chen has used the term “*wo laorenjia* 我老人家 (old me)” to address herself as she talked. In view of the generally much younger age of other female characters, and that the maximum age of sexually active mothers is thirty-six, it seems that the “mother” character setting serves as an age-related feature, representing the mature (albeit with a limit on age) women among the many types of sexual women in erotic fiction.

Aside from their comparatively older age, all texts emphasise the mothers’ lack of sexual satisfaction, in an effort to create an eager image of these widow/mothers. The most common reason for their dissatisfaction/desperation is usually having endured years of widowhood, if

¹⁹⁵ *Taohua ying kuaishi*, ch. 2, 8b.

¹⁹⁶ Huang Qiang and Guo Di, eds., *Rou putuan jiaozheng*, 105.

not also extended abstinence prior to meeting the male protagonist. As outlined in Table 3, the mothers involved were widowed for at least seven years since their twenties. The two non-widows are described as being sexually dissatisfied as well, with Wang *shi*'s husband being eight years older and liking to travel for leisure, and Yanfang's husband Weiyangsheng being away from home since her pregnancy and failing to perform to his prime stamina upon his return—the very reason that prompted her to leave her previous husband. None of them had broken their celibacy or chastity until the male protagonist emerged, and all became infatuated with the male protagonist, and praised his performance as much better than their (late) husband.¹⁹⁷ The most direct effect of stating the duration of celibacy and/or dissatisfaction explicitly is to make the subsequent plots logical, as it explains the sexual frustration of the women who suddenly decided to let go of their well-preserved chastity and risked putting themselves in social scandals.

In addition, while the “mothers” are separated from other women by the existence of a living offspring, there is no definite relation between “with(out) living offspring” and “with(out) experiences in childbirth,” as it was not uncommon at the time for children to die prematurely. In the texts surveyed, the existence or absence of offspring normally serves as an indicator of the women's value of remarriage to the protagonist; a widow with no child may remarry, but one with a child would most likely not. Experience in childbirth is also at times used as a euphemism for vagina tightness (or more accurately, the lack thereof), a trait generally praised; looseness is not particularly dismissed, but this trait is usually associated to childbirth or is simply considered unideal. For example, in *Langshi*, Wenfei's vagina is described as being too tight to receive the protagonist as she had never given birth; in contrast, the writer of *Rouputuan* opted to describe Hua Chen, at the beginning of her sex scene, with the line “Hua Chen's vagina has given birth before; it is naturally wide and large inside (花晨的陰戶是生育

¹⁹⁷ It shall be noted that this husband-shaming practice is also shared by non-mother wives.

過的，裏面自然寬大)。”¹⁹⁸ Therefore, though not always explicitly mentioned, a loose vagina is considered a default bodily feature of mothers, which is normally not of positive appeal in erotic fiction.

As the mothers are mostly secondary characters even among her female counterparts, the writers tend not to tell their stories in great detail. These more mature women, however, have similar stories as to how they engaged in illicit affairs in ways different from maidens and young wives, concubines and widows. As shown in Table 3, all of these mothers were connected to the male protagonist through another female. It should be noted that none of the mothers were actively pursued by the male protagonist: Zhao Daniang seduced Langzi as he visited her household looking for opportunities to meet his main sexual interest Wenfei; Hua Chen caught her younger female relatives hiding Weiyangsheng in their bedroom and took him away after threatening the three with exposing them for committing adultery; Bian Erniang actively seduced her young male neighbour with gifts, poems, and bribing his maid; and Ma *shi* was tricked and lured into the affair by Jin *shi*, the wife of Dongmensheng, upon Jin *shi*'s insistence on him looking for an opportunity to have sex with Ma *shi*. Not only did these women have to seize the opportunity actively, such opportunities were all created by younger females already in a relationship with the male protagonist without exception.

Among these characters, the most detailed story showcasing how a widow-mother actively seduced the young bachelor is in *Taohua ying*. In the story, Bian Erliang was the second woman the young protagonist Yuqing had sexual experience with. Described as a widow who did not remarry and normally only does needlework or compose poetry with her daughter, Bian Erniang only began to consider having an affair after witnessing the beauty of Yuqing. In order to seduce the young boy, Bian began with sending an old male servant to deliver valuable congratulative gifts to Yuqing for his examination success. After the gifts were partially

¹⁹⁸ Huang Qiang and Guo Di, eds., *Rou putuan jiaozheng*, 286.

accepted, Bian started to bribe Yuqing's housemaid Shancha, who happened to be having a sexual relationship with her young master. Bian repeatedly sent Shancha invitations for chats and gifted valuables in exchange for her service in delivering gifts and persuading Yuqing. Initially, Yuqing was uninterested and excused himself with proper manners by declaring that he dared not mingle with his widowed neighbour; he also accepted only the shoes and books but rejected the less humble gifts such as fabrics, inkstone and silver. Upon receiving the silk scarf with a poem of invitation, Yuqing maintained his insistence on keeping a distance due to the age difference, claiming:

The gentleman of the western chamber is what I would gleefully be. Unfortunately, she is too old and cannot compare to Cui Ying. What a pity!

西廂君瑞，我所樂為，惜彼年事太晚，不能與崔鶯相並，奈何！¹⁹⁹

It was only until Bian's third attempt that he was finally moved by the widow's active pursuit, but the determining factor that convinced him to have sex with his widowed neighbour was none other than his desire to marry her famously beautiful daughter.

As noted previously, it is not uncommon for female characters in erotic fiction to be depicted as easily tempted and aroused by the male protagonist's appearance and phallus size and/or performance. This applies to more mature female characters as well. Bian was attracted by Yuqing's woman-like beauty; Hua Chen and Zhao Daniang are no exception either. When Hua Chen first met Weiyangsheng, the latter acted as if in a frenzy, bowing to the temple deity as if towards Hua Chen and her company. In response, Hua Chen gave a lot of physical and far-from-subtle hints to show her interest:

Only that half-old beauty acted very pretentious towards Weiyangsheng, giggling non-stop as she covers her mouth... Upon leaving, she even peeked at him a few times before finally going out.

獨有那個半老佳人，對著未央生十分做作，自己掩了口不住的笑... 臨行之際，還把未央生睨了幾眼，方纔出去。²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁹ *Taohua ying kuaishi*, ch. 2, 4a.

²⁰⁰ Huang Qiang and Guo Di, eds., *Rou putuan jiaozheng*, 103.

When she finally got the chance to meet Weiyangsheng privately, she wasted no time in taking him over from her juniors. As Weiyangsheng was found hiding in a chest naked, Hua's decision was to immediately have the chest with the naked man moved to her home, not risking any possibility of losing the opportunity.

Similarly, Zhao Daniang was attracted by Langzi's appearance and famed size and skills. Zhao's opportunity came when Langzi visited her house in hope of reach her neighbour, his ongoing partner in an affair, to no avail. In order to seduce Langzi to bed, Zhao took the initiative in inviting him to stay for a meal. While Langzi did not resent Zhao for her age as Yuqing did, he showed no interest in Zhao until she fed him a few cups of wine and began flirting with him.

Compared to the younger mistresses of the same stories, the mothers and the wives are similarly attracted to the beauty and performance of the male protagonist. The main difference between them lies not only in their average age and appeal to the male, which led to mothers not being actively pursued as other people's wives would be, but also the mothers' independent agency in initiating and conducting the affairs. Taking *Langshi* as an example, as the wife Wenfei became interested in the male protagonist, she did not immediately decide to start an affair. It was after she was carefully persuaded by a trusted elder female, who secretly cooperated with Langzi for money, that she eventually made up her mind. As the young wife, Wenfei also had to rely on the aid of the elder female and another younger maid-confidant in making the plan and delivering messages. In short, the wife is not independent in conducting affairs, as they are usually passively pursued in the first place and depended on female confidants for both planning and execution to succeed in having illicit sex. Such dependence on other females could also be found in An'ge (*Langshi*) and the sisters Ruizhu and Ruiyu (*Rouputuan*).

In contrast, while the mothers are also not entirely independent from the aid of female servants, they acted as the director of their own plans. The maids acted only as their assistants in carrying out their orders, rather than the one suggesting the plans as in the case of Wenfei and An'ge in *Langshi*. In the case of Ma *shi*, she was initially tricked into the illicit affair, believing she would not be caught. However, as jealousy arose between her and Jin *shi*, the legitimate wife of Dongmensheng, Ma *shi* displayed her ability in making plans by suggesting a new coupling arrangement in the household, which the others eventually followed.

Bashful virgin daughters

Almost all the “daughters” attached to the mothers in the stories are introduced as virgins of marriageable age but not yet betrothed, with the exception of Wang Wanniang in *Taohua ying*, whose character is set as an attractive widow, and Zhanggu in *Dengcao heshang zhuan*, who was introduced as a daughter, but was engaged and briefly remained a virgin after properly married. The unmarried-virgin setting applies also to the orphaned Junqing who had no living parents, but co-habited with her de facto substitute “parent,” her bachelor “elder-brother” cousin.²⁰¹ As mentioned earlier, the daughters are the youngest group of female characters in the erotic tales studied, aged around fifteen or sixteen and younger than their respective male protagonists.

The common rite of passage of “daughter” characters in erotic fiction usually includes sexual awakening, deflowering, and the subsequent embrace of sexual pleasure. Their common emotional trait includes dependence on their mother and often also handmaids despite similar age. The stories of these daughters/maidens also seem to echo famous stories of young heroines in other genres, such as *Xixiang ji* and *Jiaohong ji* 嬌紅記 (Mistress and Maid), where the girls are good looking, well-educated, looking for love, have close relationship with their handmaid,

²⁰¹ In the story, Junqing was adopted by her uncle, therefore, lived with her cousin “like blood sisters 如嫡親姊妹一般,” but legally subjected to his decisions in terms of marriage arrangements.

and have had their virginity preserved until the male overcame some obstacles before claiming it.

Voyeurism is one common feature in Chinese erotic stories. In situations where unexperienced daughters are involved, their observing or overhearing their mothers having sex serves the dual function of emphasising their inexperience and bringing about their sexual awakening. In *Taohua ying*, Feiyun learnt of her mother's affair when she overheard their fornication. Suspicious of her mother's unusual claims of tiredness and secretive conversations between her mother and their maid, Feiyun pretended to sleep early and spied on her mother at night, only to witness her mother with a young handsome student getting naked for sex:

Feiyun had one look and hastily turned to leave. Within a few steps, however, [she] stopped, turning back to see...

非雲看了一眼，急忙轉身就走。走不數步，卻又立住了腳，回頭看時...²⁰²

Rather than witnessing the fornication, Miaoniang in *Langshi* first overheard and became startled by her mother's less-than-discreet fornication with the male guest:

This daughter Miaoniang, hearing the two startling the sky and shaking the ground, was so shocked that she felt a startling heart and trembling gut.

話說這女兒妙娘，聽得兩個驚天動地，嚇得心驚膽戰。²⁰³

She was later approached by her mother's lover and drawn into mother-daughter group sex. Zhanggu from *Dengcao heshang zhuan* also overheard sex between the supernatural spirit and her husband and, prior to her first actual experience, saw her father having sex. In general, the daughters are on the opposite side of the spectrum by being passive and sometimes almost against sex, quite unlike their mothers. Being the least experienced, the daughters also had higher dependence on other females for guidance into the world of desire.

Mothers and daughters: the incestuous gatekeeper

Similar to young wives, maiden daughters are more passive in sexual affairs, have no experience in sex, and need help from other females to become involved. As they normally do

²⁰² *Taohua ying kuaishi*, ch. 2, 7a.

²⁰³ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 8.

not have a father acting as the gatekeeper, they are susceptible to the influence of their immediate female contacts, in particular to their mother. Most mother characters actively seduce the young, beautiful and unmarried male protagonist. Upon their success, whenever an unmarried daughter is present, without exception, these girls will be claimed by the male protagonist.

In stories where both the mother and daughter are involved in a sexual affair with the same male, they all follow the same story pattern: the mother seduces the young male protagonist and becomes sexually satisfied; the young bachelor then asks for her daughter for sex, a request that would always be granted. Also, the male protagonist always engages in a sexual relationship with the mother first, regardless of whether he already had plans or had obtained any acquiescence from the mother to pursue the daughter afterwards. Such pattern can be seen in *Langshi*, *Dengcao heshang zhuan*, and *Taohua ying*. In the former two, the protagonist initially had no advanced plans in claiming the daughter when they began the affair with the mother, though readers have already been informed of the existence of the teenage daughter. In both texts, the daughters were only introduced into the story after their mother became sexually satisfied.

The appeal of virgin daughters does not only serve excitement in erotic stories, but also functions as an asset for mother characters who are looking for sex. Yuqing, the protagonist of *Taohua ying*, is one of the rare examples of a man rejecting sexual solicitation from a woman, in this case his widowed neighbour Bian Erniang. The thirty-six-year-old widow-mother Bian Erniang is twenty years senior to the male protagonist. The age difference made her very possibly the same age as Yuqing's mother, if not older. Despite her repeated efforts of invitation, he did not show any interest to his neighbour, even after being positively impressed by her skills in poetry and his bribed maid's persuasion. The turning point of his attitude was the moment his maid-cum-sexual partner made the following point:

(Shancha) smiled and said, “Sir, you have always said [you] want to marry a lady like Xishi. Now this Bian lady, I’m not exaggerating for her, has an appearance that sinks cars and lands wild geese, and a face that shuts the moon and embarrasses flowers; even Xishi may not be competition to her. Once an official’s family proposed to marry her, Erniang refused sternly. If sir is willing to obey her will, this marriage arrangement will be as easy as spitting on your own hand.” Yuqing has also heard about Feiyun’s beauty, therefore he nods and said, “What you are saying is sensible!”

[山茶]又笑道：「相公常說要娶一位大娘，必如西施一樣。今卞家大姐，不是山茶為他誇口，其有沉魚落雁之容，閉月羞花之貌，只怕西施，還不能夠及他。曾有宦室求親，二娘堅執不允，相公如肯從順其意，這門親事可唾手而成。」玉卿平時也曾聞得非雲之美，遂點頭道：「汝言有理！」²⁰⁴

In line with the conventional values in erotic fiction, marrying the most beautiful woman is always the goal of young literati bachelors. As a widow, Bian has the power to decide who gets to marry her daughter. At this point in the story, Yuqing had only heard about the Bians through Shancha’s description of their beauty, and was positively impressed by the poems; however, none of those swayed his decision in rejecting Bian Erniang due to her age. Merely by the promising prospect of marrying the girl whose beauty was only heard of, but not seen, Yuqing’s previous reluctance against the “old woman” immediately dissolved. Although Bian Erniang has been described as talented and beautiful, her age positioned her as merely a stepping stone towards the virgin daughter; her main value is reduced to her power to decide to whom her daughter shall be married.

Illicit affairs between (usually widowed) mothers and young unmarried bachelors typically start with the mother actively inviting or seducing the young man. As a widow, the mother officially had the legal power to decide on her daughter’s marriage, making them the doorway to marriage to a fair maiden. In erotic novels, the mothers are indeed portrayed as the door to the desirable daughters who are otherwise sheltered, and the door is always easily opened. Once the male protagonist has pleased the mother, the young men could proceed to ask for the mother’s permission in claiming the unwedded, virgin daughter. This is a request the sexually satisfied mother would always gladly approve. While the term “marriage” or “couple” is

²⁰⁴ *Taohua ying kuaishi*, ch. 2, 5a–5b.

mentioned, the only example where an actual marriage carried out between the protagonist and the daughter is in *Taohua ying*. It is also the only text where the daughter refused the protagonist's sexual advances and remained a virgin until she was married to him with proper rites.

Aside from opening doors for males to court their daughters, the mothers sometimes go beyond approving the males' request and actively facilitate the affair if the daughter appears reluctant. In *Taoyua ying*, when Bian Erniang saw her daughter acting offended by a flirtatious letter from Yuqing, which he sent secretly, Bian Erniang only consoled her daughter by casually dismissing Yuqing as merely crazed and not to be taken seriously. Once Yuqing asked for Bian Erniang's approval for marrying her daughter Feiyun, she agreed without hesitation, only subtly hinting at further physical "reward" in the future:

Erniang said: "I have had this in mind for long too. This marriage shall definitely be as you wish, [you] don't even have to propose with white jade; just don't forget my beautiful favour."

二娘道：「我也久有此心，這親事斷然依你，不要說白璧為聘，只不許忘了我的美情。」²⁰⁵

Compared to Bian, although the mothers in *Langshi* and *Dengcao heshang zhuan* had also thoroughly enjoyed the male protagonist, they showed greater concern towards their daughter's welfare: Wang was concerned that her daughter was already betrothed; Zhao was concerned about her virgin daughter's ability to cope physically. Neither insisted the male protagonist to keep their hands off their daughters, and both later agreed to his advances.

The widow Wang Wanniang in *Taohua ying* was no virgin upon her encounter with the male protagonist. Introduced as living with her mother Ma *shi* (TY), who had little role in the story, Wang had the following conversation with Ma *shi* (TY) upon receiving a parcel containing her lost hairpin, a short letter and a poem:

After reading [the letter], Wanniang smiled and said, "(...) In my lowly opinion, [I] would like to ask him to meet up tonight, in order to be engaged for life. [I] wonder what

²⁰⁵ *Taohua ying kuaishi*, ch. 3, 9a.

is mother's idea?" Seeing her so skinny with sickness, [Ma was filled with] love and sympathy. She therefore agreed immediately.

婉娘念畢，莞然而笑道：「(...) 據孩兒鄙意，欲於今夜就要約他相會，以訂終身。未卜母親主意若何？」馬氏見他病得骨瘦伶仃，十分憐愛，便即一口許允。²⁰⁶

While Ma *shi* (TY) did not engage in the affair herself, as the mother, she gave her tacit permission of her daughter's illicit affair by avoiding the scene:

Ma *shi* expected there couldn't be nothing happening. After eating dinner, [she] went into the room herself to sleep.

馬氏料想不能無事。吃完晚飯，先向房內自去睡了。²⁰⁷

These examples are rather different from *Wutong ying* 梧桐影 (Shadow of the Chinese Parasol Tree), a novel which borrowed the preface of *Rou putuan* but is, in contrast to the stories discussed in this study, against illicit sex. The text also incorporates the plot where a not-so-attractive mother is able to secure a long-term extramarital affair simply because her daughter is a potential prize:

Although the woman is thirty-six or seven, and looks ordinary, [she] however has a daughter who is already fourteen or fifteen, [and] very beautiful. [He is] anticipating in two to three years of wait [he can] have her mother be the go-between, [and] thus the long liaison.

婦人雖已三十六七，貌亦平常，却有个女兒已十四五歲了，甚是美麗，指望等他二三年，要他娘做腳，故此往來長久了。²⁰⁸

In this novel, which is seemingly pro-establishment and critical of Buddhist monks and actors while seeing them as sex criminals, this mother was also painted in a negative light. In the face of monetary temptation, she silently encouraged the rape of her reluctant daughter. No tender exchanges between the mother and daughter are seen as in other erotic novels.

In erotic stories, as the mothers and daughters are often written into the affair with the same male, their relationship is much more than only the guardian and the guarded. The mother-daughter relationships are portrayed to be highly intimate that they do not shy away from each other when sex is involved. It is not surprising as erotic fiction normally portrays a

²⁰⁶ *Taohua ying kuaishi*, ch. 7, 7a–7b.

²⁰⁷ *Taohua ying kuaishi*, ch. 7, 8a–8b.

²⁰⁸ *Wutong ying* 梧桐影 (Shadow of the Chinese Parasol Tree), *Siwuxie huibao* 思無邪匯寶, vol. 16, eds. Chan Hing-ho 陳慶浩 and Wang Ch'iu-kuei 王秋桂 et al. (Taipei: Taiwan dayingbaiké gufen youxiangongsi, 1994), 104.

jealousy-free world, where women would willingly share one man, such that mother and daughter would share the same sex partner. The mothers may initially enjoy their affair secretly hidden away from their daughter, but the daughters will always become aware of their mother's affair through hearing the noise or peeking into their mother's room, and eventually become involved with their mother's approval. When the daughters become more invested in their relationship with the male, they do not seem too bothered by his sexual relationship with their mother unless there is direct conflict of interest due to overlapping needs. The mothers and daughters also keep their secret from the husband/father throughout the duration but may acknowledge and discuss their individual relationship with the male.

A more extraordinary example of an intimate mother–daughter relationship or their ease in sexual intimacy can be found in *Langshi*. In addition to approving sexual advances toward her own daughter, the mother Zhao Daniang persuaded her daughter in submitting to Langzi, i.e., participating in pre-marital sex, and even called her silly for rejecting the opportunity:

Miaoniang turned to her side, only wanting to push Langzi away. That woman thus walked to the bed and said, “My child, being a woman, sooner or later [there will be] such a day. Just submit [to him].” Miaoniang said, “Whatever he wants to do, mom is already there. Why come and bother me? I’m not going [to that].” The woman said, “Silly child, sooner or later there will be such a day... being a woman, this happens. Your mom has first done it with him, and I like him too, calling him my darling. However you don’t like this handsome student. Isn’t that a missed opportunity?”

妙娘把身子側轉，只管推開浪子，那婦人便走到床前道：「吾兒，做了婦人，前後有一日的，從了罷。」妙娘道：「他要做甚的，便有娘在，怎麼又來纏我，我不去。」婦人道：「痴兒，前後有一日的...做了女子，便有這節，你娘先與他幹了，我也愛他，把他做心肝來叫，你卻不愛這個標致書生，卻不錯過？」²⁰⁹

Compared to Bian and Wang, Zhao did more than allowing her young boy affair to deflower her daughter. To a certain extent, her decision and speech in the scene could be interpreted as a benevolent act from a loving mother: knowing well that the deflowering would happen to her daughter sooner or later, this mother decided that a handsome young man with good skills would be a good option for her daughter in exploring this essential part of a woman's life. Her

²⁰⁹ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 8.

benevolence extended to the point that her concerns were only about her daughter missing the opportunity and Langzi potentially hurting her daughter physically. On the other hand, this act no doubt is questionable in the sense that Zhao's action is both a breach to her duty to protect her daughter's chastity and a sabotage to her daughter's value in the future, as she is unmarried while also poor.

This mother–daughter exchange on illicit sex did not end with the conversation. Instead, Zhao oversees her daughter's first sexual experience with Langzi, consoling and guiding her throughout the process as the girl complained about the pain. She even took over the girl's position until she felt ready to reassume her position:

Miaoniang felt insufferable, with hazy eyes and frowned brows, [she] said to the woman, “Mom, what should I do?”

妙娘覺道難過，星眼朦朧，眉頭雙促，對著婦人道：「娘，叫我怎麼好？」²¹⁰
As her mother's advice and consoling did not help, Miaoniang cried for help another time,

Miaoniang said, “Mom! How could I bear? Stand in for me once.”

妙娘道：「娘啊！我那裡過得？代我一次。」²¹¹
Her mother gladly obliged, as she “on one hand sympathises with this girl, and on the other hand feels aroused (那婦人一則惜這女子，二來也是動興).”²¹²

While it is rare to see in erotic fiction a lustful mother with a son instead of a daughter, such examples exist in *Rou putuan* and *Xiuta yeshi*, and the mother–son bond is highly different from that of mother–daughter, even if the son shares the same male lover with his mother like the daughters in other novels do. The child son of Hua Chen in *Rou putuan*, aged only ten, had no role aside from his mere existence, but his existence alone led to Hua Chen having to move into her younger relatives' house rather than staying in hers, lest her son become aware of his mother's illicit activities. As the senior, Hua Chen was supposed to be the host of their planned orgy, yet her son was actually a burden that led not only to her losing the opportunity of

²¹⁰ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 8.

²¹¹ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 8.

²¹² *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 8.

remarrying, but also her superior status as the host in the orgy with Weiyangsheng and her younger relatives.

The story of the widow–mother Ma *shi* in *Xiuta yeshi* differs from other lustful mother stories in many ways, even that of Hua Chen’s. Firstly, Ma *shi* has one son but no daughter; secondly, she is only three years older than the atypically “old” male protagonist; thirdly, she began her relationship with the protagonist after her son did, which is the exact opposite to the common mother-first sequence found in other texts. The son concerned, Zhao Dali, acts as the submissive one in his relationship with the male protagonist, placing himself in a comparatively inferior role to his male superior and to his mother. Compared to the mother-daughter relationship in other texts, Ma *shi* and Zhao Dali do not share an intimate bond despite sharing the same man for sex. First of all, Zhao Dali did not know about his mother’s relationship with Dongmensheng until he was summoned by his mother to pair up with Jin *shi*. The two did not discuss their experience with Dongmensheng, nor did they participate in any sexual act together as Zhao Daniang and her daughter did. The only similarity is that the coupling of the younger ones is arranged only to cater to the mother’s desire in extending her relationship with the male protagonist, except that the arrangement in *Xiuta yeshi* is asking the son to marry the mother’s newfound lover’s existing wife.

In the story, neither Ma *shi* or Dongmensheng initiated the affair. The two became sexually connected under the insistence of Jin *shi* 金氏, Dongmensheng’s own wife, as an act of revenge for Zhao Dali’s fault in hurting Jin *shi*:

Jin *shi* said, “He has played with your wife with no cost, so you should also play with his household’s vagina. But Dali has no wife. Now his mother is only thirty something and has been widowed for over a decade. My heart would be solaced only if his mother is arranged to be played by [you] my darling.”

金氏道：「他白白的戲了你的老婆，你也戲他家的屎才是。只是大里沒有老婆。今他娘才三十多齡，又守了十多年寡，安排得他的娘，等心肝戲了，我心裡才過去呢。」²¹³

²¹³ *Xiuta yeshi*, *Siwuxie huibao*, vol. 2, 227.

This speech played a twist of the cliché saying “[If you] taint the other’s wife or daughter, [your] wife and daughter will be tainted by others (淫人妻女，妻女亦為人所淫),” a situation perpetuated in *Rou putuan*, only substituting the wife and daughter for the mother. Putting one’s wife and daughter as retribution to their husband or father’s wrongdoings is not an uncommon plot; it serves as the backbone of both *Rou putuan* and *Dengcao heshang zhuan*. Nevertheless, it is rare to see one’s mother being set up as a substitution in such context, especially since mothers conventionally have a much higher status in a family and are not regarded as possessions of her son as much as a woman would to her father or husband.

As shown in the previous two examples, the implication of the existence of both mother and son in erotic fiction includes the higher difficulty for a man to intrude into someone else’s household to meet with the females, and higher concern for women of respected households in participating in illicit affairs. The descriptions of such relationship and the comparatively lower quantity also suggest that this is not a popular plot. The absence of young daughter also erases the easy “reward” of getting the young virgin, a plot almost always articulated in erotic stories whenever a mother character is involved. Despite such unwelcoming features of mother and son relationships in erotic fiction, the sexual relationship between the young male with someone the age of their mother actually mimics a mother-and-son, or mother-and-son-in-law relationship. Even though such relationships never lead to marriage in the novels, the existence of such plots in multiple texts of different time reflects a certain degree of popularity.

As outlined in this chapter, the more desired women in erotic fiction can be further categorised into different mistress types, each with a conventional set of common traits such as age, background and activeness in sexual affairs. Age and experience in life are highly relevant to their confidence in initiating sexual affairs, with mothers being the most comfortable in taking charge of the sexual affair, from taking initiative to handling subsequent sexual activities; widows and wives come in between with varying degrees of reliance on

assistance from other females, and virgin daughters are shown to be both fascinated and frightened by sex, such that guidance from other females is always needed.

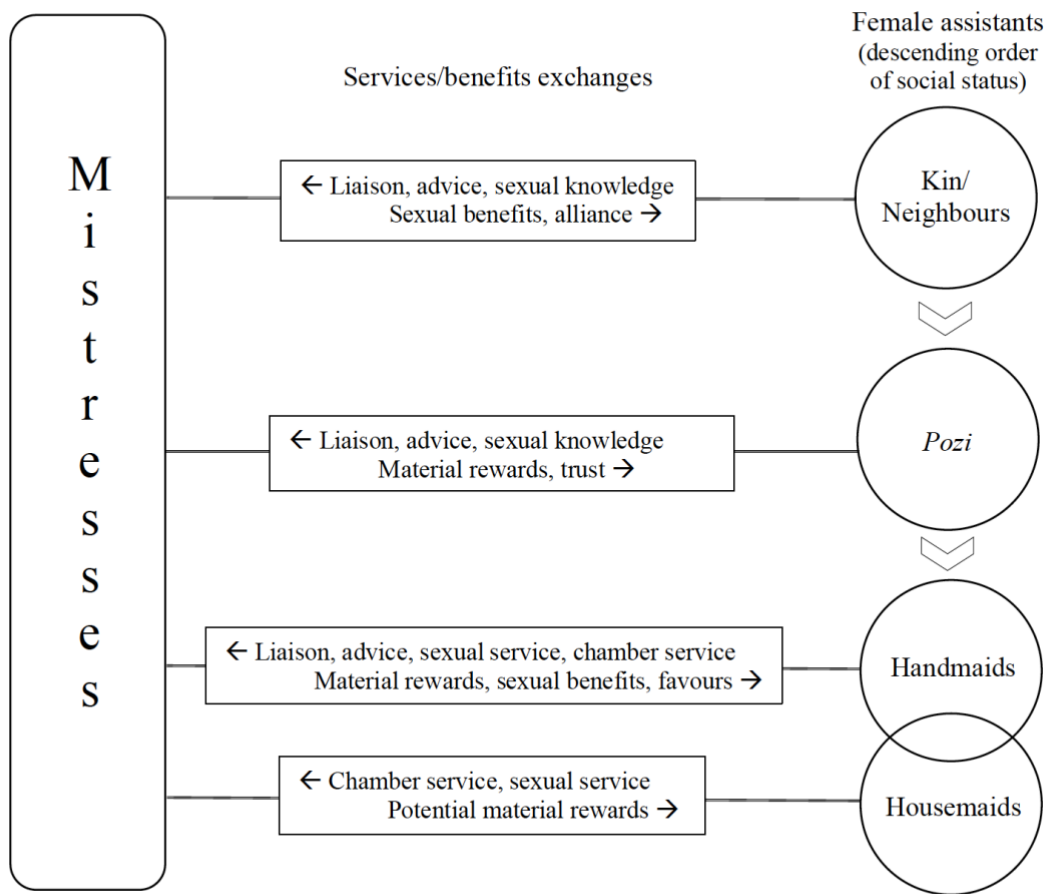
It is also evident that mistress characters rarely conduct sexual affairs privately without any interaction with other women, and the assistance by others is often the crucial element that makes illicit sexual affair an actuality. Who are the females who played such important role in these forbidden activities? How did they involved and why did they participate? In order to answer these questions, the following chapter shifts the focus to these characters which are dubbed “the female assistants.” They are the ones who participated in the plot to various degrees. Without them, sexual affairs could hardly take place to begin with.

Chapter 3: Female assistants to licentious mistresses

As illustrated in the previous chapter, the main female characters, especially the more desired wives, are often portrayed as bashful and reliant on other females to undertake their illicit affairs. Despite the secretive nature of illicit sexual affairs, most of the stories involve more than just the female directly engaged in sexual activities (i.e. having sexual intercourse) with the male protagonist. Aside from the coveted female characters (i.e. the mistresses, as categorised in the previous chapter), there is often the existence of other female character types in erotic fiction, serving purposes other than merely the object of sexual desire. The most common type of such female character is the maidservant, followed by *pozi*. In some texts, their functions were instead carried out by other characters, such as female kin and neighbours or partially fulfilled by an outcast male like in *Rou putuan*. These assisting females generally served the main female characters in mediating the latter's trysts, advising how to conduct an affair, and, in the case of maidservants, aiding their mistresses in their sexual activities in the bedchamber.

Depending on their social status and relationship with the main female participating in sexual affairs, the assistants' roles differed in terms of services provided and the rewards/benefits they could obtain afterwards. These types of "other" female characters are not unique to erotic fiction but are rather common stock characters with roles similar to their counterparts in other literary genres. However, while their portrayal revolves solely around erotic affairs, a closer study of the various characters' relationships in the context of illicit affairs reveals potential destabilising factors that affect the seemingly fixed class-based hierarchy of the female sex. The general interrelationship between the mistresses and the female assistants, as portrayed in erotic fiction, is summarised in the following diagram:

Diagram 1: Interrelationships between mistresses and female assistants



Similar to the mistress category, there is also a hierarchy among the female assistants. This is present not only between the female kin/neighbor characters and the *pozi* and maidservants, as the former group was otherwise mistresses in their own right, but also between handmaids and housemaids who were, in theory, both female house servants but were certainly unequal. These females of different social backgrounds collectively formed the female network, in which members engaged in activities for mutual benefit, with shared risks, with limited participation, and/or cooperation with characters outside of this network. A more detailed record of female assistant characters from the primary texts and their respective roles, functions and rewards is presented in the following section to further demonstrate the similarities and

differences between the various characters. Although the mistresses were understood as having more power in general, their relationship with the female assistants is more codependent than authoritative, especially when emotional exchanges are taken into consideration. This is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

This chapter chiefly investigates the common female supporting characters featured in stories of illicit affairs in erotic fiction. Their narrative functionality and background could be more flexible than the main female characters but were still generally tied to a certain stereotype. Although on the surface, there exists a static societal hierarchy between the mistresses, their kin and neighbour, the *pozi*, and the two types of maidservants, when examined in the context of illicit affairs as narrated in erotic fiction, their interrelationships are complicated by their respective characteristics, ranging from material capital, physical mobility, and specialised knowledge. By identifying their similarities and differences, this chapter seeks to demonstrate how the female network operated within the late imperial Chinese sexual fantasy and how women were imagined to be utilising the opportunity for benefits in such situations.

The chapter begins with an overview of different types of assisting female characters, including their respective roles in late imperial Chinese society as well as in fiction. Instead of separating them according to their character roles (i.e., maid, *pozi*, neighbour), this chapter will discuss this group of characters by the function/service they provide (i.e., mediating between the male and main female/mistresses in sexual affairs, providing and executing plans for secretive affairs, etc.). This arrangement is made in light of their overlapping functions, in comparison to the simpler roles played by characters in the mistress category. The functional aspect of the mistress–assistant relationship (i.e., mediating and advising of affairs, chamber services, and sexual service) is first examined to outline the domestic hierarchy among the female characters. The emotional aspect of these relationships will then be discussed as we

examine the numerous occasions where the mistresses were, in fact, overpowered by their assistants and, thus, reveal the volatility of the power structure within the female network.

3.1 Overview of common female assistants

A common feature of female assistants, especially the maids and *pozi*, is their comparative lack of character depth and their stereotyped personalities that highly resemble similar characters in other genres. The main female characters, though highly similar in actions and thoughts in most erotic tales, can still be identified as individual personalities that are somewhat distinguishable. This is, however, not applicable to the supporting female characters, as their image is not individually unique in erotic fiction but highly generic.

In order to show the popularity of certain female assistant types and the common functions they perform in their roles, I have compiled the following table to summarise the basic information about the female assistant characters identified from the five main texts studied in this thesis. Some of the characters have multiple roles that place them as both a mistress and a female assistant, but the discussion in this chapter will focus chiefly on their assisting role.

Table 4: Roles and services provided by female assistants

Character (text title abbreviation) ²¹⁴	Role in fiction	Liaison ²¹⁵	Advice ²¹⁶	Sexual knowledge ²¹⁷	Chamber service ²¹⁸	Sexual service ²¹⁹	Material rewards ²²⁰	Sexual benefits ²²¹
Qian po 錢婆 (LS)	<i>Pozi</i>	✓	✓	✓			✓	
Zhang pozi 張婆子 (LS)	<i>Pozi</i>	✓	✓				✓	

²¹⁴ For the full-text titles of the abbreviated terms, see Glossary.

²¹⁵ Refers to services of connecting the male and female characters.

²¹⁶ Refers to services of giving affair-related suggestions and advice.

²¹⁷ Includes knowledge concerning sex and relevant issues.

²¹⁸ Refers to on-scene services demanded at the mistresses' sexual activities, exclusive of sexual service.

²¹⁹ Specified as the direct participation in sexual activities with other characters upon command.

²²⁰ Inclusive of given and promised material rewards.

²²¹ Specified as sexual satisfaction desired by the respective character, which was not obtained via commanded sexual service.

Hong pozi 紅婆子 (DHZ)	Pozi	✓						
Chunjiao 春嬌 (LS)	Handmaid	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Chunying 春鶯 (LS)	Handmaid	✓	✓					
Hongye 紅葉 (LS)	Handmaid	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Lanying 蘭英 (TY)	Handmaid	✓	✓			✓		✓
Nuanyu 暖玉 (DHZ)	Handmaid/ Concubine	✓				✓		✓
Shancha 山茶 (TY)	Handmaid/ Neighbour	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
Jianlan 建蘭 (LS)	Housemaid				✓			
Wenxiang 文湘 (LS)	Housemaid				✓			
Xiaolian 小蓮 (LS)	Housemaid				✓			
Xiaoxue 小雪 (LS)	Housemaid				✓			
Ruyi 如意 (RP)	Housemaid					✓		
A'xiu 阿秀 (XY)	Housemaid				✓	✓		
Saihong 塞紅 (XY)	Housemaid				✓	✓		
Xiaojiao 小嬌 (XY)	Housemaid					✓		
Zhao daniang 趙大娘 (LS)	Neighbour/Wi dow-mother	✓					✓	✓
Ugly woman of the house opposite 對門醜婦 (RT)	Neighbour/Wif e	✓				✓		✓
Xiangyun 香雲 (RT)	Kin/2nd Wife	✓	✓					✓
Jin shi 金氏 (XY)	Kin/2nd Wife	✓	✓	✓				✓

Table 4 lists all the named female characters that fall within the female assistant category from the five novels studied, including with multiple females. An exception is the “ugly woman of the house opposite” from *Rou putuan*, who was never given a name by the writer but played a prominent role with frequent appearances and dialogues that matched the level of most other female assistants (other than housemaids). As shown in the table, each group of female assistants has different combinations of functions and they obtained different benefits. To better understand their assigned roles and the corresponding implications, these characters will be

discussed in three groups according to their social status, namely the *pozi*, the maidservants, and the female neighbours and kin.

The *pozi*

The term *pozi* 婆子, when used to describe a woman, often brings up a cultural stereotype with general traits that are expected to be commonly understood but rarely clearly defined. The term has several English translations: a “granny” in Victoria Cass’s study of different types of “dangerous women;”²²² a “dame” in David Tod Roy’s translation of *Jin Ping Mei*;²²³ and a “crone” in David Hawkes’s translation of *Honglou meng*.²²⁴ The word “granny” was chosen by Cass “to catch that mix of intimate and formal that describes the Chinese *po*.”²²⁵ “Dame” and “crone” emphasise the comparatively old age or maturity of these women, with Roy’s word choice bearing a more neutral tone and Hawkes’s — more negative connotations. Indeed, the character *po* 婆 in mainly refers to married women of mature age and serves as a respectful term for addressing elderly women. However, when the character is used as a compound *pozi* 婆子 or *poniang* 婆娘,²²⁶ these terms tend to convey a neutral to negative attitude toward the women addressed as such without any indication of age. The *pozi* address also tends to indicate the occupation of the woman-addressee as one of the *sangu liupo* 三姑六婆 (three nuns and six *po*); this title was derived not from the age but the specialised range of religious and social functions held. Due to a lack of satisfactory translation that could maintain the indication of the profession without potentially giving an unverified implication of the age of the female

²²² See Victoria Cass, *Dangerous Women: Warriors, Grannies, and Geishas of the Ming* (Maryland and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 1999). This word choice was also employed in the translation of Feng Menglong 馮夢龍, “Jiang Xingge Reencounters His Pearl Shirt,” in *Stories Old and New: A Ming Dynasty Collection*, trans. Shuhui Yang 楊淑惠 and Yunqin Yang 楊韻琴 (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2000), 9–47.

²²³ See Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng, *The Plum in the Golden Vase or, Chin P’ing Mei Vol. One-Five*, trans. David Tod Roy. (Princeton, NY and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1993–2013).

²²⁴ See Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹, *The Story of the Stone: A Chinese Novel in Five Volumes*, trans. David Hawkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973).

²²⁵ Cass, *Dangerous Women*, 48.

²²⁶ A neutral to derogative term usually used to refer to married women.

character concerned, the term *pozi* will be retained to keep its meaning, with the term presented without italics when used to refer to a character name.

The term *pozi* was often associated with the collective term *sangu liupo*. In the late Yuan journal *Nancun chuogeng lu* 南村輟耕錄 (Records of Farming Breaks in Nancun), written by Tao Zongyi 陶宗儀 (1312–1403), *sangu liupo* were described:

The three nuns (*sangu*) refer to Buddhist nuns, Daoist priestesses, and female fortune tellers; the six working women (*liupo*) refer to human traffickers, matchmakers, witches, procuresses, herbalists, and midwives. They are the same as the three harmful earthy branches and six clashes (astrological terms indicating misfortune or harmful times). It is rare for whoever has one of them in the house not to result in illicit sex or theft. If one can be cautious and distant from them, as if avoiding snakes and scorpions, that is basically the method of cleansing the household.

三姑者，尼姑、道姑、卦姑也；六婆者，牙婆、媒婆、師婆、虔婆、藥婆、穩婆也。蓋與三刑六害同也。人家有一於此，而不致姦盜者，幾希矣。若能謹而遠之，如避蛇蠍，庶乎淨宅之法。²²⁷

In a copy of the encyclopaedia *Jujia biyong shilei quanji* 居家必用事類全集 (Full Collection of Household Must-use Items) with a preface dated 1568, the same idea was retained with additional details as to which of the nine females specified were to be treated with extra caution:

Buddhist nuns, Daoist priestesses, matchmakers, human traffickers, female dealers, and women who claim to do acupuncture shall not be allowed in the household. Whenever something goes missing or someone is lured into things of no good, it is all because of such people.

尼姑、道婆、媒婆、牙婆及婦人以賣買針灸為名，皆不可令入人家。凡脫漏及引誘為不美之事，皆此曹也。²²⁸

In this entry, the midwives, herbalists, and folk religion practitioners were exempted from the rejection. The exemption of the former two is understandable due to the nature of their services, which required body contact, and the latter due to unknown reasons. The procuresses were presumably ignored as they were less likely to enter ordinary households. However, this

²²⁷ Tao Zongyi 陶宗儀, *Nancun chuogeng lu* 南村輟耕錄 [Records of Farming Breaks in Nancun], eds. Kezhong Wu 武克忠 and Guiyou Yin 尹貴友 (Jinan: Qi Lu shushe, 2007), 137.

²²⁸ *Jujia biyong shilei quanji yiji* 居家必用事類全集乙集 [The Complete Works of Home Essentials, vol. 2] 1568 Edition with Preface by Feilaishanren 飛來山人. Collected by Peking University, 57.

encyclopaedia only subtly warned of potential theft and indecencies, only suggesting that people forbid these women into their houses instead of avoiding all contact. Nevertheless, any women falling into the *sangu liupo* category were a collectively demonised group as the source of theft and moral downfall.

Pozi providing medical services in opposition to male medical practitioners likely posed as business competition to men, also possibly contributing to male tension and distrust towards them, while men were the main contributors of most texts and prints at the time.²²⁹ As Furth observed, the medical women in Ming were “rhetorically lumped together as grannies (*po*) or ‘old woman’ (*laowen*)... such colloquialism named her social place as plebeian and her skills as rudimentary, and inasmuch as they also named her person as undignified.”²³⁰ This statement is as much a proof of the attempts to erase medical women as respectable and skilled practitioners as it is a proof of the derogative undertones expressed by the *po* address. This is especially true since the *pozi* address evoked the image of *sangu liupo*, which was called to be treated with suspicion. In short, as the *pozi* became synonymous with negative stereotypes of women that were viewed with suspicion, simply calling somebody as such became an effective way of degrading them and demeaning the credibility of their skills.

Nevertheless, despite all the warnings against the various *pozi* (an umbrella term that demonises a range of professional and/or religious women), their specialised services to society, such as matchmaking and midwifery, appear unchallenged but also perhaps unintentionally overlooked. Due to the idealised gender segregation practices, women from families of sufficient financial standing were likely cloistered at home and raised with the taboo of impropriety in socialising with males outside their direct family circle. As their religious, medical and purchasing needs likely called for specialised help outside of the household, *pozi*

²²⁹ A study on the suspicion expressed by male medical practitioners toward medical *pozi* can be found in Charlotte Furth, “In and Out of the Family: Ming Women as Healing Experts,” in *A Flourishing Yin: Gender in China’s Medical History*, ed. Charlotte Furth (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 266–300.

²³⁰ Furth, “In and Out of the Family,” 271–272.

appeared a natural choice as they were able to respond to such demands. Their gender also made room for ease in direct communication, especially if medical and ritual services involved physical contact. The combination of the appeal of the practitioners of the same gender (as their potential gentry women-clients) and the availability of their services thus provided them with opportunities to enter different households and bond with these cloistered women from fine households. Their activities and presence could have raised suspicion and anxiety in the males of those households (whose personal interests might have been harmed), and thus their voices opposing *pozi* were most likely expressed and preserved in text. As *pozi* were active working women in society, it is likely that they were of humble background and had to earn a living by any means, including selling services to women. Their need to earn money likely contributed to the generic stereotype regarding their greed, which added to the popular demonisation of *pozi* as a generalised female type.

In fiction, *pozi* was usually used as a standalone term with little to no explanation: normally, no age, outlook, or speciality of the character was explained, and their background would be revealed only when it was necessary for the plot where empathetic persuasions were featured. It is as though every reader was assumed to have already known what a *pozi* should signify. The term appeared to be used both to denote the profession of the character concerned, as well as a convenient way of character-shaping using the rarely-challenged underlying stereotype of such characters: *pozi* were perceived to be cunning, knowledgeable, thoroughly trusted by other females, and hungry for money. Generally, *pozi* in fiction are working-class women providing a range of services that cover one or more of the *liupo* definitions, including matchmaking, midwifery, medical advice, hairdressing, small businesses of selling clothing, jewellery, and medicines, as well as the gathering and disseminating information/gossip.

The late Ming fiction *Jin Ping Mei* narrated a story revolving around the Ximen household, where a range of *pozi* characters was featured, each performing different functions and, in turn,

developing different relationships with the women of the household. Wang po 王婆, a prominent supporting female character featured in *Jin Ping Mei*, who was also featured in *Shuihu zhuan*,²³¹ from which the novel adapted and developed, was described to be “a match-maker... also a broker, a mid-wife, a lovers’ go-between, and a bawd (是做媒，又會做牙婆，也會抱腰，也會收小的，也會說風情，也會做馬泊六)”²³². Another notable *pozi* character Liu po 劉婆 was described to be providing medical aid and occult practice advice and introducing women to her fortune-teller husband for profit. Both examples appear to reflect that it was common for the ‘six *po*’ to be actually one person providing different services rather than a specialised female service provider. Regarding the role of *sangu liupo* relating to other women as shown in *Jin Ping Mei*, Lin Ching-su observed that they actually responded to the spiritual and material needs of many women, including gossip and female-exclusive items that were unfamiliar to men, making cloistered females their main customers.²³³

The close relation between cloistered females and *sangu liupo* in fiction often served as evidence in support of occasional warnings against them found in different genres. For instance, the negative attitude towards *sangu liupo* found in journals and encyclopaedias was perpetuated in popular stories. In Ling Mengchu’s 凌濛初 (1580–1644) *Pai’an jingqi* 拍案驚奇 (Slapping the Table in Amazement), a passage describing *sangu liupo* served as the prologue to a short story to emphasise the danger of interacting with these women:

²³¹ The earliest mention of the two texts could be traced to the 1590s and 1550, respectively. See Tina Lu, “The Literary Culture of the Late Ming (1573–1644),” in *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature Vol. II: From 1375*, eds. Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 104; and Kang-i Sun Chang, “Literature of the Early Ming to Mid-Ming (1375–1572),” in *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature Vol. II: From 1375*, ed. Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 53.

²³² Shi Nai’an and Luo Guanzhong, *Shuihu zhuan*, 244. Translation cited from Shi Nai’an and Luo Guanzhong, *Outlaws of the Marsh*, trans. Sidney Shapiro (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1980), 381.

²³³ Lin Ching-su 林景蘇, “Sangu liupo yu shidai pingjia: yi cihuaben *Jinpingmei* Weili 三姑六婆與時代評價：以詞話本《金瓶梅》為例 [Female Gossipmongers and Busybodies and the Value of Their Age: A Textual Search in *Chin Ping Mei*],” *Nixue xuezhì* 女學學誌 [Journal of Women’s and Gender Studies] 16 (2003), 186.

Let this storyteller begin by warning everyone against associating with women of the nine professions.²³⁴ Such women have too much time on their hands and too many tricks up their sleeves. With access to thousands of households, they know too much of the world and its ways. Not to mention that nine out of ten women of easy virtue fall readily into their traps; even women of impeccable moral behaviour become prey to their machinations. With mental prowess rivalling that of Zhang Liang and Chen Ping and eloquence on a par with that of Sui He and Lu Jia, they try by every conceivable means to stir up trouble where none existed. Therefore, decent and respectable officials' families, as a rule, put up large posters at their gates explicitly denying access to such women.

話說三姑六婆，最是人家不可與他往來出入。蓋是此輩功夫又閒，心計又巧，亦且走過千家萬戶，見識又多，路數又熟，不要說有些不正氣的婦女，十個着了九個兒，就是一些針縫也沒有的，他會千方百計弄出機關，智賽良、平，辯同何、賈，無事誘出有事來。所以宦戶人家有正經的，往往大張告示，不許出入。²³⁵

One of the most famous tales of *pozi* facilitating illicit affairs upon well-paid requests from males is Feng Menglong's *Jiangxingge chonghui zhenzhushan*. It was an adaptation of Song Maocheng 宋懋澄 (1569–1622)'s *Zhu shan* 珠衫 (The Pearl Vest) written in the early 1600s, in which a jewellery-selling *pozi* was paid to lure a chaste woman into an illicit affair, as the latter gradually fell into the *pozi*'s months-long scheming in leading her into the affair. In *Jin Ping Mei*, many *pozi* characters who were described as having close relationships with women inhabiting the private households were also criticised by the writer, with a serious warning against the entire social category:

Whether your household is great or small, it is best to avoid the service of priests and nuns, Buddhists and Taoists, wet nurses and go-betweens. There is no telling what they will do behind your back. A port of yore has left us some words of admonition in the form of a quatrain that expresses this very well:

To the formal reception room of your house
never admit female professionals;
Always keep your back door securely locked
in order to deny their admission.
If you have a well in your courtyard,
repair even the slightest fissure;

²³⁴ The translators have opted to use the term “nine professions” with the definitions to replace *sangu liupo* (the three nuns and six *pozi*) in the original text rather than a direct translation. The definitions are omitted here as they were added by the translators but not in the original text.

²³⁵ Ling Mengchu 凌濛初, *Pai'an Jingqi* 拍案驚奇 [Slapping the Table in Amazement], ed. Leng Shijun 冷時峻 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1998), 70. Translation cited from Ling Mengchu 凌濛初, *Slapping the Table in Amazement: A Ming Dynasty Story Collection*, trans. Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2018), 115. Their translations of the marginalia are omitted here as it was not part of the main body of the text.

Then your catastrophes will be few
and your stars of good fortune many.

但凡大小人家，師尼僧道，乳母牙婆，切記休招惹他。背地甚麼事不幹出來？古人有四句格言說得好：

堂前切莫走三婆，後門常鎖莫通河。院內有井防小口，便是禍少福星多。²³⁶

In all three of these early examples, *pozi* were all women who worked to support themselves, were tempted by monetary gains offered by the male protagonist, and managed to make the illicit affair a success with confidence and unquestionable skills; the two *pozi* in *Langshi* were no exception. The only differences in their archetypal characters rested on whether they would first try to dodge the offer or not and their methods in approaching and thus manipulating the targeted woman. None of them would resist the temptation of a considerable amount of silver and gold, and their ability to execute the task was always unquestionable and guaranteed to succeed.

As will be discussed later, *pozi* in erotic fiction were not exempt from being cast in a negative light, bearing the same stereotype as “the dangerous women” featured in Victoria Cass’s research that should be shunned. In addition to being greedy, *pozi* were also portrayed as the one person who could, without question, gain the trust of targeted women and lure them into sexual misconduct in an almost omnipotent fashion. Calling such phenomenon “granny lore” in the literary realm, Cass suggested that “the granny in Ming literature is a classic trickster and a comic hero. She speaks... with the voice of instinct; and in her knowing asides, in her quality of omniscience and in her wicked, satirical voice, she reveals a mythic authority,” who “is the first choice for the lovesick and needy of the novel, and the catalyst for the disruption of home,” and, in some extreme cases, “not simply agents of the erotic” but “are eroticism itself.”²³⁷ Although the samples of *pozi* in fiction are confined to the materials in this study, they indeed echo the “granny lore” image proposed by Cass, embodying the very

²³⁶ Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng, *Mengmei guan jiaoben Jin Ping Mei cihua* vol. 1, 169. Translation cited from *The Plum in the Golden Vase or, Chin P'ing Mei: Volume One: The Gathering*, trans. David Tod Roy, 252.

²³⁷ Cass, *Dangerous Women*, 58.

stereotype that is unique to *pozi* characters in broader literature, though acted out more as an agent of eroticism than “eroticism itself.”

The maidservants

Unlike the *pozi*, the maidservants (*bi* 婢) were not free-roaming working female commoners but female bondservants²³⁸ owned by a household with a status akin to slaves. Slave-owning had a long history in China, and slaves and bondservants were sourced from criminals, victims of human trafficking, contracted servitude, offspring of slaves and bondservants.²³⁹ Among the different types of household servile labourers in Ming and Qing — including the hired workers, worker-serfs, bondservants, and the children of the latter two groups — bondservants were considered “debased pariahs registered under their masters’ households” by law.²⁴⁰ From Ming dynasty, maidservants were subject to a range of regulations that reinforced their inferior status, such as hairstyle and dress codes, standardised greetings when addressing their superiors, specified legal regulations and punishments.²⁴¹ In Qing dynasty, maidservants remained specified as *bi*, and were subjected to different legal regulations and legal consequences compared to members of the fine households (*liangjia* 良家) and even male bondservants.²⁴² However, various sources seem to collectively imply the

²³⁸ The terms *bi* 婢 and their male counterpart *nu* 奴 are translated both as “slaves” (e.g. by William C. Jones in his translation of *The Great Qing Code*) and “bondservants” (e.g. by Hsieh Bao Hua in his work *Concubinage and Servitude in Late Imperial China*). Considering the origin and living conditions of household servile labours (*nu* and *bi*), I have opted to use the term “bondservants” instead of “slaves” unless following the terms used in referenced materials or with the intention of emphasising their status that denied their rights to object to commands.

²³⁹ Chu Gansheng 褚贛生, *Nubi shi* 奴婢史 [History of Slaves and Maids] (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1994), 75–82.

²⁴⁰ Hsieh Bao Hua 謝葆華, *Concubinage and Servitude in Late Imperial China* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014), 119.

²⁴¹ Wang Xueping 王雪萍, “Mingdai binü zhengce yu fagui de yanjin ji shehui neihan 明代婢女政策與法規的演進及社會內涵 [The Evolution and Social Connotation of Policies and Regulations for Maidservants in the Ming Dynasty],” *Dongbei shida xuebao (zhexue shehui kexue ban)* 東北師大學報 (哲學社會科學版) [Journal of Northeast Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)] 262 (2013), 56–57.

²⁴² According to the Great Qing Code, the differences between male and female slaves in terms of legal regulation were especially apparent in cases of marriage. For example, male slaves were forbidden to marry people of higher social rank, but female slaves were not specifically mentioned on such matters; the issue of “ownership” of the female slaves was specified in certain circumstances, such as unauthorised marriage, but seemingly would not be a potential issue for male slaves. See William C. Jones, trans., *The Great Qing Code* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

lowly status of bondservants imposed they had neither the right to reject orders nor much legal protection from mistreatment. In fact, in their case, being sold off as a slave was actually used as a legal punishment, reflecting that their lowly status was upheld not just by the respective owners but also by the state.

From the time of the Wanli period of the Ming dynasty, keeping housemaids became a fashionable trend not limited to the households of officials and merchants but also among the middle-to-lower class. For the richer households, the practice of having housemaids exceeded the demand for household services and branched towards the need for entertainment.²⁴³ While the work requirements of housemaids certainly differed in individual households, literary works of late imperial China have preserved various descriptions of the background and duties of housemaids, ranging from regular housework, preparing food and drinks, running errands, personal attendance to specific master/mistress, being transferred to a new household as part of their mistress' dowry, or married/sold according to their master or mistress's preferences.

Generally, bondservants helped with production and business, household services, and entertainment,²⁴⁴ while the maidservants discussed in this chapter largely fell into the category of household service workers. The maidservant characters, much like the married women, were, in principle, a single category of women within a household with members of multiple ranks, power, and influence. Women married into a household may be generalised as mistresses but the wives and concubines surely had different statuses within the household legally and customarily. In the case of maidservants, the difference within the group was much more subtle as they were not differentiated in the eyes of the law, yet their intimacy with their master or mistress determined their respective influence and status within the household. Such

²⁴³ Wang Xueping 王雪萍, "Shiliu zhi shiba shiji Zhongguo binü xianxiang lunxi 16 至 18 世紀中國婢女現象論析 [An Analysis of the Servant Women Phenomenon in 16th–18th Century China]," *Dongbei shida xuebao (zhexue shehui kexue ban)* 東北師大學報 (哲學社會科學版) [Journal of Northeast Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)] 220 (2006), 69.

²⁴⁴ Chu Gansheng, *Nubi shi*, 86–87.

differences were also reflected by their prominence in erotic fiction. For ease of discussion and to distinguish their differences, the maidservant characters are further categorised into *handmaids* and *housemaids*.

The *handmaids* refer to maidservant characters with a close relationship to their mistresses, who were at times referred to as their *xinfu* 心腹 (literally “the heart and abdomen,” which signifies their cordial relationship) functioning as a confidant and a surrogate. Similarly, another common term referring to the handmaids was *tieshen* 貼身 (literally “pasted on the body”), which indicated their special intimacy with their mistress/master. Generally, a *tieshen* maid referred to a maidservant who belonged exclusively to a specific master or mistress and would always be around and attend only to them.²⁴⁵ The existence of a handmaid also served as a symbol of wealth, as their role as a personal attendant indicated their lack of productivity (when compared to servants fulfilling more practical tasks such as cooking or cleaning the house), making them economically unprofitable.²⁴⁶ Among the maidservant characters in the texts studied, the criteria in categorising a character as handmaid, when not explicitly specified, included having a name, close attendance to their mistress’s activities (both sexual and non-sexual), and conversations with other characters in non-sexual scenes (hence their importance to their mistress in the story). While not all characters that matched said criteria were explicitly referred to as the maid-confidant in the fiction, they would be considered as one if they were portrayed to have a much closer relationship with their mistress and a more significant role in the story compared to the other maidservants. The other maidservants, henceforth referred to as housemaids, who were sometimes named, were often seen either providing services to their mistresses/masters in their sexual play and/or featured as ordinary servants whose commanded

²⁴⁵ Wang Xueping 王雪萍, “Mingdai tieshen binü qunti cunzai jichu ji shengcun moshi tanwei” 明代貼身婢女群體存在基礎及生存模式探微 [An Investigation of the Basis of Existence and Living Mode of Ming Dynasty Handmaids], *Changchun shifan daxue xuebao (renwen shehui kexue ban)* 長春師範大學學報(人文社會科學版) [Journal of Changchun Normal University Humanities and Social Sciences] 33, no. 3 (May 2014), 42.

²⁴⁶ Wang Xueping, “Mingdai tieshen binü qunti cunzai jichu ji shengcun moshi tanwei,” 42.

absence served as a marker of the privacy of their mistresses or masters. They may have little to no lines in the dialogues and only appear for one or two scenes; hence, their significance to the plot was usually minimal.

The differences between handmaids and housemaids were highly customary, as their status was equal legally regardless of whether they were born and raised in the household, a purchase or a gift, part of their mistress's dowry, or a de facto concubine without legal recognition. Taking the classic Qing fiction *Honglou meng* as a reference, it was apparent that not all maids were equal — some were closer to their mistress, acting not just as close companions, but also their confidants, their eyes and ears, and sometimes their allies; some also served as the sexual partners of their masters, but not always were given a title of a concubine. Two notable examples of such handmaids were Xiren, the principal maidservant and de facto concubine of Jia Baoyu; and Ping'er, the dowry maidservant of Wang Xifeng, who later became the concubine of Wang's husband. In the Ming fiction *Jin Ping Mei*, the differences between a favoured handmaid and a regular housemaid were even more apparent. One of the main female characters, Pan Jinlian, had two maidservants assigned to her by her husband: Chunmei (who initially served in the quarter of the main wife in the household) and Qiuju (who was bought to be the scullery maid). As the story progressed, Pan allowed Chunmei to be taken by her husband and treated her with special favour afterwards, such as exempting her from tough chores and gifting her with fineries; Chunmei, in turn, became an important ally of Pan as one of the household master's favourites. While Qiuju served the same mistress as Chunmei, she was “the one who got beaten,”²⁴⁷ with a much lower status in the eyes of her mistress and Chunmei as well.

In erotic fiction, for each mistress, there was usually only one handmaid-confidant who was named and had interactions with other characters independent of their mistress's presence.

²⁴⁷ *The Plum in the Golden Vase or, Chin P'ing Mei: Volume One: The Gathering*, trans. David Tod Roy, 204.

In the case of housemaids, they were usually only referred to as “the maids” and remained nameless, faceless characters. Those who were named often provided chamber service or sexual service upon their mistresses’ or masters’ request or were simply listed as a display of wealth. However, the housemaids’ comparative facelessness could have been changed if they were young virgins, who would then be featured in the performance of a painful reaction towards male penetration; this rare spotlight on them was a device glorifying the sexual prowess of the male. The handmaids of the female protagonists usually were multifunctional characters compared to *pozi* and other housemaids, especially the unnamed ones or those with the sole purpose of being part of a sex scene. From playing a critical role in connecting her mistress with the male from the outside world and being her intimate companion to performing minor household chores, the handmaids’ range of services overlapped with and exceeded those of *pozi* and housemaids, placing them in a special and complex position in their mistresses’ affairs.

Female neighbours and kin

The female neighbours and kin group, as female assistants, leaned much closer in status to the main female characters, referred to as mistresses in this thesis, than *pozi* or maidservants. Likely also mistresses with their own maids in their households, their relationships with the mistresses (who were the main characters of the storyline) were close to equal, as their exchanges were unlikely to have a material aspect (like with *pozi*) and certainly not the commander-and-commanded nature (like with the maidservants). Compared to handmaids and *pozi*, the female neighbours and kin were less common not only as key characters in facilitating illicit affairs in erotic fiction but as featured characters in general. Without a clear-cut difference in social status or without the demonised stereotype (that *pozi* suffered from), the dynamics of the relationship between mistresses and female neighbours and kin were displayed more subtly through differences in attractiveness and wealth.

Of the four examples listed, only an ugly, unnamed neighbour in *Rou putuan* had no other roles that could elevate her to the mistress category; her role was likely a partial substitution of the *pozi* characters, which were not featured in the story. In some texts, *pozi* doubled as the neighbour, whose relationship with the mistress concerned was thus more than a service provider and closer to an everyday companion. However, as they were identified as a *pozi* in the texts (usually by the term *pozi* preceded by a surname), their primary role would thus be considered a *pozi* rather than a neighbour. The other female characters in this category, namely Xiangyun from *Rou putuan*, Jin *shi* from *Xiuta yeshi*, and Zhao Daniang from *Langshi*, all had their ‘mistress’ moment as they served as a desirable female of respectable social status instead of a comical character embodied by an anonymous neighbour and could thus be viewed as a mistress-assistant instead. While Xiangyun was a cousin of the other mistresses and Zhao Daniang was a female neighbour, Jin *shi* was not exactly related to the main character (widow Ma *shi*). Their relationship was built upon the sexual bond between Jin *shi*’s husband and Ma *shi*’s son, which allowed Jin *shi* to address Ma *shi* as *popo* 婆婆 (mother-in-law) and gain her trust in private and sexual matters. Although their relationship was built upon a faux familial bond, acting as family members was the backbone of the relationship between the four main characters.

The absence of other types of female peers, as the male characters tended to have, appeared to reflect the limitation of women’s social world. In view of the comparative lack of female mediators aside from a *pozi* or a maidservant, the female neighbours and kin group acted almost in the stead of an ‘others’ category that included most, if not all, of the other possible candidates for female assistants. Indeed, studies on female writers in late imperial China have proved the existence of female friendship built upon kinship, neighbourhood ties, and male literati networks.²⁴⁸ There were also examples of prominent intellectual female communities like the

²⁴⁸ Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, 242.

Banana Garden poetry club active in the seventeenth century, the group of female disciples of Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716–1797), and various accounts of women travelling or visiting temples.²⁴⁹ However, as much as some erotic fiction tended to emphasise the female protagonists' literary skills, women's participation in poetry clubs was not used as a plot to expand the pool of female characters in fiction. Likewise, when a female character was depicted to be travelling or visiting temples, they were likely to be portrayed as either alone or accompanied by their own kin, and the activity itself — her rare exposure to the public.²⁵⁰ The closest and only example of female peers based on kinship and proximity of residence among the five fiction texts appears in *Langshi*, in which a “sworn sister (結義的姐姐)” was mentioned by the female protagonist; unfortunately, there was no more elaboration on this particular female relationship.

To a certain extent, the mother-type characters discussed in the previous chapter can be viewed as positioned in between the desired mistresses and the kin group of female assistants. In terms of household status, the mothers ranked above the main female assistants — the maids and *pozhi* — as they held the authority to command, employ, and reward their service. However, the mothers also served as the female assistant to the male characters as the mediators between the men and their virgin daughters, whom the men coveted. They were also less reliant on the female assistants discussed in this chapter, as the examples studied were mature widows who required no external guidance as the young wives did; instead, they had taken up the role of bridging the outside male into their inner chamber themselves. As shown in the last chapter, the mother characters were treated as stepping stones for the males, providing a different flavour to the sex scenes as yet another category of woman to be ‘collected’ by the male protagonist. In their case, the key factor that separates assisting females and mistresses in the

²⁴⁹ Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, 219–250.

²⁵⁰ For example, Wenfei in *Langshi* was first seen by the male protagonist during a family grave-sweeping activity; in *Dengcao heshang zhuan*, Wang visited a Buddhist temple with only a few house servants and thus was taken advantage of by the Buddhist monk.

sphere of erotic fiction was their treatment in the sex scenes. When it came to the description of sex scenes concerning the assisting females, such as the handmaids and the unnamed female neighbour featured in *Rou putuan*, they were described with comparatively fewer details and praises. Other than Nuanyu in *Dengcao heshang zhuan*, the maid-turned-concubine whose household status was later elevated by bearing a son allegedly from her sonless master, sex scenes directly involving the maids were usually one-off, serving as an intermittent plot filler with little importance to the story overall. These scenes generally also had a higher frequency of violence, bloodshed, and tears caused by pain and there were fewer details concerning both the female assistants' and the male characters' satisfaction.

3.2 Illicit affair services by female assistants

As shown in the previous chapter, the mistresses served chiefly as the objects of desire from the viewpoint of the male protagonists. Despite seemingly being in control of the decision whether to take part in their illicit affair or not, the mistresses' affairs often were shown to be more than just a private matter between them and the male lovers. This is especially true in the cases of the main wives, whose affairs involved heavy participation of the female assistants. The late imperial Chinese erotic fiction tended to portray a world filled with male protagonists embarking on a string of affairs with different types of women. In each affair, other than the main desired target, there may be several women involved, serving not as yet another desired object, but as important keys in pushing forward the illicit affair's plot.

As suggested by different texts, *pozi* were, by default, assumed to be responsible for women's illicit sexual affairs and were frequently featured acting as the facilitators of such affairs. A large portion of other female assistants in erotic fiction was the maidservants (i.e. the handmaids and housemaids). The prevalence of maidservants featured in respective texts served as both a reflection of the popularity of having house servants at the time and a symbolic prop to illustrate the wealth of the household. It was rather rare for female characters, especially

those of greater significance in the story, to have no handmaid-confidant. Take *Langshi* as an example: amongst the four main female characters, only the widow Suqiu had no apparent handmaid-confidant; but the services usually provided by a handmaid (typically received by more prominent female characters) were simply taken up by another assisting female character.

In this section, female assistants in erotic fiction are discussed in relation to their roles and functions in the context of illicit sexual affairs. As will be illustrated in the following subsections, the roles of female assistants in fiction were not as limited and stereotyped as the mistress-type characters. Not every fiction story always featured every type of female assistant character, but the typical functions of any missing character would be taken up by another type of character (usually also female) rather than being omitted. While there is a general pattern or style of assistance ascribed to each character type, their main functions can be generally divided into two categories: first, the mediator and advisor of illicit affairs; and second, the assistant to the sexual play between the mistresses and their lovers.

Opening the bedchamber: Mediators and advisors

Of all the help the assisting females offered, the most important one was serving as the bridge between the male protagonist from the outside world and the cloistered female character in the inner household. When comparing the plots of assisting females connecting the male protagonist with the woman concerned, their approaches usually corresponded with their status and relationship with the mistress, as did the rewards they could obtain for providing help. Both the handmaids and *pozi* characters contributed by providing advice regarding sex and trysts to their mistresses, acting as the mediators between their mistresses and the male protagonists and facilitating their mistresses' sexual awakenings and, at times, remaining present during the mistresses' sexual activities.

Although comparing to their mistresses, both had a lower social status and higher mobility, the respective social statuses of handmaids and *pozi* were fundamentally different; therefore,

their roles in relation to the mistress were also largely different despite overlapping functions. As service providers, *pozi* had different statuses compared to handmaids and housemaids. Since *pozi* were part of the free common people instead of a bondservant legally owned by a household, their roles in facilitating illicit affairs differed from female house servants in two main aspects. First, as they resided outside the mistress's household, they were usually approached and paid for by the male protagonist. Second, these women may or may not have been working for the respective female character prior to undertaking the paid assignment to facilitate the illicit affair. The specialised service provided by *pozi* came with a price; in most stories, they would only plan and arrange the illicit affair according to the male protagonist's request after receiving material rewards. Furthermore, usually, the plans they presented to the male would be received with promises of further rewards upon successful execution. The plotlines revolving around *pozi* tended to pursue the following pattern:

- 1) The male protagonist becomes interested in a particular woman and looks for a *pozi* with whom his target may have close contact;
- 2) The male approaches the *pozi* and gives her a significant amount of money and/or gifts to establish a friendly relationship;
- 3) After the *pozi* appears to be satisfied by the material offerings, the male will make his request;
- 4) The *pozi* produces a plan in which she will first interact with the target privately; simultaneously, the male has to follow her instructions;
- 5) The *pozi* influences the targeted female with praises of the male's physical appeal and shared female experiences and sentiments;
- 6) Once the target is convinced, the *pozi* acts upon the woman's request (sometimes according to the *pozi*'s own suggestions) and approaches the male;

7) If the affair is successful, the *pozi* usually fades into the background unless kept in the story to further assist the lovers.

Both cases of *pozi* helping to arrange illicit affairs in *Langshi* were conducted in this pattern, and so did its famous contemporaries, *Jiangxingge chonghui zhenzhu shan* from *Yushi mingyan* 喻世明言 (Illustrious Words to Instruct the World)) and the early chapters in *Jin Ping Mei*. As a part of the secular fiction genre (*shiqing xiaoshuo* 世情小說), both texts have similar character sets and story patterns of *pozi*-induced affairs, albeit with slight differences in story backgrounds as compared to erotic fiction, in particular regarding the wealth of the male protagonist (the male protagonists in both *Jin Ping Mei* and *Jiangxingge chonghui zhenzhu shan* are rich married merchants, while the one in *Langshi* is a young bachelor student).

In the case of maidservants, only the handmaid-confidant is responsible for liaising between their mistress and her target of the illicit affair. Although ordinary housemaids may be later involved through chamber service, the handmaid is the one assigned to have direct interaction with the male protagonist on behalf of her mistress. The handmaid's role usually begin after her mistress has decided to participate in the affair, with the ensuing common sequence as follows:

- 1) The handmaid is entrusted with her mistress's secret desire, occasionally a result of the handmaid's provocation;
- 2) The handmaid gives suggestions to her mistress regarding how to carry out her desires;
- 3) The mistress gives orders to her handmaid to deliver her messages and, occasionally, gifts to the male protagonist, sometimes as a part of a back-and-forth exchange;
- 4) The handmaid is responsible for guiding the male to her mistress's bedchamber;
- 5) During the coitus between her mistress and the male, the handmaid may remain on standby at the scene or nearby to attend to their needs;

- 6) The handmaid may remain the main point of contact between both parties if further trysts happen; regardless, the handmaid's role in the story diminishes.

The relationships between the mistresses and their handmaids are rather standardised, with the handmaids showing limited to no personal interest in obtaining anything other than their own sexual pleasure, and no desire to undermine their mistresses' interest despite commitment to wrongdoings are involved. Although the handmaids may be described as desiring the male protagonist in some texts, there is no example of the handmaid threatening to expose her mistress or appearing to be sexually competitive with her mistresses.

The mediating functions of both *pozi* and handmaids are somewhat similar, still, with several key differences. First, while both types of female assistants appear to serve both the mistresses and their lovers, the *pozi* tend to be paid by the male and sometimes also the mistress, while the handmaids have no option but to serve their mistresses as well as the lover if the mistress desired so. Secondly, it can be said that the *pozi* is the first point of contact between the outside world and the inner quarters of the mistresses, while the handmaids are the ones leading the way to the boudoir within the household for the male protagonists. This is especially the case considering that the handmaids' role is closely connected to all aspects of attending to their mistresses, with their sexual activities as no exception.

While Suqiu (*Langshi*)'s plan of an affair with Langzi did not involve any handmaids, her status among the various female characters in the same text is still comparatively high, as she is a potential candidate for marriage, which is only cut short by her death. As a prominent female character, she is in the position where she was approached by the male protagonist via the help of a *pozi* and remained in a generally passive role during their tryst; however, she was not shown to have any intimate handmaid despite having several housemaids at her disposal. The functional trope where the male is guided to the bedchamber, usually served by the handmaids, is instead provided by her *pozi* neighbour Qian *pozi*.

In theory, the mistresses are the ones with the greatest power of all female characters, enjoying the highest privileges in terms of wealth, social status, and authority over the other females. In illicit affairs, the mistress is the one being desired, the one person whom the *pozi*, the handmaid, and also the male protagonist has to please in order to make the affair a reality for everyone's interest. Hence, the mistress's will is paramount to the story. However, in examining the mediating functions of the two assisting females, both the *pozi* and the handmaids are observed to have greater power through their comparatively higher freedom of mobility and knowledge in conducting secretive affairs. The ability and knowledge of such female assistants serve to inspire, convince and even educate their mistresses, placing the mistresses as the weaker party of the relationship in this specific scenario. The mistresses are further made vulnerable and helpless once their desire to have the illicit affair is known, as they will then need to depend on their assistants' support and discretion to advance their interests and ensure their safety from unwanted consequences.

The housemaid Shancha in *Taohua ying* held a mixed position as the female who assisted in liaising with the male. Whether the mistress of the respective story section is Bian Erniang (the widowed mother) or Bian Feiyun (the unmarried maiden) is debatable, but Shancha is certainly not a servant but a neighbour to them; however, she is also not an equal, as she is a maidservant in another household. The role she played leaned closer to the *pozi*, as she was gradually bribed into servicing her patron in luring the desired person in the household she served in. The chief difference between this affair with most other examples is the gender reversal: the patron is not a young bachelor but a middle-aged widow, and the desired person is no female but a young boy.

Nevertheless, the comparatively socially inferior *pozi* and maidservants are not the only women who play an assisting role in illicit sexual affairs. Examples of female assistants who are neither *pozi* nor maidservants can be found in *Rou putuan*. Throughout the fiction, there

are limited roles played by housemaids and no existence of handmaids²⁵¹; only two *pozi* characters were introduced, but they are specifically introduced by their professions as a matchmaker and brothel owner respectively, rather than simply generalised as *pozi*. Consequently, there are no *pozi*-mistress or handmaid-mistress interactions as in other examples. The mediating functions usually played by handmaids or *pozi* are instead taken up by female companions, including female neighbours and kin, and one male character Sai Kunlun, who is not an ordinary man but rather an infamous thief who never got caught.

The first example of other female assistants in *Rou putuan* is an unnamed female character known as the neighbour of Yanfang, the female protagonist from chapters eight to eleven. Witnessing the male protagonist's interest in Yanfang, who failed to notice him due to her short-sightedness, her neighbour became excited by his appeal and began ceaselessly persuading Yanfang to have an affair with him without apparent reason or benefit other than her own excitement. Once the neighbour knew the two had met and talked, she continued to persuade Yanfang despite the latter displaying a lack of interest. Her method of persuasion is similar to those of *pozi* with arguments addressing common female experiences and concerns.

Although this female neighbour had no prior direct contact with the male protagonist, she plays the role of an informant by telling Yanfang of his existence and interest, thus raising her interest in observing the male, and made the affair happen through persuasion, which are all common functions usually performed by *pozi* characters. It is not exactly accurate to consider this neighbour character a mediator, as she was merely gossiping about an appealing male in a self-indulgent way; but the chief functions of sparking the mistress's interest and encouraging said interest using first-hand understanding of female emotional experiences within a private, "inner" household setting is identical to many other examples. In short, whereas *pozi* and

²⁵¹ In the limited scenes where housemaids were involved (without mentioning of handmaids), their functions were in no way comparable to those of the handmaids in other texts.

handmaids served as mediators with additional functions of an informant and persuader, the female neighbour character in this case served only the functions of an informant and persuader.

The second example from the same text is a woman named Xiangyun. Unlike Yanfang, she is not introduced to the male protagonist through anyone but is one of the many women he secretly surveyed and ranked during his stay in a temple, and coincidentally also his neighbour living adjacent to his new house. Xiangyun, her two sister-cousins, and one older female relative whom they address as *gu* 姑 (indicating higher familial status) had come across the male protagonist previously, though not simultaneously, and had discussed about him amongst themselves. Knowing of his explicit display of interest in her female cousins prior to their first contact, Xiangyun initially expressed jealousy as she believed her younger cousins had already had affairs with him. However, once the misunderstanding is cleared and she is satisfied sexually, she, in turn, proposes to be the mediator introducing the male protagonist to her two younger female relatives, whom she claims are to her “like sisters from the same parents” (竟像同胞的一般).²⁵² Rather than acting upon the male protagonists’ request, her decision in connecting the male protagonist with her cousins is out of her own will and sense of sisterhood, as she claims,

The two and I are not only sisters [by relation] but also by oath. [We have] initially promised to share weal and woe together. If they previously had done this thing [and] hid it from me, that is their wrongdoing. As they have never betrayed me, [if] I betray them now, exclusively holding you by my side to enjoy, that would be my wrongdoing, and my heart would not get over this. I will see them... and introduce you to meet [them], so as to let them two know about this wonder [the male protagonist’s phallus] in between heaven and earth, [and] appreciate it together.

我與他兩個不但是姊妹，又且同盟，原說有福同享，有苦同受。他以前若果有此事瞞了我做，是他的不是。他既不曾背我，我如今背了他們，獨自一個把你摟在身邊受用，就是我的不是了，心上也過意不去。我見了他...然後引你去相會，使他兩個也知道，天地之間有這一種妙物，大家賞鑑賞鑑。²⁵³

²⁵² Huang Qiang and Guo Di, eds., *Rou putuan jiaozheng*, 212.

²⁵³ Huang Qiang and Guo Di, eds., *Rou putuan jiaozheng*, 214.

While it is common in erotic fiction with multiple female characters, with or without grudges against each other, to accept sharing one single male, it is uncommon to see plots where a female character voluntarily and proactively offered to introduce her lover to other females. In *Langshi*, there is a scene where the first female protagonist mentioned to her lover that her sworn sister is someone more beautiful than herself. The plot however is not followed by her introduction of the male to her sister-friend, and the affair between the latter two is kept unknown to the first female protagonist.

As the female peer to the mistress character, both the unnamed neighbour and Xiangyun are equal in social status to the woman they connected with the male protagonist, but they are not entirely equal as presented in the fiction in terms of appeal or sexual bargaining power. For the unnamed female neighbour, she is made a grotesque comical character by the author as “an insufferably ugly creature, with a face full of dark pockmarks, hair that was short and yellowy-brown, and the skin colour of an unscoured *Jinhua* ham”²⁵⁴, a glaring contrast to her desirable neighbour with pearl-like skin. For Xiangyun, she is ranked by the male protagonist as the top-ranking “*tou deng* 頭等 (first class)” beauty, which is still not on par with her two cousins, whom are considered to be beauties of the “*te deng* 特等 (superb class).” She is also the oldest of the three and the second wife to a widower, while her cousins are both the first wives of their husbands, placing her in an equal but slightly inferior social status.

The comparative inferiority of Xiangyun also applied to Zhao Daniang from *Langshi*, who have multiple roles as a widowed mother and a neighbour. In the novel, Zhao Daniang is a widowed mother with an unmarried daughter and also a neighbour to the mistress Wenfei. Her role as a female neighbour is minor compared to her role as a widowed mother, for her identity as a neighbour is chiefly useful to the mistress as a trustworthy female to share her secret with

²⁵⁴ *The Carnal Prayer Mat*, trans., Patrick Hanan, 110. The *Jinhua* ham is a type of dry-cured ham that usually bears a medium to dark-tanned colour.

and provide a temporary hiding place for the male. Nevertheless, her existence is crucial in facilitating the affair, as her house serves as the secret entrance to the mistress's household, even though she has never personally participated in staging the illicit affair. Similar to other assisting female characters of the neighbour and kin group, Zhao is also inferior to the mistress in terms of age and social status. Aside from being a widow in her early thirties burdened with an unmarried daughter and no son, she struggled financially and have been receiving financial help from her neighbour, the mistress Wenfei. In short, even though the neighbour and kin group of female assistants are technically the mistresses' equal, they are always made comparatively inferior to the main mistresses despite their higher status over *pozi* and the maidservants.

A form of assistance that is closely linked to mediating is providing suggestions to the mistresses on conducting affairs. While this service can be viewed as an extension of the mediation service, it is essentially of a different nature. Rather than being the means of inducing the affair's initiation, the advice of female assistants on affairs is mostly direct and practical points of action, serving the dual function in the text of emphasising the innocence of the mistress involved in contrast with the confidence of her assistant(s), as well as announcing and explaining the story plots ahead.

The writer of *Langshi* included a variety of examples where assisting women guide their mistresses in initiating illicit affairs. For example, Zhang *pozi* directed her mistress in the procedures of responding to a sexual invitation, which was to write a letter in reply to the male's confession of desire accompanied with a set time for the tryst. The handmaid Chunjiao contributed by suggesting bribing the female neighbour into helping to hide the male in her house to allow for an unsuspecting entrance. Chunying, the handmaid of Ange, gave her mistress the idea of gifting poems and a flower to hint at her desire. She also reminded her mistress to send personal items as a token of proof as part of the tryst invitation the handmaid

had to deliver. Hongye, the handmaid of the young maiden Junqing, helped orchestrate the whole affair by telling her mistress the proper time for a secret affair and making the decision to bribe other housemaids on her mistress's behalf. In *Rou putuan*, as the person connecting her cousins with the male protagonist, Xiangyun took up the role of the host and made arrangements for her cousins' first night of sexual activities. One common aspect of these stories was that the main mistress either asked for help or appeared clueless, which was a common characteristic of the most coveted female mistress characters in their respective texts.

One particular example of an assisting female providing advice unrelated to initiating affairs is depicted in *Langshi*, in which Qian pozi served as the on-scene guide in handling coitus mishaps, albeit it is an unexpected service with no prior payment or planning involved. In the text, after successfully matching her neighbour Suqiu with the male protagonist who paid for her help, Qian pozi remained out of the story until the scene where Suqiu was left unconscious during sexual intercourse, prompting the male protagonist to urgently send for Qian's help. Appearing the all-knowing master of sexual matters, from consequences of aphrodisiac use to methods of resuscitating people who passed out mid-intercourse, the *pozi* remained on scene to guide the couple in completing their intercourse safely, giving timely instructions to prevent a life-threatening situation and convincing the two to have a break.

Inside the bedchamber: Chamber service, sexual service, and sexual guide

Other than connecting the male and female who are not supposed to cross paths and providing advice on how to actualise the illicit affair, another common service type provided by females for females in erotic fiction is directly related to the sexual aspects of the affair. Such services are predominantly provided by handmaids and housemaids and will be discussed in two generalised categories: the "chamber services," and "sexual services." In erotic fiction, while both handmaids and housemaids are described to be providing on-scene chamber service and sexual services, the handmaids are responsible for their mistress's more intimate needs and

with a greater likelihood of having sexual relations with the male protagonist (simultaneously with their mistress or otherwise). The housemaids are generally featured in the erotic fiction as background characters who are normally ordered out of the chamber to set the scene of a private, uninterrupted chamber, or as stand-by maids to attend to their mistress's needs during her trysts. In rare cases, the housemaids are made to join the sexual activity for the entertainment and/or ease of physical stress according to their master/mistress's command. Some chief markers of housemaid characters include not having a name (while handmaids are usually given a name), having little to no dialogue of their own, and abrupt (dis)appearance in and out of specific scenes where their service is required. They may be referred to merely as the *yahuan* 丫鬟 (“the Y-shaped hair bun,” referring to the common hairstyle of young maidservants) who perform household chores for their mistress, as well as serving as a prop to set the tone of the sex scene through their absence.

The first type of sexual service to be discussed is the “chamber service.” The “chamber services” are referred to as such not according to the venue, but to reflect the inherent nature of illicit affairs, i.e. the sexual activities of the mistress, symbolised by the bedchamber, which are meant to be “secret” but also known to the maidservants attending to her. In the main novels studied, the most elaborate example involving housemaids serving couples in illicit affairs is featured in chapters 12–14 of *Langshi*, where at least five housemaids, who are ready to provide on-scene chamber service, are all bribed to keep their mistress' secret. During this particularly elaborate tryst, the handmaid and housemaids have to service their mistress before, after, and also in the midst of the couple's coitus. In setting the romantic and picturesque tone of the tryst, the maids' duties begin with serving food and drink:

Two young maids carried small tables [and] set them by the window; in the courtyard, [they] laid out fruit wines and appetisers, [and] invited the two [lovers] to be seated.
兩個丫鬟，扛着小小桌兒，放在窓前，庭內排下菓酒噶飯，請兩個去坐。²⁵⁵

²⁵⁵ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch.12.

Once the couple are finished with their meal, the handmaid Chunjiao helps to create an atmospheric setting for her mistress:

Chunjiao swept the floor; by the pool's mountain stone [she] laid a wool sheet, on top [of the wool sheet she] laid out a cooling mat [and] placed a brocade pillow with embroidered Chinese mandarin ducks; next to the pillow [she] set a precious tripod, [in which she] lit agarwood incense disc.

春嬌把地掃了，就在湖山石畔鋪了絨單，上面鋪了納涼蓆，放上一個錦繡鴛鴦枕，枕邊放下一個寶鼎，焚下沉速香餅兒。²⁵⁶

Chunjiao and the other housemaids remain on the scene to serve their mistress and her lover as they have undressed and begin their physical activities:

Chunjiao handed over an item and said, "The horn's hat²⁵⁷ for the gentleman's use."

春嬌把一件東西遞過來道：「相公使的角帽兒。」²⁵⁸

Having maidservants standing by for immediate chamber service is presented as both ordinary and necessary. In one scene, the male protagonist is in need of physical help in the course of continuous ejaculation, wherein the mistress simply orders her maidservants for help rather than doing anything herself:

At that moment, only the two young maids, Xiaolian and Jianlan, [were] accompanying [her]. Wenfei asked one of them to hold Langzi in place, and one other to fetch ginseng soup... Wenfei instructed Chunjiao to feed [him] four or five mouthfuls of soup, by that time [the ejaculation] then stopped. [He] thereupon sat for a while, [and] a few young maids supported Langzi [to help him] to walk to the room and rest.

當時只有小蓮、建蘭兩個丫鬟隨身。文妃叫一個扶定浪子，一個取人參湯來... 文妃指春嬌喂了四五口湯，那時便不出了。當下坐了一回，幾個丫鬟，扶著浪子，走到房裡安置。²⁵⁹

Other examples of maidservants attending to their mistress's sexual affairs other than those listed in this elaborate scene include the handmaid being summoned to wipe clean her mistress and her lover's bodies post-intercourse, as well as assisting in sexual games in counting and pouring wine (as seen in *Xiuta yeshi*). In these examples, the tone of the ordering is plain and straightforward, with no promise of extra reward as in the examples when the handmaids are

²⁵⁶ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch.12.

²⁵⁷ The "horn's hat" is an item that is worn on the penis.

²⁵⁸ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch.13.

²⁵⁹ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch.14.

asked to help in facilitating a tryst; the maidservants involved are seemingly bribed only to keep their mistress's secret, with no extra reward for providing chamber services.

In *Rou putuan*, the housemaids are not described to be attending to their mistresses on the scene in the bedchamber. Instead, they assist the illicit sexual activities in an external location outside the bedchamber during the process. As the three mistresses are drafting a plan to avoid being caught by their older female relative, their solution is to designate a hiding spot protected by a security system operated by the housemaids who are already well-bribed:

[We shall] order those young maids, telling them to be at the boundary between the two sides²⁶⁰ [and] take turns in looking out; once [the older female relative] is seen coming over, [they] shall make a secret signal, either by coughing, or by calling, [and] we can easily hide the man.

吩咐那些丫鬟，叫他在兩邊交界之處輪班看守，一見他過來，就要做個暗號，或是咳嗽，或是叫喚，我們就好藏人。²⁶¹

While the above examples are intimate in that the female servants are allowed knowledge of their mistress's illicit secret, the services involved are likely ordinary duties no different to their usual chores.

The other type of on-scene service is “sexual services.” The “sexual services” refer specifically to occasions when the assisting female is enlisted to personally participate in the sexual activities, where their participation involve direct physical engagement with or provision of genitalia. They are defined as “service” due to their nature of stemming from demands rather than being voluntary (regardless of the assisting female's individual willingness). The majority of such assistance is carried out by handmaids and housemaids, often as an extension of their chamber services. In general, *pozi* rarely becomes sexually involved with the male protagonist. Their advice on sex is chiefly directed to female characters, but ultimately do not involve direct physical contact or interference with other women's sexual activities, and thus does not exactly fit into the criteria of “sexual services.”

²⁶⁰ Referring to the boundary between the two houses which are connected together.

²⁶¹ Huang Qiang and Guo Di, eds., *Rou putuan jiaozheng*, 270.

Generally, sexual services may appear ordinary in erotic fiction, but they further display the hierarchy between the serving and the served female even where both are portrayed as sexual objects in the same story scene. It is not uncommon for maidservant characters to become the sexual subjects of the male characters, especially in scenes when they are alone with the male protagonist. Such plots not only serve as tantalising extras in erotic fiction but are a reflection of actual social phenomena at the time, prevalent enough to have raised concern and later become regulated by law²⁶². Their value as sexual objects is ranked further below that of the concubines or widows as well, as sexual relations with their male owners do not guarantee them any extra rights as maidservants. Plots where the male protagonist desired the handmaids are usually described with less enthusiasm, poetic imagery or sense of romance compared to their passion for the main female characters. For example, Langzi engaged in affairs with his sister's handmaid upon the persuasion of his submissive male lover, as well as with his lover's handmaid to ensure confidentiality of his affair with a woman other than her mistress. Langzi's passion and interest in these two female maidservant characters greatly paled in comparison to his interest in females of higher social status. Similarly, the sexual relationship between the master and the housemaid in *Taohua ying* begins with the housemaid actively seducing her master, and the sexual relationship between the male and his lover's handmaid only occurred when the latter accidentally walked into the sex scene of the master-housemaid duo. The male is not depicted to be actively pursuing the maidservant at all despite his normal enthusiasm towards other women. The most significant examples where the male characters were enthusiastic in pursuing their housemaids are in *Dengcao heshang zhuan* and *Xiuta yeshi*, where the male protagonists, both middle-aged husbands who are unable to satisfy their wives

²⁶² Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 41.

sexually compared to younger male characters, are denied sex by their wives and opts to lay hands on their housemaids in their wives' back instead.

In late imperial China, sexual exploitation of unmarried maidservants by their male owners was not a criminal offence as they were considered the owner's property,²⁶³ and this reality that maidservants faced is reflected in erotic fiction of the time. Although the maidservants in fiction at times serve the dual role of an assistant and a sexual object, as they may have sex with their mistress's lover afterwards, the sexual act between them often is conducted without the mistresses' knowledge. However, male desire is not the only reason prompting maidservants to play a part in erotic stories; the mistresses are also shown to have a role in actively enlisting female servants' participation as they pleased on many occasions, from entertaining their husbands and/or lovers to entertaining themselves in their illicit affairs.

There are two main types of sexual service where the maidservants are ordered to participate sexually by their mistresses. The first type is when the mistress desires not to participate in sexual activities personally and sends her handmaid to sleep with the male character (usually their lawful husband) as her designated substitute; normally the mistress will not be physically present. For example, in *Xiuta yeshi*, the handmaid is sent to sleep with her master as her mistress is occupied by her mission of corrupting another woman into having illicit sex and thus could not accompany her husband at night. In *Dengcao heshang zhuan*, the handmaid is an important part of the mistress' plan in facilitating her own affair, as the mistress claimed to be possibly pregnant by her husband and offered her husband an alternative option:

From now even at night [I am not] letting you mess around [with me]. You have in previous days been eyeing Nuanyu [the handmaid], I [shall] now order her to accompany your sleep for a night or two.

如今連夜里也不許你弄...你前日原有些看看暖玉，我今分付他去伴你睡一兩夜。

²⁶⁴

²⁶³ Mann, *Precious Records*, 41.

²⁶⁴ *Dengcao heshang zhuan*, *Siwuxie huibao* vol. 22, 147.

However, her claim of possible pregnancy is just an excuse. By sending her handmaid to occupy her husband sexually, the mistress thus ensured her privacy and free time to carry out her illicit affair instead. In the same text, another maidservant who accompanies her mistress on a trip is also sent off as a body substitute for her mistress, who is unwilling to submit herself to a monk who attempts to force himself on her. Ironically, the mistress later submitted to having illicit sex with another monk sent to her, as her housemaid exposed the mistress's preference for younger males, and she subsequently submitted to the older monk whom she initially rejected.

The second common scenario where the maidservants become directly involved is during their mistresses' or masters' sexual play, where their service as temporary body substitute, spectacle, and/or when an extra participant is required. Such situations are more common in scenes where the mistresses are having sex with their lovers or lover-turned-husbands, but rarely with their lawful husbands introduced at the beginning of the respective text. The purpose of such service is also always to serve the mistresses' interests and not the maidservants', such that the maidservants' willingness (or the lack thereof) to participate in the sexual activity and neither their enjoyment nor suffering in the process is in consideration.

Examples of substitute sexual service by maidservants are normally found in scenes amidst their mistress's sexual activities. Such plots are rather similar in terms of the setting and sequence. Firstly, the male protagonist is shown to have extraordinary stamina. Secondly, the mistress in that scene becomes physically defeated and exhausted. Subsequently, the maidservant will be asked to serve as a substitute for her mistress:

Wenfei said [to Langzi], "Darling, I like you a lot, but [I] have no strength. Chunjiao, you may take my place once."

文妃道：「心肝，吾十分愛你，却無氣力，春嬌你可代吾一次。」²⁶⁵

Since then, the madame would meddle [have sex] with the monk; [whenever she] got tired from the meddling, [she would] summon Nuanyu to take over as the substitute.

²⁶⁵ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 29.

自此以後，夫人與和尚弄，弄倦了，叫暖玉替過。²⁶⁶
As handmaids, both Nuanyu and Chunjiao have no place in the sexual play in the presence of their mistress unless they are made to be the substitute. Their will is not a concern to their mistress at all and implicitly does not seem a concern to the writers either. In *Rou putuan*, it is also mentioned how the widow Hua Chen used to sexually exploit her maidservants for her pleasure by using them as tools for arousal:

At those time when [my husband] was still here, without worries, [I] let him touch the young maids in secret... As I got deeply aroused from hearing, [I] would then cough once, and he would crawl onto my bed at flying speed.

當初男子在的時節，放心教他去偷摸丫鬟... 我聽到興濃之際，然後咳嗽一聲，他就如飛爬上床來。²⁶⁷

In cases where the maidservants show hesitation to the following of such orders, even a seemingly gentle mistress like Wenfei in *Langshi* is described to scold them rather than excusing the maidservant for their disobedience. In a more extreme case from *Xiuta yeshi*, where two young housemaids are serving their mistress and her lover, both maids are later made to serve the male upon their mistress's command, with the two young virgins exploited to an extreme extent despite repeatedly pleading for mercy:

Dali ignored [her and] plunged solidly for fifty to sixty times. One can only see blood flowing all across the floor, tears rolling out of control, [her] face looking as though the colour of mud and gradually passed out.

大里不管，着實抽了五六十抽。只見滿地血流，眼淚汪汪的亂滾，面像土色，漸漸的死去了。²⁶⁸

It was only at this moment, when the young maidservant looks as though she is dying, that her mistress finally asks her lover to stop. Her decision is however not out of sympathy, as she immediately remarked the deflowered maid's "lack of blessing" in being unable to find enjoyment from the penetration, and shows no reaction to the consequences of violence inflicted upon the young maidservant.

²⁶⁶ *Dengcao heshang zhuan*, *Siwuxie huibao* vol. 22, 138–139.

²⁶⁷ Huang Qiang and Guo Di, eds., *Rou putuan jiaozheng*, 290.

²⁶⁸ *Xiuta yeshi*, *Siwuxie huibao* vol. 2, 189–190.

As a form of spectacle, the maidservants are also described to be required to perform sexual acts for the visual pleasure of their mistress. Both *Jin shi* (*Xiuta yeshi*) and Hua Chen (*Rou putuan*) are described as women who enjoyed voyeurism, and thus their maidservants are directed to become the sexual spectacles for their entertainment. An example of spectacle-substitute service that appeared in both *Xiuta yeshi* and *Langshi* is the mistress's demand for her maidservants to perform oral sex on the male:

Jin *shi* called, "Saihong, A'xiu, you two come and taste [it], [and you] must make him come!"

金氏叫：「塞紅、阿秀，你兩個來品啞，定要弄他來。」²⁶⁹

[Junqing] told Hongye, "You come [and] suck for once, but [when he] is about to release, quickly call me."

對着紅葉道：「你来含一個，但是要洩，疾忙叫吾者。」²⁷⁰

In both texts, the maids are made to pleasure the male to meet their mistress's desire for male ejaculation, their main concern chiefly being the end product. In short, they are simply made to do physical labour for their mistress, except that the work is sexual in nature. In addition to the labour work, the maidservants concerned are also providing visual performance for their mistresses, as the mistresses are always described to be watching intently.

Ultimately, whichever type of sexual service the maidservants are made to provide, it is the pleasure of their mistresses that is the key concern. The maidservants' bodies are merely treated as tools in their mistress's sexual play, their sexual labour taken for granted with no inherent difference to the performance of any other chores as they could be summoned to do so whenever their mistresses demanded. Rarely is any attention paid to the maidservants' feelings—be it (un)willingness, pain or pleasure. For example, in chapters 29–30 of *Langshi*, a young housemaid Xiaoxue is called to be sexually used by the second male lead character Lu Zhu upon Wenfei's request. But in the midst of intercourse, Xiaoxue was unceremoniously discarded:

²⁶⁹ *Xiuta yeshi*, *Siwuxie huibao* vol. 2, 169.

²⁷⁰ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 15.

As when Wenfei saw Lu Zhu's craze and disregard to [his own] life, [she] knew [he] was coming [ejaculating] soon, [and] said, "Runge²⁷¹ come on top of my body." Lu Zhu heard [her] words [and] immediately goes [to Wenfei]; Xiaoxue was very discontented.

當下文妃見陸珠猖狂，不顧性命，便知來快了。道：「閨哥你來吾身上來。」陸珠聞言即便走來，小雪怏怏不已。²⁷²

Even though the maidservant Xiaoxue does enjoy carrying out her mistress's command, her enjoyment does not alter her lack of power in the situation. As merely a tool for her mistress's pleasure, her brief enjoyment is disregarded to the same extent as the painful reluctance experienced by the maid in the *Xiuta yeshi* example.

Another similar example where the maidservant is ordered by the mistress to be used by the male until she wants the male herself is depicted in Hua Chen's recollection of her experiences with her late husband. In the scene from *Langshi*, the housemaid is made to physically please the male to reduce her mistress's physical work, but once her mistress returned to the scene, the housemaid is relegated to the background and is no longer mentioned by the author until she is ordered to escort the male out of the bedchamber. Even though the degree of sexual exploitation differed, the examples are essentially the same in essence that the maidservants' gendered bodies have no autonomy at all. They are exploited sexually not only by the male, but also their female owners at their pleasure.

In short, maidservants as sexual service providers are used as designated body substitutes and provide spectacle or body for visual and physical pleasure. The only difference marking the mistresses' exploitation from male exploitation of maidservants lies in that the males sexually exploit maidservants directly, while the mistresses make the maidservants their designated body double²⁷³ to be exploited by the male of their choice. While the fate of the maidservants is largely the same, exploitation initiated by the male may result in punishment

²⁷¹ "Runge 閨哥" is the nickname of Lu Zhu.

²⁷² *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 30.

²⁷³ The idea of maidservants/female peers serving as body double (*fenshen* 分身) was also raised by Huang Ko-wu, although he suggested their function to be chiefly examining the male's competence on behalf of the female in charge. See Huang Ko-wu, *Yan buxie buxiao*, 296.

by the mistresses, while exploitation initiated by the mistresses would not. Most importantly, when the mistresses are in charge of deciding which person to be sent to the male, it helps them exert control over who and when the male could have sex with, and thus also keeping both the male and potential favourite of him under her check.

As reflected in the various examples, a hierarchy exists among the female assistants in illicit affairs just as a hierarchy exists among the mistresses. In terms of social status, female kin and neighbours are of similar social status with somewhat equal power with the mistresses, with *pozi* being lower in status as women making a living in the public sphere, and maidservants having the lowest social status and power as they are of an entirely different social class. This hierarchy remain unchallenged in the erotic stories; the roles the female assistants play in the affairs in relation to the main mistress reinforced stereotypes and the underlying attitude towards women of different social classes. In terms of character stereotype, the “evil” image of *pozi* is presented in the same vein as in other texts, erotic fiction or otherwise, that they are the dangerous women who have the unquestionable ability and willingness to lead other women into sexual misconduct. Maidservants are effectively regarded as slaves: not only was their function to carry out any commands they received, but their bodies are also at the disposal of their owners, with the conventional concerns regarding female virginity and chastity apparently not applying to their gendered bodies. For the female kin and neighbours who play an assisting role, despite their somewhat equal social status, they are not exempt from being made subtly inferior to the respective “mistress(es)” through small details in physical description and their social and financial status.

However, as illicit affairs are crimes with grave consequences and thus had to be carried out secretly, the relationship and interaction between the female characters are made complex as the mistresses would thus become vulnerable or even powerless without the support of socially inferior female assistants. The female assistants would also have to ensure the affairs

could take place for their own interests, and therefore they had to strike the balance of pushing the mistresses into illicit affairs, while also ensuring to please the mistress. As mentioned in this section, the female assistants often persuade the mistresses using common “female experiences and sentiments,” which serve as the most important speech device in altering the mistress’s minds. The emotional strategies involved in such interactions between the servicing and the served, or in other words, strategies of female mutual exploitation, and how they complicate the relationships between females of different social statuses, will be discussed in the following section.

3.3 Calculated alliance between the servicing and the serviced

In previous sections, the female assistants’ roles as service providers have been explained, some of which are also exploited, if not abused. However, the inferiority of female assistants is not conclusive. Although they are bound to provide physical labour for their respective mistresses, they can also exert emotional power over their mistresses, and sometimes benefit from it. To a certain extent, this relationship also shows the contradicting feminine ideals in erotic fiction: the most desired mistresses may be clever and well educated in letters, but they are also highly innocent compared to the equally clever, if not cunning female assistants, that they will thus break from the moral ideal and fall into illicit affairs to the males’ desire. Or as this quote from *Langshi* summarised,

Li Wenfei (the mistress) is indeed a clever person; who knows this *pozi* (the female assistant) is also a clever person, therefore this business succeeded.

李文妃端的是一個妙人，不知這婆子也是一個妙人，所以便成此事。²⁷⁴

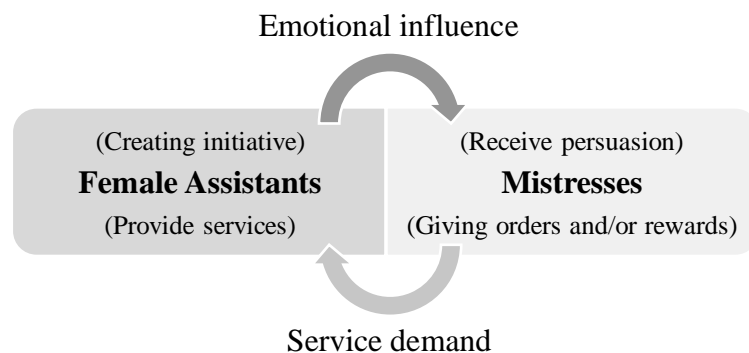
In the context of erotic fiction, the empathetic talks are in essence private, intimate talks between females that revolve around emotional struggles concerning sexual desire. Depending on the social background of the mistress to be convinced, such as unmarried maiden or young widows, these speeches target the mistresses’ specific concerns to justify transgression. By

²⁷⁴ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 3.

rationalising their desire from a female point of view, and reiteration that they are not alone in having said feelings and need, the female assistants can create a bond via the feeling of mutual understanding.

Once the mistresses are emotionally soothed, the female assistants normally have secured their trust. The mistresses will likely also give orders in demanding services from the female assistants, who will ultimately benefit them with the rewards of successful liaison of illicit affairs. At the same time, engaging in illicit affairs is a risky activity, and impossible to remain a secret to the female assistants and household servants. In order to safeguard their own interest, the mistresses have to bribe the others to secure an alliance to ensure confidentiality of their affair, unbeknown to the influence inflicted on them by the female assistants. A summary of this power/influence exchange is illustrated as follows:

Diagram 2: Power/influence exchange between mistresses and female assistants



Empathetic lure

In this section, the common direction of the empathetic talk feature will be outlined, followed by examples of the plots of female homosexual activities, which often are featured in erotic fiction as a prelude to heterosexual sex scenes. With the mistresses being pictured as the comparatively “innocent” women, they always appear as the bashful ones acting to the prescribed female conduct and trying to resist sexual temptation. To push these mistresses into sexual misconduct, the female assistants are assigned the duty of evoking sexual desires in the

main mistresses, through means of first instilling them with the idea of having an affair, and later persuading them in taking part through empathetic talks and assurance of help and secrecy.

The power of such persuasion denotes the influencing power of the female assistants, for the price of an exposed illicit affair can be more than loss of reputation, but the potential loss of all wealth and stability in life and even freedom as a civilian. Most importantly, these persuasions often address the female situation through a female voice, and are concerned mainly with the female lived experience rather than the societal female ideal. The relevant speeches also have their focus tailored to the status of the woman concerned, such as the sexual frustration of unwed maidens and the prolonged loneliness of widows.

Affirmation of female desire

In *Langshi*, Junqing the teenage maiden becomes melancholic after longing for sensuality. The scene where she swiftly shifts from snappy embarrassment to joyous for being understood is an intricate showcase of a newly sexually aroused young girl, where her already experienced handmaid serves as the peer who consoles, affirms, and later ‘helps’ her in solving her frustration. Their conversation started with the handmaid Hongye exposing her mistress’ reason for agitation:

Hongye said, “Could it be the rouse of the heart of Spring?”²⁷⁵ Junqing snapped, “Little bitch, what do you know?” Hongye said, “[When] miss was asleep at night, [you] talked nonsense and said, ‘Youth is hard to repeat, pity that good times are missed’; this is how [I] know.” Junqing recedes [her] displeasure and said with joy, “You are indeed clever...”

紅葉道：「莫不是春心動了？」俊卿怒道：「小賤人，你那裡曉得？」紅葉道：「小姐晚間睡着了，便胡語道：『青春難再，可惜錯了好光陰也』，因此得知。」俊卿回嗔作喜道：「你倒也乖巧。...」²⁷⁶

After this abrupt change of mood from embarrassed anger to the joy of finding someone who understands, Junqing quickly begins to pour out her innermost feelings to her intimate handmaid:

²⁷⁵ The phrase “rouse of the heart of Spring” refers both to emotions evoked by springtime and feelings related to romance and desire.

²⁷⁶ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 11.

You have long been my confidant, and [someone] tight-lipped; if [this is] known by others, what should be done? Hongye, do you know the sickness in my heart?” Hongye said, “How would [I] not know, I and Miss are having the same sickness. I think as a female, [we] only seek pleasure. Now [we] gradually age, with not one man to accompany, [once our] youth is gone, [it is] truly hard to experience it again.” Junqing sighed and said, “This is no talk for us girls.” Hongye said, “We two are close like the heart and abdomen, that’s why we talk about [this].” Junqing said, “I’m not withholding from you: [When I] saw this picture the day before, without realising [my] desire was roused, thus [these] two days [I was] in a trance, [with] jumbled speech.” Hongye said, “[Even] chaste and determined females are not without the nature of desire. Humans are not plants, how can [they] have no feelings? I am just the same.”

你早是吾的心腹，又是口穩哩；倘被別的齟齬，怎的是好？紅葉你知我心病麼？
」紅葉道：「怎的不知，吾與小姐便是一般的病。吾想人家女子，只圖快活。如今年紀漸大，沒有一個男子隨伴，青春錯過，誠難再得。」俊卿歎了一口氣道：「這個不是我們女兒家話的。」紅葉道：「吾兩個是心腹人，故此說起。」俊卿道：「吾不瞞你，前日見了這個畫兒，不覺情動，所以兩日恍恍惚惚，語言顛倒。」紅葉道：「貞烈之女，非無懷春之性。人非草木，豈獨無情？吾也是這般的。」²⁷⁷

Since Hongye is of the same age as her mistress, while also from an inferior social background, she can freely conduct the “girls' talk” about the otherwise inappropriate lament on sexual frustration with her mistress, but without the emotional burden of propriety as her mistress does. By emphasising that they are confidants (*xinfu* 心腹, literally “heart and abdomen”), Hongye aligns herself with her mistress as a young unwed female suffering the same struggle. Through reiterating their similarity, her speech in rationalising desire thus is made a statement to be accepted in return, as they are “the same.”

In the same text, the writer has arranged a similar persuasive speech between two female assistants, alluding to sexual frustration as “the sickness.” In the scene, as the handmaid lightly protested the idea of having an affair with her mistress’s lover, the female neighbour replied,

What kind of saying is this? Even the main mistress is [acting] like this, let alone the servant. I have no husband, [and] you have no husband; we two have the same sickness. You can’t lie in front of someone being real.

你說那裡話？正主兒尚然如此，何況是走使的。吾也是沒丈夫的，你也是沒丈夫的，兩個病則一般。你吾真人前說不得假話。²⁷⁸

²⁷⁷ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 11.

²⁷⁸ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 9.

In this example, the financially struggling neighbour and the handmaid may have different social statuses (one as a civilian, another as a servant), but they share the similarity of relying on the same mistress for their livelihood and on having no spouse. This speech also drags the unknowing mistress in to make having illicit affair a small matter, as she is also not innocent in her sexual conduct. As such, this creates the same effect of first equalling the persuading and the persuaded, and presenting sexual desire as a mutually understood “truth” irrespective of whether it actually is or not.

In *Dengcao heshang zhuan*, the mistress Wang *shi* is placed in a similar scenario as she is persuaded by four sexual female spirits to accept having a lover, after some of them fornicated with her husband in front of her and ridiculed him by sexually overpowering him. After mocking his incapability and stopping only after his wife begged for him to be spared, the spirits made this speech in an attempt to present the normalcy of married women having lovers alongside a husband:

We four sisters all have husbands, [and] none was restricted by them. Nowadays the world is like one: what woman does not want to steal [moments with] a few real men? It is only that madame’s deep quarter has numerous eyes and ears. [For] poor families [having] insufficient clothes and food, grieving at dawn and sighing at dusk, [they are] thus impossible to ignite whatever flames [of desire], [and] could only subdue it. If [one] has some standing, no matter young, old, nice, [or] bad, who would not think about this with all their mind?

我們姊妹四個都有丈夫，都不受丈夫管束。如今世界都是一個，婦人家誰不想偷幾個男子漢？只因夫人家深院內耳目衆多。窮人家衣食不足，朝愁暮歎，便怎也動不得什麼火，只索忍了。若有些門戶，任他小的老的好的壞的，那一個不心心念念，想這件事情？²⁷⁹

In this speech, the similarity emphasised by the four spirits is their marital status. By diverting the emphasis to household status and privacy, they claim that all women desire secret affairs, which the mistress Wang *shi* has just recently conducted and not ready to give up. Rather than giving reasons for a woman’s desire for affairs, or claiming the unworthiness of staying chaste, this passage simply stated women’s desire for more men as a matter of fact. This passage is

²⁷⁹ *Dengcao heshang zhuan*, *Siwuxie huibao* vol. 22, 80.

also special in its view on female desire on wanting “a few men,” which is different in not just focussing on “satisfaction,” but in a fashion similar to men having “women” instead of “woman.” Interestingly, this passage’s message of linking wealth, desire and the possibility of having affair echoed a similar passage in *Rou putuan*, which suggests that wealthier household creates more occasion for adulterous women and less motivation in holding them to account.²⁸⁰

In short, the female assistant’s speech functions by creating a connection with similarities in life status and mutual suffering from sexual frustration. Once accompanied by the persuasive speech affirming the normalcy of female desire that is otherwise deemed inappropriate, such female-to-female speech effectively rationalises the female characters’ change of mind, as they shift from adhering to the societal expectation of conduct to breaking the rules once they are convinced to fulfil instead of suppress their burning desire.

Acknowledgement of hardship in widowhood

In scenes where the mistress to be convinced is a widow, while the female assistants’ speech also affirms female desire, the sense of loneliness and injustice of widow chastity replaces the explanation of ordinariness of female desire as the main highlight of the speech. Compared to speeches that affirm female desire, those addressing the struggle of widowhood often are the most vivid in outlining the life struggles of the women concerned.

In the following excerpt from *Langshi*, the *pozi* is bribed by the male protagonist into luring her young widowed neighbour Suqiu into an illicit affair. Prior to this scene, the *pozi* orchestrated a desire-arousing stunt of making Suqiu watch and vocally encourage domestic pigs to procreate. Knowing fully that her trick has worked, the *pozi* proceeds to talk and persuade Suqiu:

On the next day, the *pozi* walked in again and asked, “Feeling at ease at night or not?” Suqiu sighed and said, “What to be at ease at?” The *pozi* said, “I have also been through

²⁸⁰ The speech concerned Sai Kunlun’s explanation of the reason for benefits of having adulterous affairs with women from wealthier families instead of poorer families, in which the issue of poverty and lack of desire of women was also mentioned. See Huang Qiang and Guo Di, eds., *Rou putuan jiaozheng*, 114.

[that]. [As] a widow without a husband, tossing and turning, how to be at ease? I am now old, [and] may as well just be a ghost. Pity that [you] lady with such youthful look, [and] lost the husband, [with] time missed, and never had pleasure.” Suqiu said, “This is being alive in vain, which may as well end with death.” *Pozi* said, “I wonder why widows remain chaste, [if they] do something in secret, who would know? I now regret missing out when young and never had pleasure, however [I am] now in old age, this is [the issue] of timing; once your flower-like appearance diminishes, [even if you] wave both hands for men, men don’t come.” Suqiu said, “Isn’t this the rotting of heart and forgetting of husband’s affections?” *Pozi* said, “[You] lady is missing the point! Pleasure in life is a convenient advantage. [If you] observe widowhood for whole life, [you] end up only [with] an empty name, [but] never any solid use, [and] no benefits to the husband. [You] Lady said [if] a widow does not preserve [her widowhood], [she] has not [returned] the husband’s affection. How come these affectionate husbands and wives, [once] the woman is dead, [the husband] will marry a woman again, immediately discarding the former wife? According to the view of this old daughter-in-law, isn’t this the silliness of maintaining widowhood?” Suqiu said, “According to what you said, maintaining widowhood is indeed foolish.”

次日婆子又走進來問道：「夜來可自在否？」素秋嘆了一口氣道：「有甚自在？」婆子道：「吾也經過的。寡婦人家沒有丈夫，翻來覆去，那裡得自在？吾如今日年紀老大，就做鬼也罷了，只可惜娘子這樣一個青春容貌，沒了官人，錯過了時辰，不曾快活得。」素秋道：「這是枉生在世，不如死休。」婆子道：「吾想寡婦人家守甚貞烈，暗裡做了一班半點兒，那得有人知覺？吾如今自家懊悔後生時錯過了不曾快活，却又年紀大了，這便是有時；一日花容退，兩手招郎，郎不來。」素秋道：「這的可不壞了心兒，可不忘了丈夫的情兒？」婆子道：「娘子差矣！人生快活，是便宜。守了一世的寡婦，落得個虛名，不曾實實受用，與丈夫沒有增益。娘子說寡婦不守，便沒了丈夫的情。怎的恁般恩愛夫妻，婦人死了，便又娶著一個婆娘，即將前妻丟却？據老媳婦看起，可不是守寡的痴也？」素秋道：「據着婆婆說起，守寡的果是痴了。」²⁸¹

In this speech, the *pozi* first made Suqiu admit her sorrow, then proceeds to explaining their mutual experience. In her speech, she also expresses regret in keeping her loyalty to her late husband to lead Suqiu into considering her potential loss, as she also emphasises the time limit of youthful beauty and its relation to potential trysts, creating a sense of urgency. While the injustice and lack of actual benefit of widowhood are also mentioned, the highlight of the *pozi*'s argument is the unequal level of expectation on *qing* between men and women: that a woman is considered heartless if she doesn't observe widowhood, but a widower can easily remarries even after a loving relationship. To a certain extent, this viewpoint echoed *Rou putuan*'s Yuxiang's soliloquy about "opening the backdoor" as her husband "strays on the path of

²⁸¹ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch.18.

evil”:²⁸² that if a man would not restrain themselves for their wife, the wife shall behave the same without blame. But overall, the assurance of secrecy and no harm brought to the reputation is also a chief factor that pushes the idea of breaking the observation of widowhood into action.

In *Xiuta yeshi*, the sexual awakening and luring of Ma *shi* was initiated not by maids or *pozi*, but rather by the young mistress of the household Ma *shi* was invited to stay at. In this scene, Jin *shi* is luring the widow Ma *shi* into having sex with a make-believe “cousin” lover of Jin *shi* with a proposed action plan. In here, Jin *shi* addresses Ma *shi* as *popo* 婆婆 (mother-in-law), as Jin *shi*’s husband and Ma *shi*’s son addressed each other as “brother,” although this “brotherhood” is in fact a sexual relationship. Similar to the previous example, the persuading speech is designed to rouse the sense of longing in the widow. But instead of outlining the concern of expected moral conduct and its injustice, this example focusses solely on the experiences from the perspective of a widow:

Ma *shi* said, “I have upheld my widowhood for thirteen years, how could [I] break my vow today?” Jin *shi* said, “Ahem, for women who stay chaste, in the beginning, it is tolerable. After three to four years, there will be some displeasure in the body... wondering that only a few years has been safeguarded earlier, there are [further] forty or fifty years ahead, how [could you] endure it until old age? Those who remarry look undignified; those who sleep with others, that person may tell it out, [and] people will know. Now that *popo* pretends to be me to mess around with him for a night, let him make *popo* truly happy, it is still better than to scratch the itch with the Myanmar bell,²⁸³ and life is not passed in vain.

麻氏道：「我守了十三年的寡，難道今日破了戒？」... 金氏道：「咳，婦人守節，初起頭，還熬得。過了三四年，也就有些身子不快... 思量前邊纔守得幾年，後頭還有四五十年，怎麼捱得到老？有改嫁的，體面不好；叫人睡的，那個人又要說出來，人便要知道。如今婆婆假裝了奴家，好耍子和他弄一夜，等他着實幹得婆婆快活，也強如緬鈴弄癢，也不枉了做人一世。」²⁸⁴

This speech has further narrated the harsh reality of widowhood. Jin *shi*’s approach to persuasion is conducted at various levels, progressing from evaluating the loss to the potential

²⁸² The passage was discussed in Chapter 2 and can be found in Huang Qiang and Guo Di, eds., *Rou putuan jiaozheng*, 233.

²⁸³ The “Myanmar bell” is a sex toy insertable into the vagina, and supposedly it would vibrate when heated by body temperature.

²⁸⁴ *Xiuta yeshi*, *Siwuxie huibao* vol. 2, 256–263.

pleasure. Prior to her persuasive speech, Jin *shi* explained to Ma *shi* the latter's late husband's extraordinarily weak performance in sex, implying a great loss that has already taken place. In her main speech, she first vividly describes the emotional and physical challenge of living alone in different seasons in detail, and that such struggle is not temporary at all. She then addresses the choice of remarrying or having secret affair in a negative light in order to persuade Ma *shi* in taking her offer of having illicit sex under disguise. To enhance her attempt in luring Ma *shi*, Jin *shi* mentions the Myanmar bell, which has just given Ma *shi* immense pleasure, and suggests an upgrade from tool-aided masturbation to actual sex. Jin *shi* seals off the last practical concern of pregnancy by promising medicines for abortion, leaving little ground for the already aroused Ma *shi* in refusing the offer. In this carefully structured speech, a widow's unfulfilled sexual need, the bleak reality of decades of life in solitary, the lack of positive alternatives in life, and the practical concern of potential pregnancy have all been addressed. Although the ultimate goal of Jin *shi* is to push Ma *shi* in breaking her vow of loyalty to her late husband, her speech is a comprehensive outline of widowhood in a nutshell, with the emphasis on all the emotional and physical lack that a widow has to endure.

Physical temptation as a female peer

An additional tactic luring female into illicit affairs that can only be conducted by female assistants is the direct sexual tease and physical touch that borderlines to homosexual activities. Such plots usually take place after the empathetic persuasion is completed with the main female character's stance on chastity being wavered. Such scenes, however, are always placed under the condition of the female assistant taking up the male's role in pretence: they are not a depiction of female homosexual desire at all.

The text *Langshi* has twice depicted female homosexual activity of such nature, one as a homoerotic play between the two wives, and the other time with the purpose of making the unmarried maiden tempted for physical pleasure. In the story, the young maiden Junqing is still

unmarried at the age of sixteen *sui*. Her handmaid, who has a relationship with the young house master's male sexual partner Lu Zhu, learns of his interest in the young mistress, and agrees to help facilitate the affair. The first step of her plan in arousing her young mistress is by presenting erotic illustrations to her:

One day, Hongye pretentiously said to Junqing, "Miss, I have just found a scroll by the door, [with] drawn illustrations here. I have not yet looked [at it] in details, [I] wonder what are these illustrations?"... [When the scroll was] taken for a look, [those] happen to be spring-vibes copulating pictures.

一日，紅葉假意對俊卿道：「小姐，吾纔在門首拾得一卷，描花樣在此，吾也不曾仔細看，也不知是甚麼花樣？」... 拿來看時，卻是春意交歡圖。²⁸⁵

Once the young virgin mistress becomes aroused and agitated from unfulfilled desire, her handmaid makes further suggestions of re-enacting the pictured sex act between the two of them:

Hongye said, "Miss, [let] us two follow the pictures [and] play for once, how about it?"

Junqing said, "You shall be the male [and you] may get on top [of my] body."

Hongye agreed, then helped Junqing to remove [her] pants, [and] herself also removed [her] pants. [She] threw [herself] upon, [and] like a man, handled Junqing [with] solid delivery [penetration] for a while.

紅葉道：「小姐，吾兩個就依畫兒上的模樣耍一回，何如？」

俊卿道：「你就做男子，可上身來。」

紅葉應允，使與俊卿脫了褲兒，自家也脫褲兒。撲蓋上去，如男子一般的，把俊卿著實送了一會。²⁸⁶

This deliberate plan of arousing the mistress's sexual desire is not at all depicted to have elements of homoerotic desire between the two, but rather on the surface a physical service the handmaid provides to her mistress, which is actually in aid to her male sexual partner in approaching the young mistress.

In *Xiuta yeshi*, while Jin *shi*'s motivation is for her own pleasure of taking revenge rather than for external rewards, she also makes use of her advantage as a female to physically tempt Ma *shi* while Ma *shi* was asleep:

Jin *shi* called "*popo*" twice [and received] no response, [so she] gently moved [her] hand to touch beneath [Ma *shi*'s] little belly... Jin *shi* put the fingertip inside the vagina to fondle, and put some saliva in, [and] the vagina seems thoroughly wet inside out. Jin *shi* knotted the edge of her own handkerchief to a genuine Myanmar bell, unchained it and

²⁸⁵ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 11.

²⁸⁶ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 11.

hold it in her own hand... [and] abruptly pushed [the Myanmar bell] in, [then] gently put Ma *shi*'s upholding legs down, pressing them together tightly for (Ma *shi*), and also pressing her own legs on top of the two feet.

金氏叫了兩聲婆婆，不應，便輕輕的把手往他的小肚子底下一摸... 金氏把指頭到毯裡摟一摟，又把饞唾放些進去，只見毯裡外都濕透了。金氏把自家汗巾頭結那個真正的緬鈴兒，解下來捏在自家手裡... 一下揪進去，輕輕把麻氏豎起兩腳放倒，替他緊緊夾住，又把自家腿壓在兩隻腳上。²⁸⁷

After Ma *shi* wakes from the pleasure and realises what happened, this act is lightly dismissed as a prank (原來大嫂捉弄我), while Jin *shi* in turn takes the chance to make her persuasive speech in luring Ma into breaking her celibacy in widowhood.

In both cases, the female assistants already had a taste of the male protagonist whom they are attempting to introduce to the targeted female. The same also applies to Lanying in *Taohua ying* as she agrees to help liaise between the male protagonist, whom she already had sex with, and the young mistress that she serves. To a certain extent, the physical pleasure enjoyed by the female assistants may be comparable to material promises from the male in securing the help from *pozi*, except that in the maids' case there exists extra sexual tension and sex scenes to make up for the plots, while the bribing of *pozi* do not have the same erotic appeal.

The most significant aspect of such feature is the convenience of having a female character to be physically intimate with another female character, which is a highly popular plot among erotic fiction. This type of plot is based on an underlying assumption of a female being open to sexually intimate interaction with another female, and that such interaction is usually unsuspecting at first glance. For example, in the beginning of *Dengcao heshang zhuan*, the *pozi* performs a magic trick and asks the mistresses to reveal their skin underneath their garment, to which Wang *shi* (the mother) commented, "No problem, it's all women here (何妨，都是女人們在此)。"²⁸⁸ In the late Ming short erotic stories collection *Huanxi yuanjia*, the fourth story's main storyline is that a man successfully entered a woman's bedroom under disguise as a

²⁸⁷ *Xiuta yesh*, *Siwuxie huibao* vol. 2, 232–233.

²⁸⁸ *Dengcao heshang zhuan*, in *Siwuxie huibao* vol. 22, 44.

woman and convinced her to sleep together to allow ‘her’ demonstrate a sex toy (in disguise of his actual phallus). Both *Taohua ying* and *Dengcao heshang zhuan* also have a secondary plot or quoted story of monks dressing up as a nun to engage with another female. Other than that, most erotic fiction has mentioned females peeking at other people having sex together or engaging in sexual activities where more than one female is involved.

Bribes for alliance

This section investigates the motivations behind the various interactions among the female characters. In the era when these erotic fiction titles were produced, there laid a range of “forbidden” elements in these stories. The texts were deemed illegal at different times, and their content concerns sexual misconduct that breaks the familial order, which was the core of social order and the heart of legal regulations. As noted previously, getting involved with illicit affairs was far from risk-free and could bring grim consequences both legally and socially, ranging from damaged reputation to potentially losing civilian status and being sold as slaves. With this background in mind, it might be one of the reasons for the stories showing little to no plots where a female character agreed to participate in such activities without obvious benefit.

The types of bribery can be generalised into two streams: one being the material rewards, and another sexual benefits. As shown in the following discussion, the choice of bribe is affected by the bargaining power of the women concerned and practical interest of the receiver, and a realistic reflection of different needs of different females.

Material rewards

The most straightforward inducement given as a reward for orchestrating illicit affairs is material ones. Silver, jewellery, and clothing items are all common items used to bribe another female into participation. With the amount given, they also likely reveal the price of purchasing the service from different women, which greatly varied.

How much can be earned through aiding someone else's illicit affairs? The answer depended on who are involved and the primary role or social status of the female assistant. To begin with, material rewards given to *pozi* tend to be recorded in most details and generous compared to any other groups of female assistants. Monetary earnings of the *pozi* in fiction create several effects: first, showcasing the wealth and determination of the male character; second, functioning as a standard ritual of offering to show the power of money and price to pay for helping the illicit affairs; third, serving the cliché plot to reinforce the *pozi*'s greedy image as well as their lack of regard to conventional rules of "morality."

Before going through the potential earnings as shown in the novels, it is important to first understand the approximate worth of money. The text *Langshi* has little description of how money was spent aside from bribing others. Its contemporary, *Jin Ping Mei*, a text with substantial details in domestic life and spending, may be used as a reference point to help understand the approximate price of liaising illicit affairs. In his study of economics in *Jin Ping Mei*, Hou Hui proposed an approximate conversion rate of one tael of silver (一兩銀) in Wanli era (1573–1619) as RMB200 (£22.7), one mace of silver (一錢銀) as RMB20 (£2.27); one candareen of silver (一分銀) as RMB2 (£0.22) in terms of purchasing power.²⁸⁹ There are also plenty of concrete examples of what certain amount was actually worth, such as showcasing the amount spent on food or consumer items.

In *Langshi*, the female neighbour Zhao Daniang 趙大娘 earned a small amount of silver by lending out her home as a hiding place. As a widow with a daughter, she has been financially struggling and usually aided by her comparatively affluent neighbour Wenfei, and thus indebted to her and supposedly owe Wenfei her help:

²⁸⁹ Hou Hui 侯會, *Cong Ximen qing du dong youqianren: Kan Jingpingmei zhong de jingji baitai* 從西門慶讀懂有錢人:看金瓶梅中的經濟百態 [Reading through the Rich from Ximen Qing: A Look on the Many Facets of Economy in *Jin Ping Mei*] (Taipei: Yuan Liou Publishing Co., Ltd, 2019), 19. Hou's study was published in 2018 and thus the conversion rate is specific to the currency exchange rate between GBP and RMB at the time of writing.

This Zhao Daniang, she is taken care of by her mistress on usual days. Just tell her about this reason [for the affair], and give her four or five taels of silver, she will surely not reject.

這趙大娘，平日又是娘娘看顧的，把這一段情由，與他說了，再把四五兩銀子與他，保著無辭。²⁹⁰

Indeed, upon hearing the request, Zhao agreed to help except feeling unsure about the monetary reward. Nonetheless, she is made to accept five taels from her neighbour-patron Wenfei for her service. She also later receives an extra ten taels from Wenfei's lover Langzi. In total, Zhao earned fifteen taels of silver. In the realm of *Jin Ping Mei*, the amount is approximately the price Wu Da used to take out a mortgage on a two-storey house with three rooms on the ground floor, an upstairs room in the front, and two little courtyards for him and Pan Jinlian, together with the money obtained by selling Jinlian's hairpins and combs.²⁹¹ A similar amount (sixteen taels) is also equivalent to the price of purchasing the maidservant Chunmei, one of the three main female characters in *Jin Ping Mei* who later became the concubine of Ximen Qing. It should however be noted that the price of purchasing maidservants greatly varied: in the same novel, some maidservants, especially pre-pubescent or resold ones, are purchased/sold with a much lower cost ranging from five to eight taels.

Compared to the neighbour of convenience, *pozi* can earn a lot more through their service in liaising illicit affairs. In the same fiction, Zhang *pozi* is paid “one slab of snowflake with fine veins weighting five taels (五兩重，一錠雪花細絲)”²⁹² by the male protagonist Langzi in exchange for her help in seducing the married young lady whom Zhang provides services to. Zhang is also rewarded by her young mistress with “four slabs of white silver” for her help in delivering the reply and invitation to Langzi, totalling the amount of income of this single affair in five slabs of silver (approx. twenty-five taels/ RMB5,000/ £567.5). When Langzi tried to bribe another *pozi* Qian *pozi* for her help in seducing her neighbouring widow, Langzi has

²⁹⁰ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 4

²⁹¹ *The Plum in the Golden Vase or; Chin P'ing Mei: Volume One: The Gathering*, trans. David Tod Roy, 30.

²⁹² “Snowflakes” and “fine veins” were common terms used to describe the colour and appearance of silver, which here denotes high purity and thus high value.

thrice visited the *pozi*, gifting her in total three slabs of silver and two bolt of pongee before finally explaining his motive. He has further promised a hundred taels of gratitude reward once the affair is arranged and succeeded. However, the amount still could not match the two hundred slabs of silver Langzi paid to bribe the leader of Wenfei's late husband's family clan, which is meant to get his support in arranging Wenfei's remarriage.

Housemaids do not normally receive material rewards, and even if they do, the value is much lesser and rarely comes in cash. The housemaid Shancha in *Taohua ying* plays a role that is a mix of *pozi*/maidservant/neighbour while assisting the neighbouring widow. Being a housemaid in the household she serves, she is definitely inferior to the widow, who is the mistress of the neighbouring household. Yet as a woman, she can pass as a companion to the widow despite the differences of their social status. As a housemaid, Shancha possesses little fine items. When she was invited for a chat with the wealthy widow-mistress next door, she was aware of her lack of even a presentable gauze dress and could only present herself for the occasion after her young master gave her his late mother's old dress. During her visit, the widow treated Shancha with wine, and gifted her with a pair of gold earrings and a new silk dress, all of which items a servant woman like Shancha could not afford normally. The material gains she obtained may be subtle compared to silver, as they all appear as treats from one woman to another, if not also generous sparing of excessive female possessions from a wealthy woman. But the rewards were already sufficient for the less privileged Shancha to pay her best effort in fulfilling the wish of the widow.

When it comes to maidservants, material bribery of maidservants is less enthusiastically described comparatively, if not actually vague and empty. One common type of bribe to maidservants is to “*maizhu* 買囑 (bribe-and-instruct),” which are usually highlighted briefly. Examples where the term “bribe-and-instruct” was mentioned include:

[There are] four to five maids, mostly bribed and instructed.

四五個丫鬟，已多買囑了²⁹³

Hongye then proceeded to bribe and instruct the maids.
紅葉便去買囑眾丫鬟²⁹⁴

The maids responded, this woman bribed and instructed [them].
眾丫鬟應允，這婦人也買囑了²⁹⁵

The amount of bribery and exact content of instruction is rarely ever explained. “Bribe-and-instruct” as a bribing method is used in other daily life scenarios in other genres of fiction as well. For example, in *Erke pai'an jingqi* 二刻拍案驚奇 (The Second Carving of Slapping the Table in Amazement), the term is mentioned in several situations where people are bribed to work for someone's favour. Similarly, there is no mentioning of the amount, and those bribed are usually of less significant social rank.

In most cases, the maidservants may be promised rewards without actually getting anything in advance. The rewards promised are not always in the form of money. One example of non-monetary rewards provided by a mistress to her handmaid is from *Dengcao heshang zhuan*, when the mistress orders her maid to help hide the magical monk lover of hers from being her husband's eyes:

Madame thus summoned Nuanyu and ordered, “You shall help me take care of the candlewick monk well, I [will] give you a fine dress to wear.”
夫人遂自叫暖玉近前分付：「你可與我養好了燈草和尚，我與你一件細衫兒穿。」²⁹⁶

Another example of non-monetary rewards from mistress to handmaid is in *Langshi*, in which the reward is a proper husband, something that a maidservant could only rely on their owners to obtain a favourable one:

Wenfei said, “Such a capable young maid! Later [I] will properly find a husband for you.”
文妃道：「好個干事的丫頭！後日好好尋一個丈夫與你。」²⁹⁷

²⁹³ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 12.

²⁹⁴ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 14.

²⁹⁵ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 19.

²⁹⁶ *Dengcao heshang zhuan*, *Siwuxie huibao* vol. 22, 77.

²⁹⁷ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 4.

Another type of inducement provided by the mistresses to their maidservants in ensuring they do not spoil their illicit affair is simply promises of favoured treatment:

Don't tell young lady and the maids, and I shall see you differently.”
不可對姑娘與丫鬟們說，我自另眼看承你。²⁹⁸

Suqiu instructed the young maids... said, “Don't spoil my affair, and I shall favour you.”
素秋吩咐丫鬟...道：「你不要壞得的事，我便抬舉你。」²⁹⁹

The special treatment is likely quite important to the maidservants as it would affect their daily life in terms of status within the household as well as their future, especially as they have little control over their lives as servants. Take Nuanyu as an example, as her mistress stayed to her promise of seeing her differently, she was entrusted with taking care of the magical candlewick monk and thus also indirectly rewarded with the special sexual enjoyment. Later Nuanyu becomes the designated body substitute for both the household matron and young mistress when they want to avoid sleeping with their husbands. While being a body substitute is a required service rather than a favour, Nuanyu was eventually impregnated and thus gained further status upgrade in the household as she gave birth to a son (allegedly to the household master). Even though it is unclear if she was made a concubine officially, she had a room for herself and was given the power to be in charge of some household matters on behalf of the mistress, which clearly separated her apart from ordinary housemaids.

However, despite all the potential improvements in life, the maidservants are ultimately bound to domestic services and unlikely to have a choice due to their lowly status. Together with the general lacking of legal protection from exploitative treatments, the rewards are likely more a gracious bonus than actual benefits to their life in servitude. Interestingly, the “bribe-and-instruct” of housemaids appears to usually apply to general maidservants in the house, but not the handmaid, who usually has to take up prominent roles in liaising and other labour work, and supposedly has a much more intimate relationship with their mistress. These seem to

²⁹⁸ *Dengcao heshang zhuan, Siwuxie huibao* vol. 22, 57.

²⁹⁹ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 19.

suggest receiving promises of owners' favour or a decent husband are potentially even more rewarding than the likely unsubstantial monetary gain, while also harder to obtain. Nevertheless, the non-material rewards appear to be deemed important enough to remain a feature in erotic fiction, as they rationalise the cooperation of the maidservants, except that the service of *pozi* much apparently is valued much higher than those of maidservants.

Sexual benefits

Aside from material bribery, which helps in both ensuring cooperation and involvement of the women concerned (for they are benefitted and become responsible), the briberies also occur in the form of collective breaching of the law forbidding illicit fornication. Unlike material gifts, this type of bribery puts every female involved at greater risk of being defamed and possibly punished by law. Although such plots likely are meant to serve extra sex scenes in the erotic novels, they also forge a bond between the females involved and rationalise the reason for those illicit affairs remaining a secret instead of being exposed.

The use of sexual benefits to ensure alliance usually happens between sexually desired females of similar social status, as they do not have the absolute authority over each other or are sexually undesired by the male like the *pozi*. For many, such inducements are also given out after careful calculation of expected responses and risks. This is also not to be confused with the demanded sexual services provided by maidservants, as the "services" are demanded irrespective of the (un)willingness of the maidservant with their enjoyment not considered, while sexual benefits are provided to satisfy the recipient with the aim of securing an alliance.

For example, when the female neighbour Zhao daniang in *Langshi* faced the risk of being caught having sex with her patron's lover by the patron's handmaid, her tactic of keeping her relationship a secret from her patron is making the patron's handmaid also sexually involved with her mistress's lover. In the scene where the handmaid visits the neighbour to borrow

something, which happen to be locked in the same room as the male protagonist, the neighbour knows that the secret will inevitably be exposed, and thus proceeded to instruct him as such:

The woman opened the room's door, [and] said to Langzi, "Chunjiao (the handmaid) is here, you [should] medicate [penetrate] her, if [this incident is] leaked, [there will be] plenty unpleasantry."

婦人開了房門，對著浪子道：「春嬌來了，你也藥他一藥，不然走了風聲，許多不好看相。」³⁰⁰

While this tactic is successful partially due to the attractiveness of the male protagonist, Zhao daniang's decision to safeguard the secret is no doubt a successful one. By making the handmaid also guilty of potentially upsetting the mistress, in order to avoid losing the existing benefits and favour from the mistress, the handmaid must keep the secret for Zhao daniang and vice versa for everyone's benefit. While the male protagonist is also asked to keep the secret, unlike the two women, his livelihood does not depend on the mistress and thus has little to do with the women's handling of their secrets and strategic alliances.

In *Rou putuan*, the mistress Yanfang, desired by the male protagonist, is lured into considering a sexual affair by her neighbour, a comparatively unattractive woman who displays extreme enthusiasm over his beauty and the fantasy idea of a secret affair between them. While considering the possibility and risks in the attempt, Yanfang is described to have gone through a calculating thinking process. The first concern addressed is the common worry of confidentiality:

As she (the neighbour) speaks, Yanfang contemplates, "Seems like this woman is in her heart extremely fond of him. Even if I am to do this thing, [as] she lives just at the opposite door, if [I] don't give her some favour, won't she spoil my affair?"

他一邊講，艷芳一邊算計道：看這婦人心中愛他極了。我就要做這樁事，他住在對門，若不把些甜頭到他，他豈不壞我的事？³⁰¹

Since Yanfang is concerned about tainting her clean record to an unworthy male, she decided that her neighbour could be a useful pawn with full confidence on having nothing to lose as the more attractive female:

³⁰⁰ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 9.

³⁰¹ Huang Qiang and Guo Di, eds., *Rou putuan jiaozheng*, 161.

Now I don't know how's that person's capability, so why not let her first do it once, as if delegating her to examination. If [he is] capable, I then join after, there's no worry such an ugly woman can steal [his] favour from me. If [he is] incapable, I can just throw a tantrum, cast him out and that's it, [my] reputation will remain untainted, what is not good about this?

我如今不知那人的本事何如，不如讓他先弄一次，只當委他考試一般。若還本事好，我然後上場，不怕這樣醜婦人奪了我的寵去。若還本事不濟，我就一頓發作起來，趕他出去就是了，依舊不曾壞得名節，何等不妙？³⁰²

While this thought process is similar in terms of using mutual sexual misconduct to ensure confidentiality, her plan is not received without being questioned. However, once the neighbour understands Yanfang's concern about breaking her well-preserved chastity for someone unworthy, she gladly accepts the task in the condition of guaranteed uninterrupted intercourse, as she lacks the physical appeal in attracting a beautiful man herself. The female neighbour's bargaining ability indicates her status as an equal to the mistress of the scene, despite that she is treated as a subordinate to Yanfang by the writer with the deliberately comic description. Yet with equal social status, Yanfang could not adopt the use-and-discard approach to her neighbour as other mistresses do to their maidservants, and material rewards do not seem to be useful enough to someone with similar family wealth. As her advantage was her stronger sexual appeal to the male protagonist, Yanfang could only share with her neighbour the opportunity of sexual pleasure that was initially intended solely for her, with this sharing act a price she has to pay due to the lack of an actual subordinate female assistant.

A slight difference between *Rou putuan* and other texts is the clear-cut separation between the “master/mistress” class and the servant class, where interaction (sexual or not) is limited in text. Aside from having much lower prominence of maidservants and *pozi* characters, the sexual benefits granted to the maidservants are also provided not by the male protagonist, but by his favoured valet. While the household of his female lovers was planning on their group sex activities, as wives of literati in a rather wealthy family cluster, the loyalty of servants in keeping their affair secret became one of the major concerns. The issue is first brought up as

³⁰² Huang Qiang and Guo Di, eds., *Rou putuan jiaozheng*, 162.

the male protagonist tried to ask for sexual benefits to his valet upon his previous promise, for which one of his lovers replies:

Ruishu said, “This is not difficult. Our home has quite some maids... not only can this occupy the body of the valet, but also stifle the mouth of the maidservants. Lest when our men return, they will go to gossip.”

瑞珠道：「這個不難。我們家裏有的是丫鬟... 不但繫伴當之身，還可塞梅香之口。省得我們的男子回來，他要去學舌。」³⁰³

While this can be considered a sexual benefit for the maidservants only upon the assumption that they have the freedom and are willing to have unsupervised sex, this is presented also as an offered benefit meant to silence the maidservants by making them also guilty of sexual misconduct, especially since there is no indication of the maidservants being ordered to entertain the valet sexually.

To sum up, the main difference between material rewards and sexual benefits lies in that the former serves more as a service request, while the latter serves more as a precautionary or remedial tactic in response to potential exposure to the secret affairs. Material rewards normally are offered by mistresses of higher status, who normally have sufficient power and assets to be gifted at ease. The offer of sexual benefits is generally used as a reward between either women of equally lower rank, a non-competition, or simply allowed among servants. Such feature is rarely used in stories where more than one woman of higher social rank is involved, which itself is rarely featured in texts of this genre.

In this chapter, the emotional and material aspect of female assistants' involvement in other women's sexual affair has been outlined. On one hand, as service providers, they are assigned the role of initiator who created the demand for their service, i.e., liaising sexual affairs on behalf of their mistress. On the other hand, while the female assistants have to provide a range of services, they are able to obtain different benefits through their participation, even if their sole duty is to keep the secret for their mistresses.

³⁰³ Huang Qiang and Guo Di, eds., *Rou putuan jiaozheng*, 266.

Comparing the few examples of empathetic persuasions, we can see a pattern of affirming female desire—showing of understanding. Those speeches reflect the perceived anxiety of female on their desire, where shame appear to dominate their thought, and that sexual desire is a sickness not to be named. They are also always aware of the inappropriateness of even having the thoughts. When reviewed in present-day views, the female-desire affirming speech may be interpreted as pro-female desire as opposed to the practice of demonising female desire. Indeed, such speeches have provided an alternative viewpoint from late imperial China that does not fully correspond to current studies of the mainstream ideal of females at that time. However, there is also a possibility that such speeches were included chiefly to facilitate sexual scenes, if not itself aimed for arousal as they defied the expected conduct of social behaviour, in particular the females from proper households. Since the most desired mistresses were all placed in an innocently powerless state in such plots, what can be nowadays interpreted as liberating or enlightening in terms of female desire might be chiefly tantalising in the past as they challenged social taboo.

Most importantly, the one element that bridged all of these depicted female activities is the concern for confidentiality. The sexual scenes in erotic fiction might be mostly placed in a private setting of the inner household, which is the feminine sphere where females supposedly could exert more control. But such setting is not, in Huang Ko-wu's words, "an absolutely concealed field 絕對性的隱蔽場域."³⁰⁴ Absolute privacy, especially for wealthier females who normally have servants always on site, is not a norm. As they resided in the inner quarters with other females, they were also open to the influence of each other, and heavily relied on them to accomplish activities they may not achieve on their own. The exchanges thus enabled the supply and demand for emotional and financial needs of different women.

³⁰⁴ Huang Ko-wu, "Antong kuanqu," 271–271.

However, by understanding the operation of female collaboration in orchestrating illicit affairs, there remain several questions to be answered. For example, are there other elements in these female relationships aside from the business-like exchanges? Are these types of collaborative relationships exclusive to occasions when females need to conduct sexual affairs in secret? With the moral boundaries of female desire fulfilment being pushed back, what other expectations towards women remained, if not further emphasised? In an attempt to answer these questions, the following chapter will further investigate the female relations presented in erotic fiction and comparisons to other literary works.

Chapter 4: More than mistresses and servants: female emotional relationships

After an overview of the common images of different types of female characters and their relationships portrayed in the tales, this chapter looks further into the interactions among female characters to investigate their interrelationships beyond individual behaviours and roles in erotic fiction. Against the backdrop of a world where gender segregation was expected for females of certain social status, the hidden world of women is exposed through an erotic lens in erotic fiction, where women no longer behaved properly or were punished for impropriety but would express and attempt to fulfil forbidden desires. Despite some differences in narrative style and the era of creation, the texts collectively painted a world of desire hidden in the privacy of the female-dominated domain, where males were only relevant in sexual relation(s) or when the pursuit of sex with the inhibited female(s) was involved.

The preset social differences between the female characters easily lead analyses of their relationships in a status-based direction, as such background indeed produces a commonly understood expectation in readers, for example, the expected exploitation of maidservants, the unquestioned authority of the household matron. While the texts reflect a world with clear-cut social differences between females based on their background and social capital, the portrayal of their interactions is not as fixed in terms of power relationships. If the emotional dependency of one character type on another is also considered, our understanding of female relationships and their emotional lives become even more complex. Are there possible emotional relationships between females of unequal social backgrounds? How much were they written into erotic stories and appeared to be plausible despite the supposedly abnormal context? Also, when women's social status and social freedom seem to be inversely related, in what ways are the power dynamics among females affected?

That certain female character types have more power over others is, of course, subject to different situations and is generally comparative. In terms of the power dynamics, my focus is more on who has the emotional upper hand within the female circles, i.e., characters with greater influence on other females psychologically, and not on their social and economic power within the greater society. For example, while a servant woman is subject to the whim of the mistress, she can also overpower the mistress by exerting influence and manipulating her mistress into making the desired decision. Another point of interest is on female relationships forged not by blood, marriage or approved common interests like poetry and religion; aside from exemplary relationships that could be used as moral paragons, spousal catfights as those portrayed in *Jin Ping Mei* or intellectual poetry groups that mirror conventional male literary groups, are there other forms of female relationships?

4.1 Emotional relationships beyond prescribed roles

As outlined in previous chapters, female characters in erotic fiction are highly stereotypical. There exists a rigid hierarchy between mistresses and their female assistants. The relationship between the service provider and the service receiver in relation to specific interests and potential gains was rather fixed. Despite their destined inferiority, the female assistants were able to exert influence on the socially superior mistresses via different means, such as supplying temptations and suggesting how to satisfy them. Aside from obvious promises of material and physical exchanges, there seems to be another layer of the motivation behind their actions. In the five selected novels, hints of emotional bonding seem to exist among females irrespective of their status. While the simplicity of storylines contributes to the limited degree of the complexity of personalities, the choices of a plot of different writers happen to converge, reflecting the tendency to depict or imagine the private lives of females commonly placed on the pedestal in erotic fiction. This is especially true when writers feature female companions of similar roles, in particular, the usually prominent handmaid characters.

When we look into the interactions of females of different social statuses, the emotions expressed seem to go beyond mere orders and responses and contain various gestures that reflect trust, affection, jealousy that are indicative of emotional relationships not bounded solely by their background and status. The following section will look into several emotional relationships that are somewhat cliché in erotic fiction but nonetheless show an additional side of female relationships beyond the women's social-familial roles.

The companionship between handmaids and maiden mistresses

As noted previously, with the constraints of storytelling, female characters in erotic novels usually have only a handful of companions. Regardless of the mistresses' identity (wife, widow or maiden), the writers of erotic fiction tend to insert a scene where they are lured into a sexual affair. I have previously suggested that such a process is the female servants' means to benefit from arousing the sexual need of their mistresses and rationalising desire over conduct. Indeed, the female servants' employing empathetic lure and benefiting from the situation seem calculated, if not manipulative. However, when it comes to the interaction between young unmarried mistresses (hereafter *maidens* to avoid confusion) and handmaids, this process provides us with an additional glimpse into the perceived relationship of young mistresses with handmaids of their own. The handmaid also serves as the close companion who exposes her mistress to and accompanies them in their sexual awakening.

The function of maidservants, in particular the handmaids, is often more multidimensional than that of other female assistant characters. Their role allows them greater physical freedom and fewer restrictions on social conduct, such as direct interaction with males or discussing sensitive topics. Their age, generally similar to their young mistresses (when specified in the text), often positions them as the default companions, as other female peers are often absent in erotic fiction. This, in turn, also places them in the group of desirable/sexually available females in erotic fiction and potentially complicates their relationship with their mistresses.

The handmaids often are shown to be special not only for their role as the intimate maid but their closeness with the mistresses (usually the young unmarried ones). For example, the handmaid of Junqing in *Langshi* is introduced as such:

Junqing has a handmaid named Hongye, [who] is the cleverest and most obedient. Junqing likes her a lot, [and they are] like sisters. [They] always share the same bed and blanket, talk about their innermost thoughts; [they] know and get along with each other well.

俊卿有一侍女，喚做紅葉，最是伶俐乖巧。俊卿十分愛他，如姊妹一般的，時常同床合被，談說心事，甚是相得。³⁰⁵

In another scene, Junqing addressed Hongye as “the person of my heart and abdomen (吾的心腹人),”³⁰⁶ conveying a trusted confidant who knows everything about her. The mistress–handmaid duo is presented to be so extremely close that, aside from honest sharing of the melancholy of being young and sexually unfulfilled, the writer also injected a sex scene of the two, where Hongye suggested simulating heterosexual play with her mistress. As Hongye took the male role to “penetrate” her mistress, the scene serves as “the awakening of the maiden’s sexual desire and the prelude to the subsequent deflowering.”³⁰⁷ Despite the suggestiveness of this homosexual scene, it is chiefly a simulation of heterosexual intercourse with no actual sexual desire of the two towards each other.

In occasions where the young mistress is in distress or trouble, in particular on issues considered improper, the handmaid serves as the person whom the young mistress turns to for emotional support. The maid is often also the messenger. For example, when Feiyun was arranged to marry someone other than the male protagonist, instead of expressing her distress to her mother, who had full knowledge of the situation, she only turned to her handmaid to cry about her fate:

(Feiyun) then entered the room and cried to Lanying, “Only you fully understand what is in my heart.”

³⁰⁵ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 11.

³⁰⁶ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 11.

³⁰⁷ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 11.

(非雲) 既而進房哭向蘭英道：「我之心事，惟汝悉知。」³⁰⁸

When the duo encounters a chance to get help, despite being depicted as well-educated and clever, Feiyun is shown to be incompetent in explaining the situation coherently and thus turns to her maid to make up a socially acceptable excuse to avoid the arranged marriage.

Throughout *Taohua ying*, the relationship between Feiyun and her maidservant Lanying is not as warmly presented as the mistress–handmaid duos in *Langshi* and *Dengcao heshang zhuan*. In fact, the plot where Feiyun is forced into an unpleasant situation is the turning point in the mistress–handmaid interaction. Previously, the handmaid worked more for the matron of the house and helped the male protagonist approach the young mistress. The pair’s interaction was nowhere as heartfelt as the examples in *Langshi*. However, as Feiyun opened up for help, they became closer to each other, especially as Lanying was assigned the task of accompanying her young mistress in her marriage.

Much like Lanying, Nuanyu in *Dengcao heshang zhuan* is also a handmaid who originally served the household and did not specifically attend to a single mistress; she served both the matron/mother and the maiden/daughter of the house. It is apparent that the handmaid’s relationship with the matron of the house differs from her relationship with the young mistress; she maintains a close relationship with her young mistress even after the lady’s marriage. While Nuanyu generally only took orders from the matron and was occasionally promised rewards, when her young mistress was in distress, the handmaid served as a confidant to whom the young mistress confessed her troubles. In addition to listening to the young mistress confess embarrassing issues, Nuanyu also displayed a greater autonomy in this role by deciding to help deliver the message to the matron/mother.

Zhanggu, however, did not return to her room, [and] instead walked to Nuanyu’s chamber, as a mistress and a maid, [they] talked about the incident the night before. Nuanyu said, “Why not tell madame?” Zhanggu said, “[I feel] embarrassed, just wait

³⁰⁸ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 8.

until three days after [the marriage ceremony] to deal with this.” Nuanyu said, “Let me tell madame.”

長姑卻不到自己房裡，反走到暖玉廂樓，與他一主一僕，說昨夜的事。暖玉道：「何不對奶奶說？」長姑道：「不好意思，且到三朝後再處。」暖玉道：「等我去與奶奶說。」³⁰⁹

On the one hand, this problem-solving function may be a part of a handmaid's duty to her mistress, especially on occasions concerning embarrassing issues deemed inappropriate to discuss in public; on the other hand, as such decisions are not always requested or carefully instructed, these circumstances become occasions on which the handmaid can make an active choice to exercise her own social skills and create or seize opportunities to help her mistress.

Both Lanying from *Taohua ying* and Nuanyu from *Dengcao heshang zhuan* are handmaids serving two mistresses (the mother and the daughter). They appear to be more than simply servants taking orders when interacting with the younger mistress. In addition to allowing the distressed young mistresses to confide in the maid, their intimate relationship also leaves little privacy between them in terms of sharing innermost and otherwise illicit desires. The handmaids are not only there to evoke and fan their mistresses' sexual desire, but they also share sexual knowledge and act as active playmates who takes their mistresses out peeping.

While plots of voyeurism are rather common in erotic fiction, in particular with female voyeurs, there is an element of giddiness when the young mistress and her similarly young handmaid secretly peek together at other people's sexual activities. In *Dengcao heshang zhuan*, Zhanggu observed her supernatural doppelganger having intercourse with her new husband and later with her father a total of three times. Aside from the first time when she was alone in the newlywed's bedchamber, on both other occasions, Zhanggu was accompanied by Nuanyu. In their second peeping together,

That (supernatural) girl...walked towards the back of the bed. Zhanggu and Nuanyu failed to run away in time and laughed in a huddle.

那女子...往床背後一走。長姑、暖玉走避不及，笑作一團。³¹⁰

³⁰⁹ *Dengcao heshang zhuan*, *Siwuxie huibao* vol. 22, 109.

³¹⁰ *Dengcao heshang zhuan*, *Siwuxie huibao* vol. 22, 124.

Even the generally straight-faced Feiyun was shown to be giggly when invited by her handmaid to peep at her mother having sex with their young male neighbour:

Lanying... sees the two in the state of thick clouds and dense rain (in the midst of passionate sex). [She] hurriedly reported to Feiyun, "Lady [should] also go take a look." Feiyun laughed and said, "So shameless! What's for watching such business?" That said, [she] went as Lanying dragged [her].

蘭英...只見兩個正是雲深雨密，連忙報與非雲道：「姑娘也去瞧一瞧。」非雲笑道：「好沒廉恥！這樣勾當，瞧他怎的？」口中雖說，卻被蘭英拖了就走。³¹¹

The comparatively more casual relationship between the young mistress and young handmaid could also be reflected in the handmaid's occasional disobedience to her young mistress, such as when the embarrassed Feiyun, feigning anger, ordered the handmaid to discard a sexually explicit poem from the male, the handmaid decided to respond by ignoring the command:

Lanying took [the erotic poem], deliberately threw it onto the bed, [and] walked out.

蘭英接來，偏向床上一丟，竟自走了出去。³¹²

Of course, her generally harmlessly defiant and improper actions were tacitly supported by the matron, who was hoping for a successful affair between her daughter and the male and would encourage anything leading to that. Lanying was also proven correct in her reading of her mistress's mind, as the young mistress then picked up the poem and began reciting it, thinking no one could see her. Their relationship as trusted companions was again illustrated when Feiyun decided to commit suicide; she entrusted, instead of ordering, the handmaid to deliver her farewell letter and fulfil her daughterly duties to her mother. From Lanying's perspective, while she had no ground to refuse the young mistress's command, she showed emotion over her mistress's sorrow and potential death; she later also followed her mistress's suicide attempt and was shown displeased thinking the male protagonist would marry someone else despite her mistress's sacrifices.

The roles of Nuanyu and Lanying are similar in terms of their relationship with others. To the mother-mistress, the handmaid is there to provide assistance in her illicit affair; to the

³¹¹ *Taohua ying kuaishi*, ch. 3, 8a-8b.

³¹² *Taohua ying kuaishi*, ch. 3, 2a.

daughter–mistress, the handmaid is also a peer in daily life and tends to behave less obedient, taking more initiative in making her own decisions. Being a competition for male interest against mistresses of all ages, the handmaids have limited room for a status upgrade, and they are rarely portrayed outside the context of their mistresses’ interests.

When compared to other mistress–maid relationships, it is apparent that the transition of a mistress from an unwed girl to a wedded woman, or more precisely, the specific package of sentiments and social circle constructed for this type of women, plays a big role in the expression and portrayal of female emotions. The intimate and generally honest relationship is exclusive between maiden mistresses and their handmaids. It does not exist in stories about married mistresses and their handmaids, even if they are of similar age. Since the young mistresses are usually presented as sexually inexperienced, the handmaids who are close to them also play a special role in their life in terms of sexual experiences, in addition to providing relevant services. On occasions where married mistresses become hesitant, maidservants may be useful in contributing ideas on conducting the affair, but the person who provides emotional companionship on sexual matters is more likely the *pozi* or other married women.

The conditional rivalry between sexually eligible females

Depiction of intimate emotion, if not dependence, of mistresses towards female assistants appears to be featured almost exclusively among young ladies. As will be explored in this section, a sense of competition and underlying jealousy are more prominent features of relationships among more experienced women. The level of tolerance, as depicted in the stories, is subject to the relevant social and familial hierarchy among the females involved. Due to their similar age, female peers, regardless of their identity as maidservants or family kin, become potential rivals for the coveted male, especially since there is usually only one male but multiple females in almost all erotic tales. The conflict of sexual interest could happen between any eligible females, including mistresses of a wide range of background and their

handmaids, irrespective of who the man is (the lover or husband); or, to put it simply, sexual rivalry exists among any lady who is not a child, an old woman or a *pozi*.

Generally, in erotic fiction, it is more common than not that the multiple female lovers or spouses of the male protagonist coexist in peace without jealousy. With the exception of the constant female competition in *Jin Ping Mei*, concerning most sexual circles consisting of “one man, multiple women,” the writers tend to portray an idealised picture of multiple beautiful and talented spouses coexisting joyfully in peace. This may be as much a feature of sexual fantasy as it is the idealised female response to having to share their spouse with other women. Rather than only an erotic fantasy, this particular representation of female relationships likely stemmed from social ideals, in particular those of the wealthier class, in late imperial China. The harmony or rivalry presented in erotic fiction is also deeply linked to the similarities and differences between the women’s social statuses, as will be outlined as follows.

Maidservants may be required by their mistress to provide sexual services, but if they had sex with their mistress’s husband or lover without having been ordered to, they would risk displeasing their mistress and would face subsequent punishment. Whether the maidservants actively seduced the man or were pursued, if not forced, by their mistress’s favoured men is irrelevant. In such situations, females are pitted against each other as presumed rivals in obtaining sexual satisfaction supplied by the same male, irrespective of their own desires and consent. For example, while the handmaid Nuanyu in *Dengcao heshang zhuan* was coerced into sex by her master, resulting in the exposure and destruction of her mistress’s magical monk, her mistress’s response was to blame her maid for seducing her husband:

Madame was taken aback, [and] scolded [the maid], “If it wasn’t you, little harlot, seduce the family master [into sex], how would [the magically shrunken monk] have been seen by him (the husband)?”

夫人吃了一驚，罵道：「不是你這小娼娘騙家主麼，如何被他看見了呢？」³¹³

³¹³ *Dengcao heshang zhuan*, *Siwuxie huibao* vol. 22, 82.

Here, the instant reaction of blaming the maidservant can be multidimensional: being upset about losing the magical monk (the source of sexual pleasure); an easy way to vent the displeasure of the sexual act instead of confronting the husband (who was denied sex by her, has no son or concubine and legally owns the maidservant); and a shocked response expressed in the form of anger as her secret became exposed. In a similar situation where the mistress caught her husband having sex with the maidservant in *Xiuta yeshi*, the immediate reaction of the mistress was to slap and scold the maidservant:

Jin *shi*... scolded, “Uncivilised girl, how indecent!” Dongmensheng hurriedly let go of Saihong. Jin *shi* left her bed, pulled Saihong by her ears, [and] gave her two loud, whirling slaps.

金氏...罵道：「野丫頭，這等無禮！」東門生連忙丟了塞紅。金氏竟走下床來，揪了塞紅耳朵，打上兩個響風大耳瓜子。³¹⁴

The mistresses’ reaction, while at first glance a natural one acting out of jealousy, is, in fact, related to the status of the other female. The violent reactions were all targeted against maidservants, who could not fight or resist their owners. Nonetheless, the mistresses all blamed their maidservants as if the latter could make active decisions or they simply assumed that the maids seduced the male. In *Langshi*, while the generally meek Wenfei treated her handmaid Chunjiao as a trusted confidant assisting her in conducting the affair, sending her as the messenger and asking her to run errands, Wenfei was equally unwilling to share her lover with Chunjiao. On one occasion, her handmaid playfully hinted her desire:

Chunjiao chuckled and said, “I have seen the gentleman a few times, [and I] also like him a bit. Later if [I can take] a little bit [of him] without mistress getting jealous, that will [already] make the reward.” Wenfei said, “Little girl, don’t be lippy.” 春嬌笑道：「相公吾也瞧見了幾次，也愛他幾分。後來倘有一點半點，娘娘不要吃醋，便是賞賜了。」文妃道：「小丫頭，休要弄舌。」³¹⁵

Instead of allowing the playful suggestion, Wenfei both rejected and warned her handmaid indirectly. This also contributed to the worried reaction of the handmaid after she engaged in sexual intercourse with the male outside the household where she serves:

³¹⁴ *Xiuta yeshi*, *Siwuxie huibao* vol. 2, 313.

³¹⁵ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 4.

Chunjiao said, “[When we] meet again, do not mention [this], or seeing you may cause suspicion and concerns.”

春嬌道：「後日相會，不要說起，看見相公恐生疑慮。」³¹⁶

However, Wenfei was depicted to be joyously compliant when her lover-turned-husband informed her of his intention to take another wife, originally the wife of his close friend, claiming:

This is the best thing ever! With this wife, you will have fun, [and] I will have a companion. Isn't this wonderful?

這事最好！更有這夫人你也有趣，吾也有伴，豈不妙哉？³¹⁷

This accepting attitude is, however, only shown on this occasion because Wenfei was unaware of the male protagonist's affair with a widow of comparable social background. Also, there is no mention of interactions between her and other concubines.

Likewise, Wang from *Dengcao heshang zhuan* showed a different attitude towards male-sharing when the other female was not her maidservant. As shown in the previous excerpt, Wang reacted negatively when her maid was coerced into sex with her husband. Yet, she did not seem to be begrudged at all when the supernatural siblings of the candlewick monk manifested themselves and sexually occupied her husband in front of her. Upon seeing his incapability, Wang even pleaded for him to be spared from sexual exploitation by the three supernatural sisters. No jealous reactions are depicted throughout the scene, even when the husband leaves the room to have more sex with one of the supernatural sisters. While she did not object to being prioritised over the handmaid in the affair with the candlewick monk, thus facing no competition, she soon encountered her daughter asking to be prioritised over herself, the mother.

[Zhanggu] said to the madam, “Mom, I am your daughter, can't you let me have my way?” Madam said, “[I'm] worried about damaging your body, by then even medicines can hardly save [you].” Zhanggu said, “Even [if I] die, I will not complain.” Madam felt embarrassed and could do nothing but let her seek pleasure every night.

³¹⁶ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 9.

³¹⁷ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 37.

（長姑）對夫人道：「娘，我是你的女兒，難道你不肯讓讓兒麼？」夫人道：「怕弄壞你了，那時有藥難救。」長姑道：「便死，我也甘心。」夫人不好意思，只得任他夜夜同歡。³¹⁸

When confronted, Wang did not show any overt jealousy and instead expressed concern towards her daughter's health. At the same time, while Zhanggu showed her reluctance in sharing, the solution rested in the mother–daughter bond where the latter sought the former's quitting the competition. Not only was there no violence or petty fights, but the arrangement was somehow also in line with the workings of domestic authority, i.e., the daughter requesting her mother's permission instead of outright taking over the monk, despite the questionable circumstances.

There are, of course, exceptions where the women appear jealous or resentful against women other than maidservants, as in *Rou putuan* and *Xiuta yeshi*. Coincidentally, both examples are peculiar in that the females feeling upset with the situation are both mature widowed women sharing the male with younger women. As shown in the previous excerpt, the young mistress Jin *shi* in *Xiuta yeshi* was intolerant of her housemaids having sex with her husband. However, when the “other woman” was the widow Ma *shi*, who in theory held a superior rank in the household as an unofficial “mother-in-law,” the competition for Dongmensheng resulted in a brawl. It was eventually resolved with Jin *shi* backing down for a truce by apologising:

“It is me, the daughter-in-law, who offended *popo* (mother-in-law); [I] shall let *popo* beat me.” Ma *shi*, thus, finally smiles.

「是媳婦衝撞婆婆了，憑婆婆打罷。」麻氏方纔有些笑臉。³¹⁹

Jin *shi* was usually feisty and always tried to safeguard her access to the males. But in this instance, since Ma *shi* is not a maidservant, Jin *shi* could not physically assault her but only verbally fought with her. In their makeshift solution to their entangled relationship, Jin *shi*, being the unofficial daughter-in-law, was, however, in an inferior situation. The situation in

³¹⁸ *Dengcao heshang zhuan, Siwuxie huibao* vol. 22, 157–158.

³¹⁹ *Xiuta yeshi, Siwuxie huibao* vol. 2, 331.

Rou putuan was similar in that the comparatively older Hua Chen indirectly threatened the younger women in her extended household, and the younger ones had no choice but to yield and only seek petty revenge by cheating in a sex game. Since they were from the mistress group but had no clear place in a hierarchy (they were not defined as wives or concubines of equal standing in relation to the same male), rivalries became possible and required cooperation to resolve.

While the above examples show how a superior status can be useful in pressuring a socially inferior female to yield, the story usually does not end with the former enjoying more sexual gain than the latter. All eventually had to coexist with other females on an equal basis. In cases where the female spouses are of somewhat equal background or status, such as the two wives in *Langshi* and the five concubines in *Taohua ying*, there exists nothing but harmonious joy between the women. Not only that they did not fight but they also got along extremely well with each other.

Overall, the different reactions to male-sharing seem to suggest that the displeasure of women in sharing results not from sharing the male itself but from the disruption of the initially clear-cut hierarchy between the females. In Keith McMahon's analysis of polygyny, it is noted that male-authored late imperial Chinese fiction did portray "women encouraging polygyny upon a passively accepting man."³²⁰ In the example of *Honglou meng*, women became "the agents and manager[s] of polygyny, not its jealous participants... women would actively support polygyny; and it would be respectable women who would support it."³²¹ The backbone of such polygyny is a fixed hierarchy of women and a system that keeps them in their rank.³²² The composition of multi-women households in erotic fiction is, of course, lust-based instead of aiming for the extension of lineage. However, applying McMahon's observation on how

³²⁰ McMahon, "Polygyny, Bound Feet, and Perversion," 161.

³²¹ McMahon, "Polygyny, Bound Feet, and Perversion," 162.

³²² McMahon, "Polygyny, Bound Feet, and Perversion," 162.

polygyny is supported and encouraged in other novels may explain the discrepancy in the mistresses' attitudes toward male-sharing when a woman of a different rank is concerned.

Source of feminine wisdom and knowledge exchange

While women are companions to each other in everyday life, their social lives are also dominated by each other. Studies on women's writings in late imperial China, such as female friendship poems, have revealed glimpses of the emotional relationships between gentry women. Borrowing "literati discourse on elevated friendship between the like-minded Confucian scholars and on heterosexual love," these texts "provided them with a discursive space to confide their inner selves to their friends, an intimacy which in other places could have been regarded as inappropriate."³²³ In erotic fiction, the female social life is rarely presented unless it concerns illicit desire and affair. These texts only show interactions within a limited group of women collectively engaging in supposedly criminal activities. While erotic tales and women's literary work show completely different aspects of female social life and emotions and most likely have distinct authorship, their contents are not without similarities. Both show a highly constructed proper expression of sentiments and a glimpse of ordinary women's everyday exchanges concerning the improper.

On a more emotional level, there seems to be an intense sense of trust and reliance of the less experienced female on the more mature one, which is more age-based than status-based. When reviewing the common features of younger female mistresses, one prominent characteristic that separates them from older mistresses is their faith in other females. In turn, the more experienced women are often portrayed as wise mentors to the younger ones, whose ideas are likely to be fully accepted as words of wisdom.

³²³ Yang Haihong, "Bosom Friends in the Red Chamber: Women's Friendship Poetry in Late Imperial China 紅閨知己：明清時期的女性友誼詩歌 [Confidantes: Feminine Friendship Poems in the Ming and Qing Dynasties]," *Tamkang Review* 44, no. 2 (2014), 174.

In *Langshi*, Zhang *pozi* exerted great influence over the female protagonist Wenfei. Before Zhang's appearance in the story, she was first introduced by a servant boy working in the same household:

Who is this old ma'am? He said, "[She] is the female hairdresser.³²⁴ Our lady likes her a lot, [and she] cannot stand even a temporary moment without her."

這個老媽媽是誰？他說：「是女待詔，吾家娘娘平日極喜他，一刻也暫離不得的。」³²⁵

Zhang *pozi*'s especially favoured position was confirmed by herself, as she boasted that the young mistress "cannot stand a moment without her (一刻也少不得我)." Along with the handmaid, Zhang *pozi* was also one of the two confidants of her mistress and was told of her illicit desire towards the male protagonist. This *pozi* ultimately dictated the whole scheme thanks to her mistress's unconditional trust.³²⁶

In their conversation, the mistress Wenfei addressed the *pozi* as *ganniang* 乾娘. The term is sometimes translated as godmother³²⁷, but the relationship between this godmother with her godchildren in the Chinese context is very different to the implied relationship in the Western context, as it has no religious implication and acts more as a courteous form of address. While *ganniang* may be used to address one's adopted mother when a vowed bond resembling a mother-child relationship exists, in fiction, *ganniang* often serves as a courteous mode of address to elderly women to show respect; there can be no overt implication of any actual relationship. Judging by the examples where the term *ganniang* was used as a polite address to a *pozi* in fiction, such as *Langshi*, *Jin Ping Mei*, and *Jiangxingge chonghui zhenzhu shan*, the

³²⁴ The term *daizhao* 待詔 can refer to non-officials summoned for their ability. In this context, *nü daizhao* (female *daizhao*) refers to a female hairdresser, normally summoned to serve women of well-to-do families. On the term *daizhao*, see Gong Yanming 龔延明, *Zhongguo lidai zhiguan bieming dacidian* 中國歷代職官別名大辭典 [Chinese Historical Dictionary of Official and Alternative Titles] (Shanghai: Shanghai Zhonghua shuju, 2006), 527. A similar use of the term *nü daizhao* as a hairdresser can be seen in *Hailing yishi* 海陵佚史. See *Hailing yishi* 海陵佚史 [Lost History of Hailing], *Siwuxie huibao* 思無邪匯寶, vol. 1, eds. Chan Hing-ho Chan 陳慶浩 and Wang Ch'iu-kuei 王秋桂 et al. (Taipei: Taiwan dayingbaike gufen youxiangongsi, 1995).

³²⁵ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 2.

³²⁶ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 4.

³²⁷ See *The Plum in the Golden Vase or, Chin P'ing Mei*, trans. David Tod Roy, vol. 1.

term was used by younger characters to address women from whom they were seeking help. The term appears to have the double function of displaying humility and attempting to bond. The exact relationship between Zhang *pozi* and Wenfei, be it an old housemaid from the maternal home, a neighbourhood hairdresser based near the household, or a working neighbour living nearby, was unexplained. It is unlikely that a woman of decent social rank would officially claim a woman of lower rank as her adopted mother, but her courtesy towards the *pozi* was likely both a sign of Wenfei's emotional dependence and an allusion to upcoming illicit affairs.

The second female protagonist Suqiu and her *pozi* neighbour were not as inseparable, but their relationship was still close knitted:

素秋與這婆子是通家往來的，平日極信任這婆子。

Suqiu and this *pozi* socialise as if their households were one, and she has always trusted this *pozi* extremely.³²⁸

When addressing Qian *pozi*, Suqiu adopts the more generic term *popo* 婆婆. Likewise, the young widow Suqiu trusted Qian *pozi* on her recommendation of a secret lover and, most importantly, in keeping her secret. In the scene where Suqiu awoke after briefly losing consciousness during intercourse, she was not described as feeling any discomfort or unease being seen at such an intimate moment. This relative ease of experienced women being seen naked or in the vulnerable state of sexual arousal was also depicted in *Dengcao heshang zhuan* and *Xiuta yeshi*.

Beyond personal relationships between females, more experienced female characters are also sometimes given the role of the female master who inspires others by rationalising the ordinary nature of female desire, if not also criticising the supposed norms of female conduct. It is almost always a woman who guides a female protagonist in the sphere of desire, connecting her emotional struggle with sexual needs, awakening her desire, aiding in her concerns or

³²⁸ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 18.

presenting the ethics of fulfilling desires. Regarding exchanges between women on experiences and feelings of being female, the emphasis here is on the worldly nature of such exchanges: they are lived experiences and are more a response than compliance to conventional education for females. These female mentors are a far cry from the proper female teachers or elders portrayed in poetry and their background could range from familiar *pozi*'s and other women in the household to neighbours or any female the protagonist encounters.

For example, although *Rou putuan* does not contain a prominent *pozi* character, the widow Yanfang, who is also one of the main female characters, was given the female mentor role, not in a private setting as most other examples are, but almost as an influencer among her female peers. After a long, explicit speech explaining that sex is the only entertainment for women and that women should spend their energy choosing a husband rather than a lover, the reception was described as such:

After listening, all those female companions said, "An experienced person naturally has different words [of advice]. Every sentence is intimate and substantial."

那些女伴聽了都道：「過來的人，說話自然不同，句句親切有味。」³²⁹

On the whole, this type of dependence and wisdom-sharing among women seems to construct a feminine knowledge base and narrative that is based on a female perspective and applies to women exclusively. This brief section also reflected occasions of female social gatherings where they could talk and exchange ideas, albeit it was only a brief passage. Such female exclusivity is, of course, the result of both the general gender segregation in society and the social rules that tend to favour the continuation of patrilineal power. In this social system, women's well-being was of lesser interest.

It is possible that the authoritative image of experienced women is a functional device in erotic fiction that serves multiple purposes. Firstly, creating a mentor-like figure enables the development of the subsequent sex scenes. Secondly, such personality, enjoying the taken-for-

³²⁹ Huang Qiang and Guo Di, eds., *Rou putuan jiaozheng*, 155.

granted trust of the mistresses, makes the latter appear even more naïve and inexperienced and her sexual desirability even higher. Being morally righteous and hesitant in conducting illicit activities is part of the package of an ideal female; yet, enthusiasm for sex is also very welcome in erotic fiction. A combination of the two traits seems to at least double a female character's appeal. Thirdly, encouragement of women's quest for sexual satisfaction while disregarding social expectations of modesty and reserve may be much less acceptable if spoken through a male voice, even in novels written under pseudonyms. Whether such ideas are normally presented exclusively in a female-to-female setting is, however, subject to further research.

The previous chapter outlined that many female assistants heavily relied on verbal communication to convince the mistresses to agree to illicit affairs, which also often contained exchanges in feminine experiences and insights into female life. While Yanfang served as a voice of reason to her female peers, her neighbour also shared her insights on the benefits of having an affair:

In this world, only widows who don't remarry get the memorial arches built [for them]. No one has ever heard of a married woman never taking a man in her life, and the government is willing to reward her. Do you think what I said is right or is it wrong?
世上只有不嫁人的寡婦起節婦牌坊，不曾見說有丈夫的婦人一生不曾偷漢，官府肯來旌獎他的。你道我說得是，說得不是？³³⁰

Much like the speech made by the supernatural sisters in *Dengcao heshang zhuan*,³³¹ these conversations between females concern not the observation of societal expectation but instead focus solely on the females themselves — their desire, consequences of their actions, and their interests. Considering the context of such exchanges, it is unlikely that these feelings would be explicitly transmitted in writing, but it does not mean they do not exist, especially considering the potential female readership of this widely circulated text.

³³⁰ Huang Qiang and Guo Di, eds., *Rou putuan jiaozheng*, 160. Translation cited from Li Yu, *The Carnal Prayer Mat*, trans., Patrick Hanan, 208 with amendments.

³³¹ See *Dengcao heshang zhuan*, *Siwuxie huibao* vol. 22, 92.

Additionally, the stories also contain brief mentions of the transfer of sexual knowledge from one woman to another. When the young maiden mistress and her handmaid in *Dengcao heshang zhuan* secretly observed others' sexual intercourse, the handmaid said the following:

Nuanyu said, "Miss, I'm about to die." [She] pulled Zhanggu's hand to touch her vulva, [it was] as if urinating. Zhanggu said, "What says this?" Nuanyu said, "Miss, you have never done it. Naturally, [you] don't know."

暖玉道：「姑娘，我要死也。」拉長姑手去摸他的陰戶，只如小解一般。長姑道：「這是怎麼說？」暖玉道：「小姐，你沒弄過，自然不知道。」³³²

While this conversation did not continue with any explanation of female arousal, this scene is one of the young maiden's first hands-on learning about the female sexual experience: first through peeking in secret, then through touching another woman, all completed before she had her first sexual experience with her husband. *Xiuta yeshi* also briefly mentioned the source of sexual knowledge of the female protagonist Jin *shi*:

To be honest, my dad has two concubines; one is a prostitute from a brothel; one comes from a Hangzhou private brothel. At home, they always joke with the aunts, sisters, and female in-laws and show off their female abilities. [That's why] I do know some of those.

實不相瞞，我家爹爹有兩個小老婆，一個是南院的小娘，一個是杭州私窠子出身的，常常在家裡和孀孀嫂嫂姑姑姊姊們說笑話兒，也賣弄女人本事，我儘曉得些。³³³

In the scene when Jin *shi* attempts to lure Ma *shi* into illicit sex, she also offers the provision of "abortifacient drugs from the times of girlhood (當初做女兒的時節打胎藥兒)" in case of pregnancy. According to Matthew Sommer's study on abortion in late imperial China, for abortifacient drugs to be effective and not lethal, specialist knowledge was likely required, and known reports of abortion attempts seem to correlate with unwanted pregnancy resulting from illicit sexual affairs.³³⁴ While it is likely that Jin *shi* either learnt about the drugs from her father's concubines or through experience, it is also suggestive of female companions being a

³³² *Dengcao heshang zhuan*, *Siwuxie huibao* vol. 22, 111.

³³³ *Xiuta yeshi*, *Siwuxie huibao* vol. 2, 113–114.

³³⁴ Matthew H. Sommer, "Abortion in Late Imperial China: Routine Birth Control or Crisis Intervention?," *Late Imperial China* 31, no. 2 (December 2010): 97–165.

possible channel for the transmission of knowledge relevant to female bodies — knowledge that was not widely circulated.

4.2 Beyond the erotic realm: female relationship in other literary works

Erotic fiction is highly focused on the presentation of desire and gratification; therefore, female relationships portrayed therein should be understood within this specific context. This thus leads to the main question for this section: beyond the world of erotic fiction, how were female relationships portrayed? Were the depictions in erotic fiction a fantastical imagination repeatedly used only in the genre to enable similar plots of illicit affairs, or did they, in fact, capture popular imagery of women's sex life? Most importantly, could the relationship between a mistress and her female subordinates be similarly close when no forbidden activities and exchanges were involved? This section investigates tales circulated also in Ming and Qing China, in particular, other fictional works that tell stories of human sentiments (commonly referred to as *renqing xiaoshuo*) to look for the (dis)connection between the narratives of erotic fiction and their contemporaries. For comparison, this section will highlight several types of female relationships that may or may not prevail in erotic fiction and compare them to relevant depictions of female relations in other literary works.

Jing Ping Mei itself is considered one of the classic works thematically close to erotic fiction, if not one of them. While this text is not included in this research both due to its difference to the main texts studied and the fact that it does not fit into the criteria of erotic fiction set by this research,³³⁵ it is undoubtedly highly influential and its style of storytelling was likely a reflection of and influence on popular appeal at a considerable level. As a novel that depicts indulgence in extravagance, sex is one of the overarching themes, and the story is populated by various types of female characters, including wives and concubines of various

³³⁵ While *Jin Ping Mei* does contain plenty of erotic elements, its story is not concerned exclusively with the sexual adventures of the main characters, such as ordinary socialising, business, domestic life etc. For the criteria of “erotic fiction” specified in this thesis, see chapter one

wealth, appeal and background, women who fall into the *sangu liupo* category, maidservants, courtesans. Largely set on a domestic backdrop focusing on the Ximen household, which consists of one main wife, five concubines, numerous maidservants and other servicewomen, the female relationship/network described in *Jing Ping Mei* has much more variety as well as complexity than the generally shorter and more narrowly focused erotic novels.

Similar to *Jing Ping Mei*, *Honglou meng* is also an exemplary work whose story happens largely within a domestic sphere, with an in-depth focus on the emotions and relationships among its characters. It also features a vast number of female characters with varied personalities and backgrounds. Unlike *Jin Ping Mei*, the focal household of Jia is much more privileged in terms of wealth, social status and, thus, the number of residing females and associated female servants. The complexity of their interrelations is immense. However, females associated with the Jia household are deeply bonded with each other either by marriage, kinship, or as female service providers. Aside from female relations between mistresses and maidservants, there is also more variation in interactions between wives and concubines, concubine mothers and daughters, handmaids and housemaids, in a larger clan rather than a single household of only one male head, leading to a much more complicated human network.

Relationship between wives and concubines

Imperial China operated a polygynous monogamy system under which it was legal for a male to have concubines in addition to one wife.³³⁶ As stated in the law, the wife had superiority over concubines.³³⁷ The recognised status as a wife or concubine, however, did not guarantee favour over, or equal treatment with, other women under the same roof. Within a household, sharing the same male inevitably meant sharing available resources, especially sex, and thus

³³⁶ Shiau-Yun Chen, "Jealous and Violent: Constraining and Celebrating Wifely Jealousy in Mid-to-late Ming China," *Ming Studies* 79 (2019), 23.

³³⁷ Neil Ennis Katkov, "The Domestication of Concubinage in Imperial China" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2013), 271.

created an environment where competition for various interests might arise. The concubines may also be a threat to the wife's interest both by being more favoured in the household and creating competition in inheritance if she produced any son(s). In short, the relationship between wives and concubines was fundamentally unequal, but in reality, the balance of status was not entirely unchallengeable.

In erotic fiction, it was quite common for the wife and concubines of the same male to have a harmonious relationship with little jealousy of each other. For example, the male protagonists in *Taohua ying* and *Langshi* populated their households with multiple women as their recognised spouses (one wife and five concubines for the former and two wives and eleven concubines for the latter). A similar situation where a group of women willingly shared a man can also be found in *Rou putuan*, although in this case, none of the four women was married to the male. Each female character's individuality and interaction with others exist independently in their respective storyline. When they become part of the same household, they are then often mentioned as a collective rather than an individual, as their change of status often also indicates the closure of the story. In the *Taohua ying* example, the concubines are portrayed as coexisting on good terms. They even cheerfully welcomed the wife together (who was the last to marry into the household) and had no qualms about engaging in orgies together. The wife, a comparatively reserved person, was the only person displeased with their orgies. Nevertheless, their life is collectively described as such:

Since then, they have pleasure day and night that cannot be documented.

自此朝歡暮樂，不能枚記。³³⁸

In *Langshi*, the two wives did not object to sharing a husband.³³⁹ They courteously insisted on being equal like sisters and were on such good terms that one of them playfully initiated sex in

³³⁸ *Taohua ying kuaishi*, ch. 12, 3b.

³³⁹ The practice of having two-wife polygyny was illegally impossible but not unique in fiction. An example of studies on texts with such feature can be found in Jessica Dvorak Moyer, "The Marvelous in the Everyday: Domestic Space and Colloquial Fiction," in *Women Rules Within: Domestic Space and Genre in Qing Vernacular Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 56–91.

the absence of their husband. The concubines' existence, on the other hand, is only briefly mentioned and they are not even named:

[Langzi] then married seven beauties, totalling two wives and eleven concubines, in total twenty spouses... spending all days on writing poems and drinking wine for enjoyment.
又娶著七個美人，共二個夫人與十一個侍妾，共二十個房頭...終日賦詩飲酒快活。
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As both texts opt for a happy ending instead of giving their protagonist karmic retribution, the harmonious groups only enjoyed life and ascended together.

Comparing texts beyond the erotic fiction genre, most mistress-type female characters have their personal interest tied to the male protagonist, but their interests are not limited to sexual gratification. Nevertheless, many of these other interests, such as stability, wealth, and status, are indeed based on their sexual relationship or exchange with the male protagonist. Most importantly, the relationship between these women could be both positive and negative. Take the Ximen household from *Jin Ping Mei* as an example. The relationship between the women is far from harmonious and is instead depicted to be competitive, with vicious fights, strategic alliances, and violent retaliations. While the wife enjoyed a higher status and was capable of being the mediator at times, the concubines had a much more complicated relationship with each other. For instance, when Pan Jinlian was first married as the fifth concubine, she deliberately befriended the primary wife, thus obtaining favours and gifts from her as well as jealousy from the rest. The inner household of the Ximen family was a battlefield where each concubine had her own allies and rivals. Their power was also built upon their own abilities and relationship with maidservants and other servants. Their life was also filled with often vicious gossip that resulted in extreme consequences, such as death or being sold away. While there were moments when the concubines could coexist peacefully during family occasions, those moments were far from the idealistic harmonious bliss depicted in *Langshi* and *Taohua ying*.

³⁴⁰ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 39.

One type of woman that is not always given much attention in erotic fiction is maid-turned-concubine characters, such as Zhao yiniang (concubine Zhao) in *Honglou meng* and Sun Xue'e in *Jin Ping Mei*. While technically also part of the concubine group within a household, who already have comparatively lesser guaranteed rights and are subject to greater competition, those who were initially housemaids of the same household appear to easily become the marginalised among the marginalised, living with ambiguous (but almost always negative) identity.

In Lin Bi-huei's study of Zhao yiniang, she noted the tragic destiny of concubines, in particular, those who were previously housemaids; Zhao's inferior background as a daughter of servants and her lack of refined behaviour surely kept her low status in the household.³⁴¹ As reflected by Zhao yiniang's role in the text, the concubines in a large family like the Jia's had no actual power, to the extent that they were even inferior to powerful maidservants or long-term old servants, lacking motherly rights in educating and raising their offspring or rights and favours on special occasions like banquets or events related to birth or death. Similarly, Sun Xue'e from *Jin Ping Mei* was initially a maidservant who entered the Ximen household following her mistress when she married in. After her mistress died, Sun was made a concubine but was not on good terms with the more favoured concubines and was almost always in a disadvantaged position. In fact, she was more a house cook with a title than a concubine.

When a maidservant was promoted to a concubine, not only would they have no actual power, but immediate competition from other wives and concubines would also arise. If they produce offspring, they might even be drawn into the fights between the *di* 嫡 (orthodox, of the wife) and *shu* 庶 (secondary, not of the wife) families and lose their life.³⁴² Due to her

³⁴¹ See Lin Bi-huei 林碧慧, "Zhao yiniang yu Jia Tanchun de munü guanxi yanjiu 趙姨娘與賈探春的母女關係研究 [The Mother-Daughter Relation between Zhao yi-niang and Jia tan-chun in *Red Chamber Dreams*]," *Donghai zhongwen xuebao* 東海中文學報 [Tunghai Journal of Chinese Literature] 20 (July 2008): 163–187.

³⁴² Lin Bi-huei, "Zhao yiniang yu Jia Tanchun de munü guanxi yanjiu," 168–170.

background and personality and because the household was populated with wives from prominent families, the maid-turned-concubine Zhao yiniang never truly earned recognition from other women, including the more favoured maidservants. She was even scorned by her own daughter. In short, Zhao's relationship with other women was overall a failure. Lin concluded that it was the result of Zhao yiniang's delusional sense of superiority.³⁴³ While the Ximen household was less influenced by the propriety of each woman's background, the background of Sun Xue'e as a former maidservant certainly contributed to the lack of recognition of her by other concubines and might have also limited her to her previous function as a maid.

Interestingly, while both Zhao yiniang and Sun Xue'e were painted as unrefined maidservants-turned-concubines enduring the life of being looked down on even by servants, there are also the counterpart examples of Xiren (from *Honglou meng*) and Chunmei (from *Jin Ping Mei*), favourite handmaids who were de facto concubines of the house master. They both had much more success in their relationships with other household women. While unsuccessful concubines were often treated with scorn, Xiren and Chunmei, despite having starkly different personalities, succeeded in their respective households in terms of gaining recognition from other women and house servants and served as important allies to other women in dealing with house politics. The key to such difference appears to be the capability in work and interpersonal relations as well as in earning favour from the powerful master/mistress.

Whether highly successful or a complete failure, this type of maidservant character is rarely featured in erotic fiction. While there are examples of housemaids eventually promoted to concubines, they are generally not of high importance to the story. For example, the handmaid Lanying in *Taohua ying* was rescued by the male protagonist from the hands of a criminal after accidentally being separated from her mistress, the male protagonist's primary

³⁴³ Lin Bi-huei, "Zhao yiniang yü Jia Tanchun de munü guanxi yanjiu," 170.

sexual interest. Having already had sexual relations with the protagonist, she was taken as a concubine. Since then, her prominence sharply diminishes in the story. As a concubine, Lanying was no longer shown to be interacting with her former mistress, who was later also married into the household as the wife. Despite her former identity as a maidservant, Lanying did not seem to be in a difficult situation among other concubines but was able to participate in activities equally with the rest. The previous relationship and the bonding life-and-death moments between mistress and handmaid, however, disappeared. As the writer seems uninterested in the women once they were officially acquired by the male, little was offered in the text to show the impact of a former maidservant's background on her life as a concubine, in particular when her former mistress was the primary wife and there was thus a change in their relationship. Therefore, the bond between maidservant and maiden, in general, functions similarly to other classic literary duos, with the maidservant serving as a disposable character, only as a medium in an affair and an additional sexual object.

The utopian harmony in erotic fiction and the battle-like situation in *Jin Ping Mei* are almost at the opposite end of the spectrum; the tension between women in *Honglou meng* is less extreme but nonetheless unsavoury. In terms of the depiction of concubines as a character type, concubines came from much more diverse backgrounds and were unlikely to display the ideal female temperament. This happens in other fiction genres, too. But in terms of storytelling, erotic fiction tends to focus more on the pursuit of outside women but not after they become part of the male's household, therefore evading scenes where the excitement of enjoying the forbidden women diminishes and everyday sexual interactions of females under the same roof (therefore, the potential for conflicts) arise.

Management of women living under the same roof

As for the relationship between women after they became acquired by the male protagonist, the lack of interest by most writers starkly contrasts their interest in female

relationships prior to their entering the household. In the generally limited timespan of the stories of erotic fiction, writers rarely present the evolution of the characters' interrelations through time beyond marriage. For instance, the limited number of mother characters tend to be featured either as sexually available women with a sexually available daughter or a parental figure with little to do with the story in most cases. There are few examples where a prominent female character is made pregnant amid the story, with the exception of Yanfang in *Rou putuan*, however, her pregnancy serves only to bring her out of the main storyline as well as to make a remote reference to karmic retribution. Actual interaction between the wife, concubines, and sexually active maids in erotic fiction tends to be focused on the indulgent sexual pleasure provided to the male protagonist, with little description of everyday interactions as the story progresses. Likewise, the efforts to show the personalities of female characters almost always end once they engage in sexual union with the male protagonist.

As long as a household is populated, there will be countless errands to attend to and human relations to handle, and in the "inner" part of the household where females reside — managing such a female-oriented realm is inevitable. As the mistress of the household, the wife would have to assume the duty of household management, including everyday tasks such as the arrangement of clothes, food, and allowance, and dispute settlement, within the household. Undertaking such duties is an aspect deeply related to the women's activities, quality of life, and source of dispute in *Jin Ping Mei* and *Honglou meng*. This aspect of women's life is, however, almost entirely omitted in erotic fiction. This omission helps simplify the female relationships in the stories so that any interaction and exchanges serve the sole purpose of addressing the women's desires. Not explicitly outlined, this type of household environment also creates a space where the female head has to supervise and regulate other women's activities. With proximity and overlapping of living space, privacy is limited, and inhabiting females could potentially be an ally, a silent witness, or an informer of each other's deeds.

When considering female relations within a household, even a shift of a handmaid's main mistress could mean a shift of power balance among the mistresses. In her observation of the symbolic meaning of moving *Jin Ping Mei*'s Chunmei's (Plum Blossom) service from the wife Yueniang (Moon Lady) to the concubine Jinlian (Golden Lotus), Hirsch suggested that "the Moon Lady's position as the household manager is further undermined when Hsi-men Ch'ing arranges for Golden Lotus to be given the Moon Lady's maid Plum Blossom. The balance of power shifts over to Golden Lotus and Plum Blossom's place is never filled by a maid of equal skill."³⁴⁴ This statement brings out an important aspect of a handmaid's role: if she is skilled and favoured, she is considered a person with considerable power despite her servant status, and thus a useful asset to the mistress who enjoys her exclusive service. The shift of this human asset also brings disruption to the power balance between the mistresses, thus complicating the politics of the inner household.

When we investigate the case of Ping'er and Xiren in *Honglou meng*, it is evident that when maids become well-accomplished in their relations with the master/mistress, they have thus established their footing in the household and could then earn respect both from other servants as well as other mistresses with lesser power. While in erotic fiction, there is mention of higher-rank handmaids exercising their power on behalf of their mistresses, the examples are often limited to arranging illicit affairs. Their authority and ease in decision-making are a reflection of the conventionality of powerful handmaids being the unchallenged spokesperson of their mistress.

This also leads to another aspect of female relationships in a household: that women of both mistress and maidservant ranks must work with each other on shared responsibility and consequences. Since the females were mostly confined to a shared space, they were subject to

³⁴⁴ Mary Ellen Hirsch, "The Depiction of Women in '*Jin Ping Mei*' and '*Honglou Meng*,'" (Thesis (M.A.) University of Oregon, 1991), 72.

both companionship with and surveillance of each other, leading to the need for working relationships that allow mutual benefits (e.g. via providing favours) or risk becoming victims of gossip or actual consequences, especially when misconducts were concerned. The potential influence of female household members appears to be largely contained within the female circle, yet the impact can go beyond it, for example, gossip may spread to the male members of the household. This, in turn, further complicated their relationships and standing in household politics, supposedly exclusive to female household members.

Among the main texts studied, one scene in *Dengcao heshang zhuan* shows a brief exchange between the matron and the handmaid/concubine,³⁴⁵ where the matron made the following instruction prior to travelling:

Madam said, “Of course, I will return home for the new year. You stay home to take care of the child, be careful of the household, and do not show yourself and create issues. There are young servants who still look human; [you may use them] to kill boredom.”

夫人道：「我自然回家過年。你在家照管孩子，要緊慎門戶，不可丟頭露面做出事來。家里小廝還有略像人形的，消消悶要去了。」³⁴⁶

As the newly widowed matron became the de facto household head, fully aware of the handmaid's previous sexual conduct, she explicitly suggested the handmaid use the house servants in case of sexual need. The bottom line for her seems to be keeping all potential scandals within the house. In *Jin Ping Mei*, the newly widowed Yueniang was also concerned about the sexual conduct of the other women under her management, especially since the maidservant Qiuju attempted to expose the affair of her mistress Jinlian. Adopting a completely different approach, Yueniang decided to restrict the mobility of the female members of the inner household:

Although Yueniang did not believe in the words of Qiuju, she was apprehensive lest Jinlian, who was still a young and delicate lass, and who no longer had a husband, as time went on, might someday succumb to a momentary temptation. [She] feared that if word of this got out, it would lead to gossip [about them] by outsiders ... all the doors

³⁴⁵ In the fiction, the handmaid Nuanyu was said to have given birth to a son by her master, but it was never mentioned if she was promoted to a concubine.

³⁴⁶ *Dengcao heshang zhuan*, *Siwuxie huibao* vol. 22, 185–186.

were locked, and the maids and women were all prohibited from going out without reasons. Everything is observed strictly.

雖是月娘不信秋菊說話，只恐金蓮少女嫩婦，沒了漢子，日久一時心邪，著了道兒。恐傳出去，被外人唇齒...各處門戶都上了鎖鑰，丫鬟婦女無事不許往外邊去，凡事都嚴緊。³⁴⁷

Although both cases concern worries about public reputation, the measures adopted and their subsequent influence on household members are greatly different. To begin with, erotic fiction rarely sees a maidservant trying to expose the sexual misconduct of their own mistress like Qiuju from *Jin Ping Mei* did. Qiuju's attempt was not without obstacles either, as the handmaid of Yueniang was close with Chunmei, the powerful handmaid of Jinlian, the two managed to keep the secret from being exposed to Yueniang, the inner household manager; this also resulted in Qiuju being battered for her actions. After Qiuju's another attempt to expose her mistress's affair, Yueniang also scolded her for trying to destroy her mistress.³⁴⁸

This leads to another aspect of omitted portrayal: the other side of female interaction between adulterous mistresses and their maidservants if they do not get along. In erotic fiction, maidservants appear to be always encouraging their mistresses' sexual desires and aiding their mistresses' illicit activities; this is, however, not the case in other fiction. In *Jin Ping Mei*, Chunmei, the favoured handmaid, acted as an important ally of Pan Jinlian in her attempt to secure favour from her husband and compete against other women; but there was also Qiuju, the unfavoured handmaid who also exclusively served Pan Jinlian, but did not facilitate her mistress's illicit affair and instead tried to expose her secret.

The relationship between Jinlian and Qiuju is a great example of what could go wrong if a mistress failed to maintain a good relationship with her maidservant and have control of her household when participating in adulterous affairs. Although Qiuju was purchased specifically to serve Jinlian, she was never favoured by her mistress, and instead was verbally and

³⁴⁷ *Mengmei guan jiaoben Jin Ping Mei cihua* vol. 3, 1439. Translation adapted from *The Plum in the Golden Vase or; Chin P'ing Mei*, trans. David Tod Roy, vol. 5, 42–43.

³⁴⁸ *The Plum in the Golden Vase or; Chin P'ing Mei*, trans. David Tod Roy, 52.

physically abused for an extended period. Upon learning of her mistress's illicit affair, Qiuju's instinct was to expose the secret, undeterred by heavy rebuke and beating upon failed attempts. The strained relationship between the mistress and maidservant is highly likely the core reason for the mistress's downfall. When compared to the examples studied, as a mistress, Jinlian did not rely on Qiuju's help in facilitating the affair, but Qiuju was aware of her mistress's actions since she was, in fact, a handmaid, only unfavoured. This makes Qiuju indirectly involved in the illicit affair, where she became a witness that possessed the knowledge to ruin her mistress. Jinlian may have correctly understood and predicted her influence and network in the household to be in her favour, because her handmaid was close with the primary wife's handmaid; however, she made the mistake of alienating her maid with unkind treatment, providing no incentive at all for the maid to refrain from using this knowledge against her. Her failure to maintain a good relationship with her unfavoured handmaid eventually led to her downfall.

4.3 Women participating in illicit affairs: implications and functions

The previous sections have shown that female characters in erotic fiction normally behave and interact with each other within the framework of their respective character type, with more or less generic features of emotional dependence, everyday tensions, and exchanges.

Built upon the analysis of female relations depicted in fiction, the main question in this section concerns the nature of such relationships in several aspects: how do these relationships function in erotic fiction, and what are the implications of such relationships to the genre and its manipulation of the female image?

Nakedness among females

The intertwined relationship between females in illicit affairs suggests a sense of nakedness among them, including physical nakedness and emotional nakedness. As illustrated in previous discussions, women are described to be generally comfortable about physical

intimacy with another female, especially when a more mature or subordinate woman is involved. Physical nakedness between mistresses and maidservants is not at all surprising, given that the latter are meant to provide service at all times, including when the mistresses are having sex. Occasions when the maidservant brings her mistress to secretly observe others have sex or has direct contact with her mistress's genitals are met with no adverse responses from the mistresses.

There are occasions in addition to chamber services when sexual matters are not concealed among women. It happens when women living in proximity can hear, see, and learn about the sexual matters of others, especially mistresses living in the same household. Daughters overhearing their mother having sex is one of the most common scenarios. Group sex scenarios with the participation of multiple women are also common. On occasions where no male is involved, one common plotline is that a mistress is touched by another woman in bed with the aim of arousing her sexual desire. *Xiuta yeshi* has very detailed accounts of such activities, starting with Jin *shi* inviting Ma *shi* to sleep together naked, which the latter obliged after Jin *shi*'s commentary that “[It is just a] woman sleeping with a woman, what is to be shy about? (婦人和婦人家睡，怕甚麼生).”³⁴⁹ The nakedness in bed enabled Jin *shi* to touch and insert items into Ma *shi*'s vagina; upon being awakened by the sensation, the latter only laughed and confessed her sexual experiences without showing any displeasure. Similar accounts of a relatively young mistress allowing another woman in bed (usually a *pozi*) so that the latter could show her methods to achieve pleasure in the absence of men can also be found in texts like *Huanxi yuanjia*³⁵⁰ and *Jiangxingge chonghui zhenzhushan*.³⁵¹ There are also accounts of

³⁴⁹ *Xiuta yeshi*, *Siwuxie huibao* vol. 2, 241.

³⁵⁰ A collection of erotic short stories published in late Ming, the fourth story in the compilation, titled *Xiangcaigen qiaozhuang jian mingfu* 香菜根喬裝奸命婦 (Coriander-root Dressed in Disguise to Have Sex with an Officer's Wife), narrates a story where a man dressed up as a pearl-selling widow to stay overnight at a woman's house, and tricked her into having sex.

³⁵¹ This story contains a plot where a *pozi* was staying overnight with a young woman whose husband was away, and upon leaving the bed to close the door, swapped with a young man and sent him to the bed. Feng Menglong

women becoming impregnated after sleeping with female guests, both in fiction and non-fiction texts.³⁵²

Emotional nakedness in a sexual context is presented in relation to the unequal status between women, such as mistresses confessing to service women and mothers giving guidance to daughters. The one displaying such desires is usually the superior one, knowing well that the inferior, in fear of retaliation, would not betray her and expose her secrets. In other words, the superior confides in the inferior because this entails less risk of consequences.

The mothers are the ones most open about their sexual misconduct to the other main woman in their life: their daughter. More mature women risked higher potential loss as they, if exposed, might lose their comfortable life at a relatively mature age and had assumedly less chance of remarrying for a similar level of comfort compared to younger females. It is also understandable that, in the stories, they seem not worried about their daughters revealing their affair, as the daughter's present and future depend heavily on their mother's reputation and inherited wealth; a daughter's betrayal to her mother by exposing her shameful secret may also raise criticism. In their unique relationship, instead of providing any material bribes or sexual benefits to ensure secrecy, the mothers simply allow their daughters to be claimed by the male, effectively making them equally guilty of sexual misconduct.

There are, of course, also exceptions where honest admission of desire is shared among women of equal status. Concubines or affair participants of similar age in *Taohua ying* and *Rou putuan* were of somewhat equal status and shared similar potential consequences if any of them

馮夢龍, *Yushi Mingyan* 喻世明言 [Stories Old and New: A Ming Dynasty Collection] (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 9–47.

³⁵² For example, the characters in *Dengcao heshang zhuan* discussed an incident where a virgin girl became impregnated after the household hosted a “nun.” An incident regarding a man named Sangcong 桑冲 who dressed up as a woman and learnt women's handiwork to create opportunities of sleeping over, in turn having sex with females, was recorded in both *Ming shilu Xianzong shilu* 明實錄憲宗實錄 [Veritable Records Emperor Xianzong] vol. 172, *Zhongyang yanjiu yuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo xiaoyinben* 中央研究院歷史語言研究所校印本 [Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica Edited Copy] and Lu Can 陸燾, *Gengsi bian* 庚巳編 [Collection of Gengshi], in *Yuan–Ming shiliao biji congkan* 元明史料筆記叢刊 [Collection of Note-form Literature and Historical Materials from the Yuan and Ming] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987), vol. 9.

became exposed. While their confessions were much less honest compared to those between mistresses and subordinate women, they are also always presented to be willing to admit their desire. On the contrary, the inferior females are more likely to hide their illicit deeds from their superiors. For example, the three young cousins in *Rou putuan*, Xiangyun, Ruizhu, and Ruiyu, tried to conceal their secret activities with the male protagonist from the elder female relative. They were obviously at a disadvantage in any social and family encounters vis-à-vis their seniors, let alone if exposed and confronted about their illicit affairs. As peers, they are comfortable confessing and joking about their desire and sex life among themselves.

The lack of privacy within the female sphere contributes to another aspect of female nakedness. Living within the inner household area, which contains the bedchambers, accidental discovery of others' sexual activities is rather common in fiction. With only doors and windows as the barrier, sexual activities are inevitably exposed via the sight and hearing of others on various occasions such as family visits, late-night strolling or overhearing of strange sounds. The rooms may be concealed, but the activities inside are not. This lack of secrecy is likely the cause of the much-needed bribery, as mentioned in chapter three. It is perhaps also the reason for the ease of female-to-female transparency, as rarely is it possible to keep any real secrets.

It is certainly difficult to verify whether the assumed ease in nakedness among women is a reflection of a common phenomenon or a handy assumption in erotic fiction. Strictly based on the descriptions shown in erotic fiction, the only female type showing shyness in front of other non-maidservant females are virgin mistresses.³⁵³ Married women, including those married to the same man, displayed no qualms about each other's nakedness or when touching another woman sexually (but not in a homoerotic manner). Ultimately, nakedness, or the choice to be naked when talking about their sexual behaviour, is a privilege of superior females, as the

³⁵³ For example, when Zhanggu was asked to reveal her chest to verify a magic trick only when her mother, a *pozi*, and maidservants were present. See *Dengcao heshang zhuan*, *Siwuxie huibao* vol. 22, 32.

mistresses have comparatively more autonomy over their bodies (male ownership notwithstanding). On the other hand, while maidservants have more leeway to enjoy their bodies behind their owners' backs, their bodies are ultimately at their owner's disposal. The maidservants have no actual power over how their bodies are used; they are metaphorically always naked, especially in front of their masters and mistresses.

Disrupted hierarchies

In ordinary circumstances, we may assume that the hierarchy among women is understood within fixed conventions, such as wives over concubines, mothers over females without children, and mistresses over maidservants. In the context of sexual matters in erotic fiction, a slightly different order is created: considering individual resourcefulness and confidence in independent operations, the most powerful females are the mothers, followed by the *pozi*, widows, maidservants, young wives, with virgin daughters in the lowest tier.

In terms of the right-to-sex, the hierarchy among women is no different from their social hierarchy. The situation in *Dengcao heshang zhuan* best encapsulates the status of each person within a household, albeit quite different from other tales in that there often was more than one man available simultaneously, shared among one wife, one daughter and one handmaid at any given time. While the hierarchy of females revolved around the household head's choice of bed companion, the outsider-male obviously prioritised the matron, then the daughter; the maidservant was out of consideration if any of the two mistresses became unaccompanied:

Since then, the monk no longer hides from others at home. When officer Yang sleeps with Nuanyu (the handmaid), [he would] accompany the wife. When officer Yang sleeps with the wife, [he would] accompany Zhanggu (the daughter).

從此和尚在家不怎麼避人了。楊官兒同暖玉睡，便陪夫人。楊官兒同夫人睡，便陪長姑。³⁵⁴

While the handmaid was also one of the desired females, her sexual life was dictated by her master's preference, and she was abandoned/spared once she became the excess female. When

³⁵⁴ *Dengcao heshang zhuan*, *Siwuxie huibao*, vol. 22, 157.

caught red-handed by her mistress having sex with an attractive man outside of the household, her fate was at the mistress's mercy. She eventually chose to surrender the male for her mistress's pleasure. By doing so, Nuanyu protected herself from potential punishment, but she also since lost access to the male due to her mistress's favour to him.

However, the handmaids' bottom position in the right to sex hierarchy is only relative to their status vis-à-vis the males. Among women, they hold the great power of emotional influence over naïve mistresses and are the gatekeepers of virgin mistresses. Such power also situates them in a pseudo-authoritative position that mirrors the situation of mothers as the gatekeeper of their virgin daughters. The following excerpt is from *Langshi*, in the scene where the male protagonist asked for his widow lover's permission to take her daughter, to which she responded:

“What is difficult for you? [I'm] afraid it's only difficult for this daughter of mine. If [you] make it difficult for her and damage her, even ten [girls] will not compensate [for that].”

「你卻有甚難為，只恐難為了我這女兒哩，若是難為了他，把他弄壞了，便是十個也陪不起。」³⁵⁵

For comparison, the following two excerpts are taken from another chapter of *Langshi* and from *Taohua ying*, respectively, both are the handmaid's warning to the male protagonist preparing to fornicate with their virgin mistress:

Hongye said, “...just one thing: this tender pistil of the lady cannot be compared to mine. You must be slow and tender. Don't damage her.”

紅葉道：「...只是一件：這小姐嫩蕊兒。不比吾的，你須緩緩輕輕，不要弄壞了他。」³⁵⁶

Before Lanying left, [she] instructed, “... and one more thing, she is just fifteen years of age, [and] is truly a tender pistil, [you] must be very tender, [and] shall not adopt that previous manner [which] hurt me so much [and that] it is still painful [after] several days.”

蘭英臨去，又叮嚀道：「...還有一說，他年才十五，真是嫩蕊嬌枝，須要十分憐惜，不可用那前番手段，創得我幾日還疼。」³⁵⁷

³⁵⁵ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 7.

³⁵⁶ *Langshi sishi hui*, ch. 15.

³⁵⁷ *Taohua ying kuaishi*, ch. 3, 5a.

Such speeches certainly served chiefly to reiterate the virginity and vulnerability of the mistresses concerned. This common plot has several effects: firstly, it objectifies the maidens by presenting them as delicate items that can be damaged if not handled with care; secondly, this incites expectation of violence and pain of their loss of virginity with metaphors of flowers and the mentions of “damaging,” which often echoes the female assistants’ painful sexual experiences with the male protagonist. Most importantly, the speeches create the impression of the mistress being passively given access to by the speaker. While it is reasonable when the speaker is the mother, when the speech is delivered by the handmaid, it leads to the question: does the handmaid have actual authority over her virgin mistress’s body?

A much more questionable disruption of female hierarchy is, without doubt, the incestuous relationships between mothers and daughters when they share the same male lover, if not outright engage in sexual activities together. As discussed in chapter two, when a mother character is introduced as one of the male’s sexual partners, her daughter would be introduced subsequently, also for the male’s sexual pleasure. There is no mention of direct sexual contact between the mother and daughter, and the daughter never became involved before her mother. The closest sexual contact depicted between mother and daughter is in *Langshi*, where the mother was initially watching her daughter having sex and joined in upon her daughter’s request for help.

Such activities would likely be considered a crime of *luanlun* 亂倫 (disruption of *wulun* 五倫, the five cardinal human relationships). As shown in several entries in *Qing shilu*, this term applies to sex crimes where a man is arranged by his father to marry his brother’s widow,³⁵⁸ sex between father and daughter,³⁵⁹ an attempt to rape a daughter-in-law,³⁶⁰ or sister-

³⁵⁸ *Gaozong chunhuangdi shilu* 高宗純皇帝實錄 [Veritable Records of Emperor Qianlong] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986), vol. 1218, 337a.

³⁵⁹ *Gaozong chunhuangdi shilu*, vol. 1374, 440b.

³⁶⁰ *Renzhong ruihuangdi shilu* 仁宗睿皇帝實錄 [Veritable Records of Emperor Jiaqing] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986), vol. 195, 585b.

in-law,³⁶¹ and similar sex crimes among extended family members such as cousins-in-law. Such crime was also considered a reasonable justification for the on-scene killing of senior family members:

For the seniors are to be respected by the lowly juniors: when there are indeed licentious sexual affairs, the guilty person has already committed the crime of *luanlun*. If the lowly junior kills [the senior] on the scene out of impulsive anger, it is naturally forgivable. 夫尊長之於卑幼。果有姦淫情事，則犯者已蹈亂倫之罪。或卑幼一時激於義憤，當場格殺，自屬可原。³⁶²

However, the incestuous activities depicted in erotic fiction fall into a grey zone where the women's behaviour was not exactly incestuous. In the examples examined in chapter 2, there is no actual legal relationship between the male protagonist and either the mother or the daughter. While such scenes create an impression of an incestuous energy where the male protagonist fornicates with a mother–daughter duo, the actual legal relationship between them does not exist. Between the male and the women, their crime would most likely be illicit sex. Between a mother and a daughter — it is complicated. Their shared crime is having illicit sex with an unrelated male. The mother and daughter are not depicted to be having sex with each other. This may not be a straightforward case of incest, as with those between male and female family members. Whether a lack of legal relationship renders a suggestively incestuous relationship not *luanlun* may require further investigation of similar accounts.

When reviewing the general picture of female relations in the circumstances concerning illicit affairs, a further question arises. In such situations, any women involved, ranging from affair participants to the housemaids obeying orders to stay silent, are, in theory, all guilty. The powerful mistresses are made vulnerable by their desire and subsequent misdeeds, which allows female assistants to become more powerful by exerting influence and obtaining exceptional favour. The female assistants are at the peak of their power if the mistress they serve is the most coveted and cloistered woman, when they become the person in power to

³⁶¹ *Renzhong ruihuangdi shilu*, vol. 65, 876a.

³⁶² *Renzhong ruihuangdi shilu*, vol. 158, 42b.

determine whether the illicit affair can take place or not. One may then question: how could this female relationship be understood?

Corrupt friends, co-conspirators, or creators of social pitfalls?

The relationship among women collectively participating in illicit affairs goes beyond a simple mistress–servant or served–server relationship, which offsets the simple higher–lower social class binary. Being females without relationship by blood or marriage, the relationships between the mistresses and female assistants certainly do not fit into the first four of the *wulun*, and might only potentially be categorised as friends, which “was traditionally deemed least essential,” and “usually presented as a threat to domestic harmony” since friends were family outsiders.³⁶³

Regarding the concept of friendship in late imperial China, it has been suggested that “many men believed friendship was more or less a masculine relationship in that it was largely perceived to be a male privilege... To make friends was to move beyond the compound of one’s home and to travel afar.”³⁶⁴ A hint of men’s understanding of female friendship can be found in Beata Grant’s discovery of the collection of letters written by the seventeenth-century woman poet Shen Hui 申蕙, in which the male compilers categorised Shen Hui’s friends as poetry friends (*shi you* 詩友), painting friends (*danqing you* 丹青友), calligraphy friends (*shufa you* 書法友), and Chan-discussing friends (*tanchan you* 談禪友),³⁶⁵ all of which concern shared cultural interests.

While friendship might traditionally be considered a male-exclusive relationship, female friendship likely lacked its own discourse and written accounts to gain equal recognition. In

³⁶³ Martin W. Huang, “Male Friendship in Ming China: An Introduction,” in *Male Friendship in Ming China*, ed. Martin Huang (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 2.

³⁶⁴ Huang, “Male Friendship in Ming China,” 5–6.

³⁶⁵ Beata Grant, “Chan Friends: Poetic Exchanges Between Gentry Women and Buddhist Nuns in Seventeenth-Century China,” in *The Inner Quarters and Beyond: Women Writers from Ming through Qing*, eds. Grace S. Fong and Ellen Widmer (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010), 219–220.

her study of poems written by Chinese gentry women during the seventeenth to mid-nineteenth centuries, Yang Haihong noted a “rarity of depictions of female friendship in male-authored classical Chinese literature contrasts with the large repertory of stories, poems, and plays on and about friendship between men,” while such silence is “loudly contradicted in poetry by gentry women.”³⁶⁶ While friendship did not, in Yang’s words, “play a crucial role in the social construction of femininity” as opposed to a female’s role as a mother, daughter, wife, she proposed that friendship poetry “participated in the revision of femininity by constructing a gendered self within a web of human relations inside and outside of patriarchal families.”³⁶⁷ These interpretations, however, are still confined to situations where the women concerned are all educated and most likely from rather equal social status and background.

Shifting the focus onto female *companionship* instead of strictly *friendship*, Dorothy Ko noted that gentry women might have established a female-centred social space upon the basis of familial kinship.³⁶⁸ Ko proposed that women’s communities can be categorised based on membership and activities as domestic, social, or public. Ko explained her criteria for a “familial” community as one where “all the women were related by kinship ties and that activities were enmeshed in everyday family life,” and the social communities were “made up of a group of related women together with their neighbours and in some cases friends from afar,” both of which are related to informal activities. It was possible for the communities to also evolve from domestic to social or social to public, with the incorporation of external members.³⁶⁹

³⁶⁶ Yang, “Bosom Friends in the Red Chamber,” 170.

³⁶⁷ Yang, “Bosom Friends in the Red Chamber,” 172.

³⁶⁸ Gao Yanyi 高彥頤 (Dorothy Ko), “‘Kongjian’ yu ‘jia’ — lun Ming mo Qing chu funü de shenghuo kongjian 「空間」與「家」—論明末清初婦女的生活空間 [“Space” and “Home” — On the Living Space of Women in the Late Ming and Early Qing Dynasties], *Jindai Zhongguo funüshi yanjiu* 近代中國婦女史研究 [Research on Women in Modern Chinese History] 3 (August 1995): 38.

³⁶⁹ Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, 15–16.

While Ko's study focuses on the domestic lives of gentry women, borrowing Ko's idea of the variation in women's communities, we may see that female relationships in erotic fiction fall between the "familial" and "social" categories. However, the heterogeneous social statuses of the women involved make the relationships highly complex, as they reflect fundamentally different living circumstances, supposed social circles, and the social rules these women were expected to live by.

However, if their relationships are evaluated according to the idea of friendship between male literati or gentry women in late Ming and early Qing times, the females in illicit affairs, no matter how intimate they are with each other, can hardly be regarded as friends. Not only is there an imbalance of status and lack of intellectual exchange, the relationships between them also feature calculation and exchange of favours, which renders the heartfelt exchanges likely only an extension of mutual exploitation.

The core of the relationships between these women is inappropriateness — the breaking of social hierarchy and moral conduct. Since most erotic stories take place in a confined domestic bubble with a limited number of household members, free from the supervision of senior family members and lacking social interactions with other households, the female assistants were made the only companions to the main mistresses. The interaction and exchange have already been discussed: each woman has a clear role, function, and expected benefits from illicit affairs. An aspect not yet highlighted is the implication of the fixed setting that was hardly altered in erotic fiction written across different times.

A core function of the female assistants is contrasting the naivety of their mistresses, further amplifying the mistresses' image as desirable women. Comparing the general portrayal of different types of female characters and their relative reliance on female assistants, several elements imply a higher social value of the mistress, which leads to a higher chance of a happy ending, i.e., the woman becoming the main wife of the male protagonist. Conventionally

positive traits like beauty, poetry-writing skills, and good social background form the basic appeal; but subtle traits like bashfulness when initiating sex, measured by their degree of dependence on their female assistants, serve as the determining factor of the mistresses' value.

As a tool in highlighting the mistresses' naivety, female assistants also serve as the luring voice of sexual desire; they are the person igniting sexual desire within the mistresses and then converting hesitant mistresses into willing follower of this newly lit desire. In short, they orchestrate the pitfall of the mistresses' chastity. Many mistresses, such as the concubines, mothers, and some of the widows, required no persuasion of female assistants to engage in illicit sex; they were also the ones who, at most, became a concubine, if not simply become forgotten or abruptly taken off the story after successful consummation. Those accompanied by an intimate female assistant always appeared to have no excessive sexual desire until induced. Even if they were described as enjoying sexual pleasure, on no occasion did they actively feel the need to fulfil their desire in a forbidden way and ask for help from their female assistants. In the case of these mistresses, it could even be argued that they would not have committed any sexual misconduct had they not talked to their close female assistants.

When comparing the five texts, the mistress–handmaid/*pozi* relationships in *Rou putuan* and *Xiuta yeshi* are presented in a slightly different light. While there are mentions of maidservants, their roles are confined purely to service providers, with limited exchanges with their mistresses. Specifically for these two texts, characters of the servant rank are rarely given the spotlight, but one prominent exception of when the maidservant Saihong was violently abused to the brink of death. In *Rou putuan*, assisting roles normally taken up by *pozi* or maidservants are instead taken up by female kin or neighbours and partially covered by an accomplished male burglar. On the one hand, this may be a reflection of the writer's attitude towards the lower social class as mere service providers. On the other hand, the preservation

of such roles and the replacement choice suggest that the arrangement of someone of socially lesser standing serving as the key to illicit affairs may be a deliberate choice.

Considering the supposed relation between the mistresses and the female assistants, it is perhaps more logical if the latter act at the bidding of the former on most occasions. Yet in the stories of adulterous affairs, even if the mistresses did seek help from the female assistants, those requests always took place after the mistresses had unknowingly fallen into the scheming of the female assistants and the male. Also, the male usually had a limited role in devising strategies targeting the mistress. While the female assistants are always bribed to do so, such a common storyline indeed reiterates the bias existing in society against lower-class females like the *pozi*, seeing them as a potential source of corruption and, thus, unwanted companions for women.

Without a doubt, such depiction is likely meant more for creating the idealised fantasy of a female character than reflecting actual female relationships of the time. Treating such depictions as hints at the relationships between women in late Ming and early Qing times, however, provides plenty of suggestions on various aspects of female life. The most direct suggestion is the possibility of women hiding secret sexual relationships from men that had direct authority over them. There also appears to be a female-exclusive network where sexual knowledge is transmitted among women, and they might have worked together for collective benefits, also behind the back of the men in their household. While erotic fiction tends to feature innocent mistresses relying on female assistants, examples where the mistress utilises her resources to actively seduce a man also exist and can be a real possibility in reality, given her power in the household.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

How did women in late imperial China work together to conduct illicit sexual affairs, and what bonded them together? With this question in mind, this research looked into five Chinese erotic fiction novels composed around 1572–1730 — *Langshi*, *Xiuta yeshi*, *Rou putuan*, *Dengcao heshang zhuan*, and *Taohua ying* — as a source of representation of illicit sexual affairs with a focus on female collaborative operations, a theme that is otherwise rarely explored in other literary genres.

To identify their various roles, unique functions, and social capital, I have categorised the featured female characters into two main groups, the “mistresses” and the “female assistants.” They are further separated into different subcategories. The mistresses are defined as women who possess certain status and authority within a household and are grouped according to their representative familial role at the time they were introduced to the story, namely the wives, widows, mothers, and daughters. Through comparative analysis, a general trend concerning these characters across texts has been identified. Age-wise, wives, and concubines are usually around their twenties, mothers are normally set to be in their thirties, and virgin daughters are about fifteen to sixteen. The daughters, wives, concubines, and mothers have decreasing reliance on the help of female assistants as their age increases, so does their hesitancy to illicit sex.

Sisters in crime: who are they and how did they come together?

The very core of illicit affairs that connected all female participants together is the need to ensure the secrecy of the affair. Each with their specific role, function and things to offer, the females involved form a network of unlikely sisters in crime to help each other obtain what their hearts desire: sex with a handsome lover for the mistress, money for the *pozi*, favours for the maidservants, and a taste of someone else’s lover for the mistress’s female companions.

Comparing the mistress characters, erotic fiction normally positions wives as the most important female character to be pursued, with the most detailed storytelling depicting their emotions and social interactions. As the protagonist, readers are presented with the full cycle of the wives' change of mind from initial curiosity to submission to their desire, from the initial self-restraint to actively seeking for sexual affair and from being disappointed by their husbands to the careful planning the illicit affair until their eventual fornication with the male. As the managers of the inner household, the wives rarely leave the boudoir and must rely on the help of female assistants to communicate with their intended male lover, but they are also in charge of their space and able to create the perfect tryst by choosing the right time and exercising full control of house servants. While concubines share a similar age range with wives, their role appears to be more as an extra sexual women than serving other purposes such as connecting different characters or impacting the plotlines.

Childless young widows are not very common in the selected texts. One of the two examples was given attention on par with the wives; the other example was treated equally with other women of similar age and considered less attractive compared to coveted virgins. However, they appear to have received a more affectionate portrayal compared to concubines, especially in the *Langshi* example, where the widow was described to be a choice for marriage. The widow was also depicted in a manner similar to wives, with detailed accounts of emotional changes and an active female assistant. Despite being the oldest of all mistresses, the mothers are usually described as possessing youthful beauty and always got opportunities to fornicate with the male before their daughters could. Like wives, concubines and widows also enlist the help of female assistants, but their relationship is not as equal, with the assistants serving solely to execute orders. But the most important female relation involving mothers is their unique bond with their virgin daughters, a special role irreplaceable by others: since the daughters are

mostly shielded from the outside world, the mothers serve as the key person in allowing the male access to their virgin daughters.

In fact, virgin daughters could be considered an important asset to their mothers. As some stories hinted, the daughters could be the actual reason motivating males to have sexual affairs with the mothers. In the realm of erotic fiction, the mothers always agree to the male's request to see their daughter. They may also actively encourage their daughters to engage in illicit sex, when their sexual relationship with the same male is ongoing and known to the daughter. In addition, mother characters with multiple children are not found, and only two are described as having a son: one is still a young child and could not threaten his mother's actions, and the other is an adult son and already the same-sex lover of the male protagonist. Without a daughter to attract male lovers, one of them benefitted from her closeness with younger female relatives for sex, and the other was intentionally tricked into an illicit affair. When reviewing the mistress's malleability in the hands of the female assistants, it is apparent that it changes in relation to different stages of life and greatly diminishes with age and change in social status. Considering the difference between younger women and more mature women, the most crucial indicator separating the sexually timid and the confident is not exactly age or even marital status but motherhood. The tone of speeches made by mothers is akin to the *pozi*'s, hinting at experiences in life, and their emotions are usually calm and contained with little ebb and flow. The reason for such a portrayal is unknown. The portrayal of mothers as a character independent of their motherly duty and the perceived idea of mature women and their sexuality are topics worthy of further investigation.

While the female assistants' chief function is helping corresponding mistress characters in conducting illicit affairs, female assistants of different social statuses provide slightly different services in exchange for benefits that suit their desire. On the top tier in terms of social status among female assistants, the female kin and neighbours serve as a medium, adviser and source

of sexual knowledge for the mistresses and in exchange, they obtain sexual benefits and the mistresses' allegiance. On the lower tier are the *pozi*, who provide similar services as the female kin and neighbours, while the benefits they obtain in exchange are typically material rewards and trust of the mistresses. On the lowest social tier are the maidservants, who belong to the servant class and are of fundamentally unequal status with their mistresses, but with specific functions in relation to their closeness with the mistresses. Those with a more intimate relationship are categorised as "handmaids;" their job is only to attend to their mistresses' personal needs. In their mistresses' illicit affairs, they serve as a medium and adviser, with the additional function of chamber service and sexual service provider. In return, they may receive material rewards, sexual benefits, and vague promises of favours from their mistresses. The other maidservants are generalised as "housemaids." With a more distant relationship with their mistress, their chief function is to provide chamber service and sexual service. While, in comparison, their role is much lesser, they may potentially still obtain material rewards for their help in keeping the illicit affair a secret.

The roles played by the female assistants are highly informed by their real-life archetypes' general images and social constraints. For *pozi*, the term itself contained a neutral to negative undertone as a referral to a specific range of women normally associated with the *sangu liupo*, but without concrete indication of their age. The *pozi* tend to be treated with suspicion and women are warned to avoid contact with them. Demonised as being greedy for money and with an image of a person who induces issues within the household, this real-life stereotype of *pozi* translates into fiction with writers' commentary and storylines that reinforce the warnings of them as the source of misdeeds. As bondservants, both handmaids and housemaids are owned by the household and bound to provide services for their owners. The level of intimacy with their master or mistress plays a major role in determining their status in the household. Though chiefly customary, the difference potentially brings a stark difference to their life: they may get

better treatment from the owners and be entrusted with more personal duties, hence a receive higher chance of obtaining rewards. The least frequently featured female neighbours and kin enjoyed a relationship with mistresses with their status being close to equal, unlike the commander-and-commanded relationship between mistresses and *pozi* or maidservants. Three out of four examples of this type of female character had moments where they act as the mistress in the scene and, in theory, belong to the same social class. However, in a situation where they serve as the assistants, there are always subtle shortcomings that make them inferior to the mistress: lesser beauty, being the second wife or being poorer. While their role as assistants to the other mistresses largely overlaps with the *pozi*, the help they provide for the realisation of an illicit affair is, in fact, more of a favour than a paid service.

One main element in the operation of facilitating illicit sexual affairs is the provision of affair-specific services by female assistants. As mediators and advisors, the *pozi* and handmaids each followed a conventional process where they gradually became trusted by the mistress and served to provide guidance on the planning the illicit affair, eventually leading the male into their mistress's bedchamber. The nature of their work is highly similar; however, the *pozi* tend to be approached by the male and are likely paid by both the male and the mistress, and mostly dissolved into the background once the goal of fornication is completed. The handmaids, however, mainly receive orders from their mistress and serve more as a messenger for her instead of a go-between like *pozi*. Throughout the process, they may also serve as a messenger to deliver and receive gifts and poems for their mistress. Also, considering both of them act as the door openers for their mistress, the door opened by the *pozi* is the one separating the inner household and the outer world, and the door opened by the handmaid is the one leading from the inner household to the cloistered treasure: the mistress in her bedchamber. In such situations, the mistresses are placed in the passive role at the mercy of their female assistants despite being the most powerful. When their function is taken up by the female neighbour or

kin, they will substitute both by bringing the male through both doors — into the house and the bedchamber. Instead of following the requests of the male or the mistress, their driving force of being the medium is usually their own excitement of seeing the illicit or genuine desire to share sexual pleasure with intimate peers. However, as advisors on sexual matters with the sole purpose of persuading the mistress to have illicit sex, all three types of female assistants play a similar role as a trusted fellow female instead of adopting three different styles.

The other main element in the operation of facilitating illicit sexual affairs is the provision of chamber service, sexual service, and sexual guidance. If the mediating and advising service is the first half of illicit affairs, chamber service and sexual service make up the subsequent half and form an indispensable part of the fornication acts. The chamber service includes a broad range of tasks taken up by maidservants for the operation and enjoyment of the mistress's trysts, such as dining service, ensuring the comfort and ambience of wherever the fornication is bound to happen; assistance during sex such as handling sex tools, cleaning of the mistress and her lover's body; safety measures such as guarding the area to avoid being caught by unwanted intruders. Sexual service normally takes place also during the trysts but requires the female assistant to personally participate in the sexual acts where direct physical engagement with the lovers' genitalia is involved. As the majority of sexual services are carried out by maidservants and thus are commanded regardless of their willingness, this is considered a type of female service even if some of the maidservants find enjoyment in it. Sexual service caters to mainly two situations: first, when the mistress wants to avoid sex and seeks a substitute (usually in situations where the mistresses want to avoid or distract their husbands); second, when a female body is needed in the sex as a temporary body substitute as a part of a visual spectacle and/or as an extra participant (usually in sexual activities with the mistress's lover, irrespective of her relationship with the husband after the tryst has begun). However, due to the complete disregard for the service-providing maidservant's willingness and comfort when

providing such services, they could, in fact, be regarded as exploitation, except that the viewpoint of sexual service makes the mistress accountable for the sexual exploitation of her maidservants as opposed to other types of sexual exploitation carried out by the male towards the maidservants.

Aside from the core aspects that help the operation of illicit affairs, there are two more elements that could not be omitted: the empathetic luring that sparks the beginning of illicit affairs and the bribes that secure the service and guarantee of confidentiality, or in other words, the calculated alliance between the females involved made to ensure collective benefits and safety. Since hesitation towards illicit affairs is a main feature of prominent mistresses, the illicit affairs may not take place unless they become convinced to do so. The female assistants thus have to exert emotional influence to create an initiative for the mistresses to agree to it. Through affirming female desire as a fellow female, acknowledgement of hardship and unfairness of widowhood, and sexual temptation through touch enabled by the physical intimacy between females, the mistresses are always convinced to start arranging a tryst, which requires the female assistants' help. With this request for aid in forbidden activities, the mistresses would have to provide bribes according to the assistant's desire to complete the most important preparation of illicit affairs: ensuring that whoever learns about the illicit affair would keep the secret. If the female assistant is a *pozi* or a maidservant, there is a high chance that they would receive material rewards such as money, luxurious items they could not afford, or in the case of maidservants, vague promises of future favours from the mistress. For female neighbours and kin, due to their similar status to the mistress, are normally offered a different sort of bribe: sexual benefits. While such benefits are fulfilled by the male, they are still considered a benefit offered by the mistress because the mistress is the one in the power to make it happen.

With a full picture of the operation of illicit affairs, the individual roles of each female character type and their persuading and bribing each other to create a scenario where everyone will get what they desire, we may see emotional relationships between females that are not fully dictated by their expected roles in these interactions. Between handmaids and maiden mistresses, the basis of their relationship is very clear-cut: servant–mistress. Yet in their interactions, as shown in erotic fiction, the handmaids always serve as close companions in whom the maiden mistresses could confide her secret desires, as well as mischievous playmates with whom to peek at others having sex. In mistress–handmaid relations where wedded women are involved, such close relationships are replicated even if the participants are also of similar age. The female companion providing emotional support in sexual matters for the married mistress is instead substituted by either the *pozi* or other married women.

With the unbalanced ratio between one male protagonist versus his many lovers, some of the mistresses inevitably encounter moments where the attention of the male is occupied by another female. This other woman could be anyone of any background, provided that they are within a certain age range. While it may be natural for them to feel a sense of rivalry, and complete harmony is certainly idealised, erotic fiction shows a mixture of both: if the other female is another mistress, there will be blissful harmony where they all enjoy or at least tolerate each other; if the other female is a maidservant, even if forced into sex, the mistress would lash out on her and not accept sex between her and the male (situations where the mistresses demand sexual service notwithstanding). Additionally, when reviewing the description of female relationships between those of similar social backgrounds and speeches addressing sexual knowledge, a broad picture is painted in which females trust and understand each other's desires and share their insights and knowledge. Such exchanges are chiefly sex-themed, though, due to the nature of erotic fiction.

Considering the circumstances surrounding illicit sexual affairs and the common familial situation of a household of many beauties, a quick comparison of two desire-focused texts beyond the erotic fiction genre, *Jin Ping Mei* and *Honglou meng*, revealed several aspects rarely mentioned in erotic fiction that may offset the operation of illicit affairs or the ideal harmony between the mistresses. For instance, the relationships between the wife and concubines are normally courteous and sometimes described to be nothing but full of bliss. Turning to fiction with elements more than strictly the erotic, the darker representation of such relationship immediately emerges, with vicious spousal fights and rivalry as the norm and situations where the handmaid-turned-concubine is not treated with respect by most household members. In the domestic sphere dominated and managed by women, the complexity of the Jia household in *Honglou meng* and Ximen household in *Jin Ping Mei* shows the constraints of female desire deliberately omitted from erotic fiction: the restriction of subordinate female members imposed by the female household head (normally the wife) and the potential threat of displeased maidservant exposing their mistress's illicit affairs close servants are bound to notice.

Reviewing the female relationships in illicit affairs presented in the texts, the assumed physical and emotional nakedness among women of all backgrounds is stark, as there are plenty of occasions that encourage the nakedness of feelings and bodies in a private, secluded situation without the male presence. There also exists a forced nakedness between females, as complete privacy under the same roof is almost impossible. While such an assumption on female interactions may apply to non-illicit affair-related circumstances, there exists a disruption of hierarchy that is emphasised in illicit affairs. For handmaids, they remain in the lowest tier within the female hierarchy in terms of the right to sex. Yet, at times when they are about to lead the male to their virgin mistress, their speech of asking for his gentleness mirrors the speech of mothers, despite their completely different roles. This is nevertheless only a mild

disruption when compared to situations where mothers and daughters share the same male lover. Upon closer inspection, whether this is straightforward incest is a complicated matter: there is neither an official relationship between the male and any of the women when fornication took place, nor direct sexual activities between the mother and daughter. As such, their sex crime might simply be illicit, and it is highly unlikely that they would expose one another.

For women being collectively guilty of illicit sex to different extents — their relationships become destabilised and make one wonder about their true nature. We have learnt of the different packages of emotions and behaviours associated with each mistress type; the female assistants are the facilitators of illicit affairs through providing different services and exerting emotional influence, in turn making their mistress the generous providers of whatever favour they may be looking for. The dual factor of concern for safety and secrecy that underline sexual gratification bond the females together, contributing to their collective effort. Although the stories sometimes depict emotional bonds between women, the nature of mutual benefit does suggest a profit-based partnership above all else, especially when comparing the language used in late imperial China that concerns female relationships and friendship. Therefore, I believe it is apt to conclude such relationships as *sisters in crime*, for such a strategic network is bonded by their collective guiltiness, extremely female-centred, and, at times, surpassing the confinement of supposed hierarchy dictated by social norms.

The unspoken: a reflection on limitations

While erotic fiction may provide a side view of the operation of these supposedly secret successes in illicit affairs, these stories also serve as reflections on many more via what is unspoken, such as the absence of bisexual desire in women (in contrast to men), undesirable factors against illicit affairs, the contradicting idealisation of sexual females, and the dismissal of cross-social-class female friendships.

First and foremost, while male characters are mostly described to be bisexual (or at least accepting to both sexes), females are presented to be lusting only for the opposite sex. In situations where women literally have sex with each other, they only act out a simulation of heterosexual contact or aim to evoke the desire of the male. In one particular scene in *Langshi* where a wife secretly penetrates another wife in the dark with a two-headed phallic tool, this homoerotic scene, despite its uniqueness, was not decorated with details of the act and ambience as many other sex scenes in the novel were. While this is not a novel discovery, this common lack of attention is worth rethinking: women are depicted to be naked in front of and intimate with each other physically and emotionally, yet not a hint of female homosexual desire is found despite ample opportunities.

Considering the design of each female type's role, the writers of erotic fiction seem to have consciously positioned female assistants as the loophole in the lives of the mistresses, who are almost always chaste and proper, with a large amount of sexual passion awaiting to be unlocked. Hence, the female assistants are used in erotic stories as tools to highlight the mistresses' naivety, presented as a desirable trait along with their enjoyment of sex. At the same time, the naïve and chaste female would easily give up their previous efforts to throw themselves into the wilful gratification of sexual desire and would even have their loyalty to their husband shifted to their lover upon sexual satisfaction. While such type of portrayal is certainly an attempt to justify the contradicting dual ideal for a woman to be both chaste and licentious, this is simultaneously a jab to men who fail to sexually satisfy their women. With sexual gratification made the chief goal of the mistresses in erotic fiction irrespective of their status, it is tempting to assume the writers may be advocating for female sexual freedom against the unfair expectation imposed on widows but not widowers. Yet, the contradicting standard betrays a selfish motive and reinforces the ideal of female loyalty; the only encouragement given is the promising joy of dedicating the loyalty to someone "better."

The female network portrayed in erotic fiction is confined to domestic and intimate settings. This rationalises the simplicity of the setting and the unchecked behaviour of the characters. Most of the stories come with a limited number of characters. For example, the male protagonist usually had lost both parents but inherited a substantial fortune, was educated and had no worries in life except for finding beautiful women. The female characters are often sexually dissatisfied, with either no prior sexual experience or comparatively disappointing experiences. In adherence to the social segregation of the two genders, there always exists at least one female medium, easily swayed and bribed without considering rejecting the request, to connect the lovers in the illicit affair. Young ladies are infantilised, while older women and servicewomen are portrayed as fearlessly confident with a hedonistic approach whenever an opportunity of fornicating with a young, pretty male presents itself.

With the detailed account of the collaboration within the network, in which each woman provides what she can afford for one another, it is easy to determine the story's ordinance of "what to avoid" through the reading of the "what to do" instructions, as erotic novels present themselves as inciting stories where illicit affairs always succeed (whether they remain unexposed depends on individual cases). As mentioned, female assistants exist to be evil and contrast the goodness of their mistresses. The calculated alliances between females involved in illicit affairs are always a necessity. They create certain important implications and effects: the demonising of lower social class females as the creators of pitfalls to a mistresses' conduct and reputation, the denial of the possibility of female friendships among different social classes, and the rejection of the idea that women of a higher social class could be aware of and active in pursuing their unfulfilled sexual desires. Such treatment also entails price or reward for each action any woman takes, commodifying almost all actions as mere business exchanges: from contacting an attractive male outside the household to acting as if nothing was seen or heard

— all are rewarded accordingly. This also creates an impression of mutual exploitation between females in illicit affairs, as no aid or favour comes for free.

Since rewards are always guaranteed, female assistants featured in fiction with the sole concern of narrating sexual affairs are always cooperative, resourceful, and keep their promises. Without a resentful housemaid like Qiuju from *Jin Ping Mei* or a competitive assistant-rival like Feihong from *Jiaohong ji*, it is challenging to interpret whether the trusted partnership is forged solely by favours or for emotional reasons. This absence of female antagonists, at least those who may act as a hindrance to illicit affairs, calls for cross-examination of female relationships in illicit affairs across genres for a more well-rounded picture.

We may treat erotic fiction as materials once suggesting “what to expect,” as it happened in *Rou putuan* when Yuxiang read the erotic tale and began to think whether the story was exaggerated or her husband was incompetent. What if, in addition to becoming sexually aroused, female readers read into fictional female relationships and treated these novels as inspiring guidebooks for conducting illicit affairs? With the conventional plots contained in fiction and drama, it would be extremely surprising if no one ever became inspired and attempted to replicate the stories, if not even use such stereotypical beliefs to either place blame on others or play innocent. The simplification of relationships between the richer and the poorer women as purely profit-based no doubt perfectly echoes the prejudice against women of lower social class, yet this lack of positive portrayal also raises the question of whether it stems from a so-called male perspective due to conflict of interest or is a reflection of the general social trend of discrimination against the poorer.

This research is no doubt only the beginning of more unanswered questions. Here, I made a comparative study concentrating more on female relationships amongst the mundane and despised characters rather than the cultured and celebrated ones. As we proceed to investigate

other fictional and non-fictional accounts, I believe we will gradually achieve a more comprehensive understanding of different aspects of the life of common women. The potential of expansion and follow-up of this project can be vast: synchronically, we can probe into other intimate aspects such as self-perception, friendship, sexual orientation, and female bodily maintenance. Diachronically, we can attempt to address how private female life was conducted in different eras of imperial China and compare similarities and differences. Furthermore, we can connect these findings to the historical and social contexts to better understand how female life was presented and why it was presented as such. I hope this project will contribute to uncovering of Chinese women's history in the sphere of the improper and unrefined, where the faces of different women will gradually become distinguishable from each other, and their stories allow us to learn about how they lived. As we fight for women's voices and well-being in modern times, we shall not let our female ancestors' stories fade into obscurity and oblivion and do our best to gather the scattered hints to recreate their voices.

Glossary

- DHZ *Dengcao heshang zhuan* 燈草和尚傳 (Legend of the Candlewick Monk)
LS *Langshi* 浪史 (Chronicles of the Libertine)
RP *Rou putuan* 肉蒲團 (The Carnal Prayer Mat)
TY *Taohua ying* 桃花影 (Shadows of Peach Blossoms)
XY *Xiuta yeshi* 繡榻野史 (Unofficial History of the Embroidered Couch)

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