

JIN PING MEI

FEMALE RELIGIOUS PRACTICES, AGENCY, AND FREEDOM IN THE NOVEL
JIN PING MEI

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Abstract

In the patriarchal milieu of sixteenth-century China, women demonstrated agency in their families and communities through their religious practices. Male family members typically performed Confucian rites related to ancestor veneration; yet there were many opportunities for women to participate in practices associated with other religious traditions. In this study, I will elucidate the religious roles of women during the late Ming dynasty (1368—1644 CE). Using the cultural-historical method, I will demonstrate the ways in which women gained agency and freedom from social conventions through their religious practices. By comparing literary sources with historical documents, I will validate the use of my major literary source, *Jin ping mei*, to study the religious practices in sixteenth-century China. This study will provide scholars with a nuanced understanding of gender roles within upper-class families in early modern China. Women were not simply passive, submissive members of a Confucian society; rather, they often gained authority and autonomy within their families and communities.

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Introduction: Female Religious Practices and Agency in the Novel *Jin Ping Mei*

Jin ping mei 金瓶梅, also known as *Jin ping mei cihua* 金瓶梅詞話 is an anonymous novel, written in China during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644 CE).¹ It is a detailed depiction of daily life in the wealthy household of Ximen Qing (西門慶), his wife, and his many concubines. According to Ming Dong Gu, who is a scholar of comparative literature, this novel was banned in China for hundreds of years due to its pornographic content, and as of 2004, uncensored versions were still banned there.² Nevertheless, a branch of scholarship that focuses on *Jin ping mei* (*Jinxue* 金學) has developed in China.³ While many Chinese-language studies of *Jin ping mei* exist, there are relatively very few studies in English that address this work.⁴ There are fewer still English-language studies focusing specifically on religious practices in this novel.⁵ I have not located any English-language studies regarding both gender and religious practices in

¹ Robert Hegel, introduction to *The Golden Lotus*, trans. Clement Egerton et al. (Tokyo; Rutland; Singapore: Tuttle Publishing, 2011), 6. Robert Hegel translates *Jin ping mei cihua* as *The Plum in the Golden Vase: A Ballad Tale*. The *cihua* style of writing, which includes large amounts of poetry embedded throughout the prose text, was popular during the Ming dynasty.

² Ming Dong Gu, "Brocade of Human Desires: The Poetics of Weaving in the *Jin Ping Mei* and Traditional Commentaries," *Journal of Asian Studies* 63.2 (2004), 333.

³ Gu, "Poetics of Weaving," 333.

⁴ *Renditions: A Chinese-English Translation Magazine* provides English translations of Chinese literature and some secondary scholarship. For example, Volumes 81 and 82 (Spring and Autumn 2014) contain a translated commentary on *Jin ping mei*, entitled "The Number One Marvellous Book: The *Jin Ping Mei*, Commented on by Zhang Zhupo from Pengcheng," translated by David Rolston. See https://www.cuhk.edu.hk/rct/toc/toc_b81.html.

One may also find French and English reviews of Chinese-language journal articles on *Jin ping mei* through the *Revue Bibliographique de Sinologie*.

⁵ The late scholar of Chinese language, Peter Rushton seems to be the only English-language scholar who has directly addressed religion in *Jin ping mei*. In a chapter entitled "The Neo-Confucian Reader and the Rhetoric of the *Jin Ping Mei*," he argues that the author of *Jin ping mei* did not necessarily intend for this novel to be pornographic. Peter Rushton, *The Jin Ping Mei and the Non-Linear Dimensions of the Traditional Chinese Novel* (Lewiston: Mellen University Press, 1994): 27-50. See also: Peter Rushton, "The Daoist's Mirror: Reflections on the Neo-Confucian Reader and the Rhetoric of *Jin Ping Mei*," *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 8.1 (1986): 63-81.

Jin ping mei. Commentaries, family life, and authorship have served as lenses through which scholars have examined the *Jin ping mei*, but the intersection of gender and religious practices remains largely unexplored.⁶ In this study, I endeavour to uncover the roles women played in family religion, the ways in which women used religious practices to gain and maintain agency and power in their families and communities, and the ways in which various sources informed women's religious practices in Ming-dynasty China. I will defend my assertion that through their religious practices, women living in the late sixteenth century (around the time *Jin ping mei* was written) could transcend the gender-based barriers in their society.

In this introductory chapter, I will begin by providing some essential background information on the Ming dynasty in China, including the status of women at that time. Next, I will discuss Ming dynasty Confucianism, and specify what I mean when I use terms such as "Confucianism" and "Neo Confucianism" in this study. I will briefly introduce Confucian didactic texts for women, including a short discussion on the

⁶ On commentaries, see Junjie Luo, "Annotated Translation of Four Early Commentaries on Jin Ping Mei" *Asian Literature and Translation* 1.3 (2013): 1.14, and Andrew Plaks, "The Chongzhen Commentary on the *Jin Ping Mei*: Gems Amidst the Dross" *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 8.1 (1986): 19-30. On family life, see Katherine Carlitz, "Family, Society, and Tradition in Jin Ping Mei." *Modern China* 10.4 (1984): 387-413. For authorship studies, see Xu Yongming "A New Candidate for Authorship of the *Jin Ping Mei*: Bai Yue 白悅(1499-1551)" *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 33 (2011): 55-74, and David Roy, trans., *The Plum in the Golden Vase or Chin P'ing Mei* Vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). I discuss commentaries and authorship in more detail in Chapter One of this study.

For general studies on *Jin ping mei*, see: Andrew Plaks *Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

China Review International covers reviews of English secondary scholarship on a variety of topics, from 1994 - 2016. One can find reviews of several articles, monographs, and books on *Jin ping mei* in this periodical.

implications of these texts. I will also describe religious scene of Ming China. Last, I will provide overviews of all subsequent chapters, and explain how they relate to this study.

The Ming Dynasty: An Historical Overview

The Ming dynasty arose from the ruins of the Yuan dynasty (1215—1368 CE), during which the Mongols ruled China. Zhu Yuanzhong (朱元璋, r. 1368—1398 CE), a poor, uneducated man from Anhui province, founded the Ming dynasty in 1368 CE.⁷ He was intent on "restoring Confucian values and Chinese culture after the Mongol conquest."⁸ The author of the *Jin ping mei* would have lived during the reign of the Wanli emperor (萬曆帝, r. 1573—1620 CE).⁹ By this time, powerful eunuchs had become quite problematic in China's government. In fact, by the Yongle 永樂 reign period (1403—1425 CE), eunuchs enjoyed significant financial privileges, and came to influence Ming political, military, and legal spheres.¹⁰ By the sixteenth century, the emperor relied heavily on eunuchs, who were compliant but typically not well-qualified for government jobs, in his bureaucracy. It is no wonder, then, that the Ming dynasty ultimately failed, and some scholars interpret *Jin ping mei* as a criticism of the Ming government.¹¹

⁷ Zhu Yuanzhong (1328—1398 CE) was also known as the Hongwu Emperor (洪武帝). His posthumous name was Ming Taizu (明太祖). Yonglin Jiang, *The Great Ming Code / Da Ming Lü* (Seattle; London: University of Washington Press, 2005), xxxviii.

⁸ Jiang, *Ming Code*, xxxviii.

⁹ Peter Ditmanson, "Imperial History and Broadening Historical Consciousness in Late Ming China," *Ming Studies* 71 (2015): 24.

¹⁰ Gilbert Chen, "Castration and Connection: Kinship Organization among Ming Eunuchs," *Ming Studies* 74 (2016), 29.

¹¹ Peter Ditmanson notes that "The character of the [Wanli] emperor and the imperium itself became an issue in public discourse at an unprecedented level, to the point that some scholars have argued that

Chinese culture and society went through many changes during the Ming dynasty. Despite the effects of the Ming "autocracy and bureaucracy," cultural and intellectual activities flourished, education became more accessible, and social changes occurred.¹² Social mobility through mercantile activities was also possible, as demonstrated by Ximen Qing in the *Jin ping mei*.¹³ Books became more accessible to the general population, owing to the flourishing printing industry and the growing tendency to write in the vernacular language.¹⁴ Short stories and novels that were concerned with daily life appeared, and drama became a popular form of entertainment for the urban middle-class.¹⁵ Regarding religious practices, the Historian Dorothy Ko informs us that religious piety was important in the daily lives of elite women during the seventeenth century, and that women often gathered to study Buddhist sutras.¹⁶ During the Ming dynasty, the lay Buddhist movement grew significantly—lay men and women tended to practice at home, rather than at temples or monasteries.¹⁷ The lay Buddhist movement was syncretic in

Ximen Qing (西門慶), the dissolute central character of the 1580s novel, *Golden Lotus* (金瓶梅), was based on the imperial person." He cites David Tod Roy, who asserts that even though the story of *Jin ping mei* took place during the Song dynasty, the author clearly wrote about the conditions of his own lifetime, during which the Jiajing (嘉靖, r. 1521—1566 CE) and Wanli emperors ruled China. Roy draws parallels between Xunzi's (荀子 ca. 310—ca. 215 BCE) writings on the late Zhou social disintegration and the fall of the Song dynasty in *Jin ping mei*. Ditmanson, "Late Ming China," 24; Roy, *Plum*, V1: xxix-xxx.

¹² William T. De Bary, "Self and Society in the Ming," in *Sources of East Asian Tradition, Volume 1: Premodern Asia*, ed. William T. De Bary (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 428.

¹³ Timothy Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China*, (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 151.

¹⁴ Shang Wei, "Everyday World," 73. The written vernacular language was based on the Mandarin Chinese dialect during the Ming dynasty.

¹⁵ Shang Wei, "'Jin Ping Mei' and Late Ming Print Culture," in *Writing and Materiality in China*, ed. Judith Zeitlin et al. (Cambridge; Massachusetts; London: Harvard University Press, 2003), 188-189. See also: Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 75.

¹⁶ Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, 198-199.

¹⁷ Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, 199.

nature, merging Buddhist ideas with Confucian and Daoist principles.¹⁸ Elements of domestic religion and syncretism are clear throughout the *Jin ping mei*. Indeed, it is often difficult to classify a particular religious practice in this novel as belonging to one religious tradition or another. The inner quarters (or women's quarters, *guige* 閨閣) of the Ximen household frequently serve as a major site of religious practices in the *Jin ping mei*.¹⁹ In her study on families in late imperial China, Historian Patricia Ebrey describes the pre-modern Chinese family, which, in many ways, resembles the Ximen family:

We know that it [the premodern Chinese family] was organized on patrilineal, patriarchal, and patrilocal lines; that filial piety and ancestor worship underlay its internal organization; that marriage was early and nearly universal; and that the big, undivided family ideal was not achieved on a very large scale given that the average household in most times and places contained about five members.²⁰

The Ximen family is based on descent through the male line, and all Ximen Qing's wives move into his household. He is ostensibly the head of his household, although in subsequent chapters, I will argue that his wives play a large part in every aspect of household management. Ximen Qing and his many wives live in his deceased parents' household, and he makes sacrifices to his deceased parents at various points throughout the novel. The Ximen family are perhaps atypical of pre-modern Chinese families, in that there are so many family members in one household; however, Ximen Qing is very

¹⁸ Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, 199. By "syncretism," I mean the tendency for religious traditions to borrow from each other and influence each other. In late imperial China, society and the state tolerated different religions, so long as their teachings did not interfere with in interests of the state, which included social ethics and particular rituals. Kwang-Ching Liu and Richard Shek, *Heterodoxy in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 3.

¹⁹ In wealthy households, young girls began binding their feet around six years of age. At that time, they began their "cloistered lifestyle" within the inner quarters of the household. These apartments were located at the rear of the family compound, and sexually-active men were not allowed there. Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 55-57.

²⁰ Patricia Ebrey, "Family Life in Late Traditional China," *Modern China* 10.4 (1984), 380.

wealthy and can afford to support many servants and concubines. All of the marriages in *Jin ping mei* result in the wife or concubine moving in with the husband at his family's estate. Wives and concubines are expected to obey their husbands in the novel, and the Ximen family's main concern is to produce a male heir to inherit Ximen Qing's wealth and to perform his ancestral rites. Of course, the Ximen family and the empire are both in a state of collapse at the end of the *Jin ping mei*, which, as I will discuss in later chapters, may serve as a criticism of the Ming government and of the Ximen family's behaviour.

Financial ruin and natural disasters marked the demise of the Ming dynasty. During the mid-fifteenth century, China experienced a "little ice age."²¹ There were several periods of drought, flooding, and locust plagues in northwest China, which led to famine.²² People considered the Wanli emperor to be immoral and politically inept.²³ In 1644 CE, the last Ming emperor (Chongzhen 崇禎, r. 1627—1644 CE) committed suicide. He left his empire in a vulnerable state, and in that same year, the Manchus took control of China.²⁴

Ming Dynasty Confucianism

²¹ William Atwell, "Time, Money, and the Weather: Ming China and the "Great Depression" of the Mid-Fifteenth Century," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 61.1 (2002), 92.

²² Atwell, "Great Depression," 95.

²³ Peter Ditmanson, "Late Ming China," 24.

²⁴ Spence, *The Search for Modern China 3rd Edition* (New York; London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), 24-25.

The founder of the Ming dynasty chose Neo-Confucianism as the official state orthodoxy.²⁵ During the Ming period, the government based the imperial examinations, which were ostensibly the prerequisite for an official career, on Zhu Xi's (朱熹, 1130–1200 CE), writings.²⁶ Zhu Xi was interested in laying out a pathway leading to goodness, and to develop this pathway, he turned to the *Four Books* [of Confucianism] (*Sishu* 四書).²⁷ Between the thirteenth and twentieth centuries, young students in China studied Zhu Xi's commentaries on the *Four Books* in order to better understand their meanings.²⁸ Wang Yangming (王陽明, 1472—1529 CE), a Ming-dynasty thinker, took Confucian learning in a new direction. According to Wang, in order to gain a true understanding of something, one had to practice it in one's daily activities. For example, filial piety (*xiao*

²⁵ The term "Learning of the Way" (*Daoxue* 道學) often glossed as "Neo-Confucianism" in Western scholarship refers to interpretations of the canonical Confucian texts that occurred during and after the Song dynasty (960—1279 CE). For example, Zhu Xi was a Song Neo-Confucian thinker, and Wang Yangming was a Ming Neo-Confucian thinker. Kwang-Ching Liu and Richard Shek, "Introduction," in *Heterodoxy in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 3. Whalen W. Lai "The Origins of Ming Buddhist Schism," in *Heterodoxy in Late Imperial China*, ed. Kwang-Ching Liu and Richard Shek (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 112.

²⁶ Benjamin A. Elman. "Changes in Confucian Civil Service Examinations from the Ming to the Ch'ing Dynasty," in *Education and Society in Late Imperial China, 1600-1900*, ed. Benjamin Elman and Alexander Woodside. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 115.

²⁷ The *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語), the *Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大學), the *Doctrine of the Mean* (中庸), and the *Mencius* (Mengzi 孟子). The *Great Learning* and the *Doctrine of the Mean* are both Chapters in the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記), which is another canonical Confucian text that Zhu Xi found to be influential. Zhu Xi wrote extensive commentaries on the *Four Books*. Confucius' Chinese name was Kong Qiu (孔丘, 551—479 BCE). Some of his followers referred to him as Kong Fuzi (孔夫子), or Master Kong. Scholars in the West commonly refer to Confucius' tradition of thought and practices as "Confucianism." Irene Bloom, "Confucius and the Analects," in *Sources of East Asian Tradition Volume One: Premodern Asia*, ed. William Theodore De Bary. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 27. In East Asia, the Confucian Tradition is commonly associated with a group of scholars called *ru* (儒). According to Bloom, *ru* can be translated as gentle, weak, soft, or enduring, but it evokes "a commitment to learning, refinement, cultural accomplishments, and the practice of rites and music..." Confucius did not found the *ru* tradition; however, he did wish to perpetuate it. His early followers called themselves *ru*. Bloom, "Confucius," 29.

²⁸ Daniel K. Gardner, trans., *The Four Books: The Basic Teachings of the Later Confucian Tradition* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2007), xiii-xiv.

孝) is best understood by those who practice it daily.²⁹ He was concerned with education, the organization of communities, and military affairs.³⁰ Wang taught that our innate knowledge and moral nature will lead us to ethical understanding, and that we can all understand the meaning behind our existence.³¹ For a century or so after his death, Wang's students and those who found his teachings influential took an interest in other traditions, such as Buddhism.³² They began to challenge some societal attitudes that were based on Confucian Orthodoxy.³³ One of his followers, Li Zhi (李贄 1527–1602 CE), asserted that women and men are intellectual equals, and that there should be more educational opportunities for women.³⁴ We can see here that attitudes were beginning to change among Confucian scholars of the late Ming dynasty (1500—1644 CE). The Confucian tradition, like other religious and philosophical traditions, continuously evolves. The distinction "Orthodox Confucianism" versus "Neo-Confucianism" is somewhat problematic, since the Confucian canon has grown and changed over time, and the newer texts often serve as commentaries to and elaborate on the older ones. The Imperial Academy, which was established in 124 BCE, used the *Five Classics* as its

²⁹ Filial piety is a Confucian concept which pre-dates Wang Yangming. The *Analects* (2.7) addresses filial piety: "The Master said, Nowadays to be "filial" means simply to be capable of providing parents with nourishment. But even dogs and horses get their nourishment from us. Without the feeling of reverence, what difference is there?" Gardner, *Four Books*, 15; De Bary, "Self and Society," 435.

³⁰ De Bary, "Self and Society," 437.

³¹ Spence, *Modern China*, 441-442.

³² Timothy Brook, *Praying for Power: Buddhism and the Formation of Gentry Society in Late-Ming China* (Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press, 1993), 63.

³³ Li Zhi, for example, developed an interest in Buddhism and eventually took the tonsure. Spence, *Modern China*, 447.

³⁴ Pauline C. Lee, *Li Zhi: Confucianism and the Virtue of Desire* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 21-22.

curriculum, in order to train students for positions in the bureaucracy.³⁵ From the Han dynasty (206 BCE—220 CE) to the Song dynasty, the number of texts in the canon increased from five to thirteen.³⁶ When I use terms such as "Confucian" or "Confucianism" in this study, I will do my best to cite relevant specific texts and scholars. I will most often mean the Confucianism of the Ming dynasty, as reflected in texts and practices that were well-known during that period. It is my hope that this brief introduction will give my readers a sense of the major texts and philosophers that comprised Ming-dynasty Confucianism.

Didactic Texts for Women

While Confucian ideologies affected the entire population to some extent during the Ming period, this study is mainly concerned with those ideas which directly pertained to women.³⁷ In her book *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China*, Dorothy Ko discusses what she refers to as "the twin pillars of Confucian gender ethics."³⁸ The first of these pillars is *sancong* (三從), which Ko translates as "Thrice Following."³⁹ This concept comes from the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記),

³⁵ Gardner, *Four Books*, xviii.

³⁶ The foundational texts, or *Five Classics* (*Wujing* 五經) were: *The Classic of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經), *The Book of Odes* (*Shijing* 詩經), *The Book of History* (*Shujing* 書經), *The Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮經), and *The Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋). Gardner, *Four Books*, xv; xvii-xviii.

³⁷ The founder of the Ming dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang, governed his empire using Confucian ideology. He read Confucian texts and created the Ming legal code, which is based partially on Confucian ideologies. The curriculum of local schools was based on the Confucian classics and other Confucian texts, as were the civil service examinations. Yonglin Jiang, *The Great Ming Code / Da Ming li* (Seattle; London: University of Washington Press, 2005), xxxvii-xxxix.

³⁸ Ko, *Teachers*, 6.

³⁹ Ko, *Teachers*, 6. Although scholars such as James Legge have translated 從 as "following" or "obediences," Ko chooses to render it as "following," because she feels that this term allows for more

which has been part the Confucian canon since its inception.⁴⁰ According to the Thrice Following, unmarried women were required to obey their fathers, married women were to obey their husbands, and widowed women were to obey their sons. The second pillar of Confucian gender ethics is the Four Virtues (*side* 四德), which are also found in the *Book of Rites*.⁴¹ Ban Zhao (班昭, c. 48—c. 120 CE), the author of the didactic text *Instructions for Women* (*Nüjie* 女誡), popularized these virtues. Her work was prominent among wealthy households during the Ming dynasty.⁴² In this text, Ban admonishes women to develop feelings of shame, keep their bodies clean, and dedicate their time to weaving, spinning and food preparation. The ideal woman was to be humble and modest, and remain within the inner quarters of the household.⁴³ *Instructions for Women* became one of the *Four Books for Women* (*Nu sishu* 女四書), which served as educational material for women during the Ming and Qing (1644—1911 CE) dynasties. Ko notes that women very likely read the *Four Books for Women* and the canonical *Four Books*, and that didactic works such as the *Four Books for Women* were undeniably popular among both men and women.⁴⁴

flexibility in our understanding of gender relations in China. She notes that variations occurred in women's adherence to these followings, depending on the class of their father, husband or son. According to Ko, women were not simply victims of "coercion and brute oppression." The situation was far more complex, as I will demonstrate in Chapter Four.

⁴⁰ Gardner, *Four Books*, xviii.

⁴¹ Ko, *Teachers*, 145. For a more detailed discussion on the Four Virtues, see Chapter One.

⁴² In this text, Ban discusses the four fundamental attributes of a good woman: virtue (*de* 德), speech (*yan* 言), countenance (*rong* 容), and work (*gong* 功). This text later became one of the *Four Books for Women* (*Nü sishu* 女四書), which became mandatory reading materials for young women in wealthy households by the Qing dynasty. Mann, *Precious Records*, 80; Ko, *Teachers*, 145.

⁴³ Ko, *Teachers*, 145.

⁴⁴ Ko, *Teachers*, 55.

Other didactic texts for Ming dynasty women included the *Instructions for the Inner Chambers* (*Neixun*, 內訓). The author of this text was likely the Ming Empress Renxiaowen (仁孝文皇后, r. 1402—1407 CE).⁴⁵ This book instructs women to avoid being jealous of their husband's concubines. The *Book of Filial Piety for Women* (*Nu xiaojing* 女孝經), which is an anonymous work from the mid-Tang dynasty, also strictly condemned jealousy among wives and concubines.⁴⁶ There are several other examples of didactic texts for women, but to describe them all is beyond the scope of this study. It is clear that these books, although sometimes authored by women, were most beneficial to men. These prescriptive texts for women suggest that in many ways, women had little power in their own lives during the Ming dynasty. Yet, as I will demonstrate in the following chapters, this was not the case.

A Note on Widowhood and the Cult of Female Chastity

In Ming-dynasty historical records, there is much evidence suggesting that women who outlived their husbands or fiancés often turned to suicide to preserve their chastity. In the *Ming Veritable Records* (*Ming shilu* 明實錄), there is a section entitled "Biographies of Women," which records the virtuous conduct of four hundred women.⁴⁷ Based on the data in this section of the *Ming Veritable Records*, suicide, with the

⁴⁵ Ko, *Teachers*, 6.

⁴⁶ Julia K. Murray, "The Ladies' Classic of Filial Piety and Sung Textual Illustration: Problems of Reconstruction and Artistic Context," *Ars Orientalis* 18 (1988), 95.

⁴⁷ Fangqin Du and Susan Mann, "Competing Claims on Womanly Virtue in Late Imperial China," in *Women and Confucian Cultures in Premodern China, Korea, and Japan*, ed. Dorothy Ko et al. (Oakland: University of California Press, 2003), 229.

intention of preserving chastity, was considered to be a virtuous behaviour for women.⁴⁸

While I am not aware of any Confucian text that prescribes suicide for widows, I agree with Ko's suggestion that "In the eyes of local officials and the state, widows who committed suicide exemplified sacrificial loyalty, a key virtue that upheld the Confucian social and gender hierarchy."⁴⁹ Here we see an example of the upholding of Confucian virtues through practices that are not found in canonical texts or condoned by Confucian scholars. Remaining alive and serving one's parents-in-law, or devoting oneself to raising the deceased husband's heirs, were also acceptable options for widows. In their essay "Competing Claims on Womanly Virtue in Late Imperial China" (2003), Historians Fangqin Du and Susan Mann cite a story that involved a certain Lady Sun (孫妃), who focused all of her energy on her child and grandchildren after her husband died. To justify her actions, she quoted Zhu Xi: "Starving to death is a minor matter; whereas losing one's chastity is an extremely important matter."⁵⁰ Regardless of whether a woman decided to kill herself or to remain a chaste widow and serve her in-laws, Ming society and certain Confucian philosophers discouraged remarriage for women, and acceptable options for widows largely benefitted men. Yet, as I will discuss in subsequent chapters, widows did remarry in the *Jin ping mei*. This phenomenon supports my assertion that scholars must turn our attention to other sources (beyond simply examining didactic texts and historical documents) in order to better understand the social and religious lives of women in the past.

⁴⁸ Du et al., "Competing Claims," 229-230.; Susan Mann, *Precious Records*, 2-3.

⁴⁹ Ko, *Teachers*, 185.

⁵⁰ Du et al., "Competing Claims," 229.

Chapter One: An Introduction to *Jin Ping Mei*

In this chapter, I provide a brief overview of some English-language studies regarding authorial candidates for the *Jin ping mei*. I include a discussion about the importance of authorship, specifically with respect to this study, which examines gender and religious practices. I briefly introduce the extant editions of the *Jin ping mei*, as well as one of the more notable commentaries on this novel. I also describe the basic plot and the main characters of this novel in Chapter One.

Chapter Two: Sources and Literary Devices in the *Jin ping mei*

When reading the *Jin ping mei*, it becomes clear that the author was highly educated, and that his society influenced him significantly. In this chapter, I justify my use of this novel to study female religious practices in the late Ming dynasty. I begin by discussing some very convincing secondary scholarship on this topic. Next, I examine religious references and practices in the novel in conjunction with historical information about Ming religious traditions. Lastly, I consider the *Jin ping mei* alongside its contemporary literary works, and establish a connection between these works, in order to further support my assertion that the *Jin ping mei* is a reasonably faithful representation of elite family life during the late Ming dynasty.

Chapter Three: Gender, Agency and the Cultural-Historical Method

This chapter serves as a condensed state-of-the-field essay on gender studies in Asian religious traditions. I discuss recent trends in this field, and explain the ways in which I will employ other scholars' ideas in my own study. I also define and describe the

cultural-historical method, which I employ in my study of the *Jin ping mei*, and I explain the reasons why this method is particularly useful in gender studies. I also clarify what I mean when I use terms such as "gender," "agency," and "freedom" in this study, since these terms do not have fixed definitions over time and space.

Chapter Four: Analysis of Religious Practices in the *Jin ping mei*

This chapter is a detailed analysis of female religious practices in the *Jin ping mei*. I discuss religious practices throughout the novel, and I argue that women gained freedom and agency through these practices. Some of the major categories I examine include funerary practices, female religious practitioners and healers, religious education within the inner quarters, pilgrimages and temple visits, and the efficacy of prayer and sincere religious practice. This chapter encompasses Buddhist and Daoist practices, as well as those practices that I cannot easily categorize.

Conclusions

In the concluding chapter, I summarize my analysis of the *Jin ping mei*, and reiterate the conclusions I have arrived at, based on my careful comparison of source material and historical documents with this novel.

Chapter One: An Introduction to the *Jin ping mei*

In this chapter, I will briefly introduce *Jin ping mei*, including the religious elements in this novel, so that those who have not read it will be able to follow all subsequent chapters without any difficulty. I will begin with a description of the plot and characters, followed by a discussion on authorship, versions of the novel, and its commentaries. In my sections on authorship and editions of the *Jin ping mei*, I will summarize a small selection of scholarship, both older and more recent, on this topic. Lastly, I will briefly discuss the work of one of the most well-known commentators of the *Jin ping mei*.

1. Plot and Characters

The *Jin ping mei* is set in the late Song dynasty (960—1279 CE), during the rule of Emperor Huizong (宋徽宗, 1082—1135 CE, r. 1100—1125 CE). The author specifies that the events in this novel occur during the Chenghe reign period (重和, 1111—1118 CE). According to the author of the *Jin ping mei*, the Chenghe period was a time of great disorder, during which bandits wandered freely and famine wrought havoc on the population.⁵¹ The novel takes place in Qinghe County (Qinghe xian 清河縣), which, in

⁵¹ Roy, *Plum*, VI:16-17. This seems to be historically true, since during the Northern Song (960—1127 CE), China had to contend with many rivals. The Khitans held a territory in the northeast of China (the Liao Dynasty, 947—1125 CE), and the Tanguts held a territory in the northwest (the Xia Dynasty, 990—1227 CE). There were also rivals north of China's border—the Jurchens and the Mongols. The Jurchens attacked the Northern Song, which fell in 1127 CE. Famine and banditry would certainly result from the state's focus on its military campaigns in the years leading up to the fall of the Northern Song. See Spence, *Modern China*, 28. Regarding the military struggles of the Northern Song, see also: Paul J. Smith, "'Shuihu zhuan' and the Military Subculture of the Northern Song, 960-1127," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 66.2 (2006): 363-422.

the novel, is located in the municipality of Dongping zhou (東平州), in China's Shandong Province (Shandong sheng 山東省).⁵² The author, who lived during the Ming dynasty (1368—1644 CE) wrote the *Jin ping mei* as an extension of an earlier novel, *The Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳),⁵³ which is also set in the Song dynasty.

The *Jin ping mei* is famous for its large variety of characters from all walks of life. The main characters are Ximen Qing (西門慶), a wealthy and corrupt merchant, and his many wives and servants. His principal wife is Wu Yueniang (Moon Lady, 吳月娘), the daughter of a Battalion Commander. Yueniang is a devout Buddhist, and tries her best to manage the Ximen household during its declining years. Ximen Qing's many concubines also play a large role in the *Jin ping mei*. Pan Jinlian (Golden Lotus, 潘金蓮), who is Ximen Qing's fifth wife, comes from a very poor family. She is sold many times during her childhood, but manages to acquire a modest education in reading, writing, and music in her youth. Jinlian and Ximen Qing begin to have an affair while she is still married to a peddler named Wu Dalong (Wu the Elder, 武大郎). After murdering her husband, Jinlian marries Ximen Qing and joins his household as his concubine. She is selfish, jealous, cunning, murderous, and desires to have Ximen Qing all to herself. Li Ping'er (Little Vase, 李瓶兒) is Ximen Qing's sixth wife in the novel. She too commits adultery with Ximen

⁵² Xu, "A New Candidate," 66. Xu notes that during the Song dynasty, Qinghe was located in Hebei Province, not in Shandong Province. Its current name is Xingtai 邢臺 County, in Hebei Province.

⁵³ The title of this novel is also translated as "Outlaws of the Marsh." Some scholars believe that the author of *The Water Margin* is Shi Nai'an 施耐庵, although its authorship is the subject of much debate. For a translation of this novel, see Sidney Shapiro, trans., *Outlaws of the Marsh* (Sydney; London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1986). For a study on *The Water Margin*, see C.T. Hsia, *The Classic Chinese Novel: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968).

Qing, and plays a role in her husband's death. Li Ping'er marries Ximen Qing and gives him a son, but Jinlian indirectly kills this son, and eventually drives Ping'er to her death. Meng Yulou (Jade Tower, 孟玉樓), is Ximen Qing's third wife. Her role in the *Jin ping mei* is mostly that of a supporting character. She is close with Jinlian, and the author describes her as follows: "She was possessed of a natural beauty, to be sure, but the golden lotuses that peeked out from underneath her skirt were neither all that big nor all that small."⁵⁴ Li Jiao'er, a former singing girl from a local brothel, is Ximen Qing's second wife. She is well-known among the Ximen ladies as the "tight fisted manager of Ximen Qing's household finances."⁵⁵ Lastly, Ximen Qing's fourth wife is Sun Xue'e (Snow Moth 孫雪蛾), a former servant to his first principal wife (now deceased). She plays a very minor role in the novel. She is noted for her good cooking and her inclination toward being quarrelsome and adulterous.⁵⁶ Other notable characters include Wang Po (Dame Wang, 王婆), who owns a small teahouse near the district yamen.⁵⁷ She also works a go-between, or person who arranges marriages, and as a procuress.⁵⁸

Ximen Qing does not have many surviving family members. Ximen Dajie (西門大姐) is the daughter of Ximen Qing's deceased principal wife. She and her husband,

⁵⁴ Roy, *Plum*, V1:175. Since smaller, more meticulously-bound feet were most beautiful (the three-inch golden lotus being the ideal size), it is no surprise that Yulou is not among Ximen Qing's most favoured wives.

⁵⁵ Roy, *Plum*, V1: xxiii.

⁵⁶ Roy, *Plum*, V1: xxxv.

⁵⁷ In late imperial China, the *yamen* (衙門) was a government office. The county magistrates, who served as judges, investigators, and jury for the local people, worked at the Yamen. Spence, *Modern China*, 122.

⁵⁸ Roy, *Plum*, V1: xci-xcii. For example, Dame Wang procures the poison that Pan Jinlian uses to kill her husband. I discuss Dame Wang's role in the *Jin ping mei* in detail in Chapter Four.

Chen Jingji (陳經濟) come to live with the Ximen family early in the novel. Ximen Qing's parents are both deceased, and he is free to squander their wealth by participating in various kinds of immoral activities, such as drinking and visiting brothels.

The Ximen family also has many servants and maids. Relatives and female friends of Ximen Qing's wives often come to visit them. Buddhist monks and nuns, Daoist priests, and other religious practitioners also play a significant role in the *Jin ping mei*.⁵⁹ Buddhist nuns frequently visit the inner quarters of the Ximen household, as I will discuss in great detail in chapter four. It is not possible to describe all of the hundreds of characters of the *Jin ping mei* here; however, I will provide brief introductions to any characters that come up in subsequent chapters and are not mentioned in this introduction. The large number of characters in the *Jin ping mei* certainly adds to the novel's complexity and appeal.

The *Jin ping mei* describes the Ximen family's daily activities in fastidious detail. I agree with David Tod Roy's opinion that it is somewhat difficult to describe the nature of this novel. He notes that when reading the novel, one might think of it as what Patrick Hanan refers to as the "folly and consequences" type.⁶⁰ Although this description is somewhat accurate, it does not account for all of *Jin ping mei*'s features, including changes in viewpoint, and frequent changes in diction (from mimetic passages to passages of burlesque or parody). We also learn nothing about the author's intentions or value systems by understanding *Jin ping mei* as a folly-and-consequences type of novel.

⁵⁹ In *Jin ping mei*, the author uses the term *seng* 僧 for Buddhist monks, and *gu* 姑 for Buddhist nuns.

⁶⁰ Roy, *Plum*, VI: xxii. Sinologist David Tod Roy (1933—2016) was a Professor of Chinese Literature at the University of Chicago. He completed a five-volume, annotated translation of *Jin ping mei* in 2013. Patrick Hanan (1927—2014) was a Professor of Chinese Literature at Harvard University.

I agree with Roy that the purpose or core values pertaining to the *Jin ping mei* are difficult to uncover, and that Hanan's classification of this novel is too simplistic. Robert Hegel also seems somewhat perplexed regarding the author's intentions.⁶¹ He asserts that the author of *Jin ping mei* was obviously concerned with demonstrating the damaging effects of self-indulgence (particularly lust, over-consumption of alcohol, and anger). As such, it is a didactic text. Hegel downplays the role of Buddhist salvation in *Jin ping mei*, citing a confusing incident at the end of the novel, wherein Ximen Qing is reborn as his own son. He notes that some scholars feel that "sloppy editing" is to blame for conflicting messages in the novel, but Hegel ultimately feels that the author included ambiguous messages about Buddhist salvation in order to challenge the idea of anyone easily escaping the consequences of their actions through salvation.⁶² I agree that Ximen Qing's being reborn as his own son, who later becomes a Buddhist monk is paradoxical. Perhaps having some knowledge of the author's religious sentiments would help scholars to better make sense of this ending. Of course, this information is not yet accessible for scholars, since the author's identity remains unknown. On the surface, the *Jin ping mei* is a detailed description of daily life in a wealthy household in early modern China, and it reads in some ways as a didactic text. However, there are many complex layers underlying this mimetic work.

The novel is comprised of one hundred chapters in total. During the first forty-eight chapters, Ximen Qing's household is in its ascendancy. He is successful in his

⁶¹ Robert Hegel is a Professor of Chinese Languages and Literature at Washington University in Saint Louis.

⁶² Robert Hegel, Introduction to *The Golden Lotus*, trans. Clement Egerton et al. (Tokyo; Rutland; Singapore: Tuttle Publishing, 2011), 8.

political, sexual and economic endeavours, and obtains an official position through bribery and flattery.⁶³ Ximen Qing's undoing begins at the midpoint of the novel, chapters forty-nine and fifty. At this point in the story, he purchases an aphrodisiac from a strange monk from India. Roy provides an inimitable description of Ximen Qing's downfall during the next chapters of the *Jin ping mei*:

During the next thirty chapters Ximen Qing's star appears to continue in the ascendant, but the seeds of self-destruction that he planted in the first half of the book bear fruit in the death of his son, the death of his favourite wife [Li Ping'er], and finally his own death in chapter 79, described in memorably gruesome detail, from an overdose of the aphrodisiac he had acquired at the midpoint of the novel, exactly thirty chapters earlier.⁶⁴

The death of a son would have been a great tragedy for a man such as Ximen Qing, who had no other sons at that time and would need a male heir to take care of his ancestral rites after his death.⁶⁵ In the final twenty chapters, the Ximen household comes apart, and we learn about the fates of his wives and family members. Hegel points out that the final twenty chapters mirror the first twenty chapters—we observe the characters coming together in the first twenty; whereas we witness their disbanding at the end of the novel.⁶⁶ Wu Yueniang gives Ximen's new young son to a Buddhist monk for adoption, thus putting an end to his ancestral line.⁶⁷ Yet, this incident embodies a note of the ambivalence that is so prevalent in the *Jin ping mei*. We learn that when a son joins the

⁶³ Roy, *Plum*, V1: xxxiii.

⁶⁴ Roy, *Plum*, V1: xxxiii.

⁶⁵ Alan Cole notes that in order to secure her status in her husband's family, a wife or concubine had to give birth to a son. The birth of a son insured the family's economic future, as well as the future well-being of his parents. Confucian texts such as *The Classic of Filial Piety* (*Xiaojing* 孝經, c. fourth century BCE) state that sons must mourn for their parents and make memorial sacrifices to them in the next life. Alan Cole, *Mothers and Sons in Chinese Buddhism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 35; 187; 17-18.

⁶⁶ Hegel, *Introduction to The Golden Lotus*, 7.

⁶⁷ Roy, *Plum*, V1: xxxiii-xxxiv.

sangha, nine generations of ancestors will benefit and be saved.⁶⁸ The final chapter describes the rebirths of several of the characters, which are based on a complicated and cryptic amalgam of karma and fate.⁶⁹

2. Authorship

The *Jin Ping Mei*'s authorship is shrouded in mystery. Professor of Chinese Literature and Culture, Xu Yongming notes that scholars from all over the world have suggested more than twenty possible authors for this novel.⁷⁰ With only the pen name "The Scoffing Scholar of Lanling" (Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng 蘭陵笑笑生)⁷¹ to work with, we must try to piece together historical information with evidence from the novel in our attempt to resolve this mystery. As Xu points out, identifying an author is valuable not

⁶⁸ Roy, *Plum*, V1:417.

⁶⁹ In *Jin ping mei*, karma from previous lives seems to be the basis of fate in one's current lifetime. In chapter forty-six, the Ximen wives consult with a fortune teller. She informs Yueniang that she will have a son who will end up taking the tonsure, and that there is nothing she can do about this fate (Roy, *Plum*, V3: 124). In chapter one-hundred, Yueniang encounters the Buddhist monk to whom she promised her son earlier in the novel. While staying at his temple, she has a nightmare about all that is fated to happen to her should she continue fleeing the city with her son. The monk tells her "The fact that you and your son encountered me is something that was: Both ordained and fated to happen to you, because in days past you planted the seeds of your good fortune. Were that not so, it would have been difficult for you to avoid: The splitting of your flesh and blood." (Roy, *Plum*, V5: 417). Here, we see that fate and karma are closely connected, and that karma affects fate. Yueniang's fate is based on karmic seeds that she sowed, either in a previous life or in her current lifetime. The reason that one cannot change one's fate is simply that one must deal with the fruit of karmic seeds planted in the past, regardless of how one behaves in the present lifetime.

⁷⁰ Yongming Xu 永明徐, "A New Candidate for Authorship of the *Jin Ping Mei*: Bai Yue 白悅 (1499-1551)," *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 33 (2011): 55. In this article, Xu asserts that a certain Ming-dynasty scholar official named Bai Yue (1499-1551, *jinshi* 進士 1532 CE) wrote *Jin ping mei*.

⁷¹ This translation of 蘭陵笑笑生 belongs to David Tod Roy, in the introductory chapter of his English Translation of the *Jin ping mei*. Roy asserts that this name does not necessarily imply that the author of the *Jin ping mei* was from Shandong Province. Instead, Roy feels that this pseudonym is an allusion to Xunzi (荀子), who lived and worked as a magistrate in Lanling. Xunzi was critical of corruption among government officials, and wrote extensively on Confucian, Daoist and Mohist teachings. Xunzi was also known to scoff at the philosophies of his contemporaries, such as Su Qin (fl. early third century BCE) and Chang Yi (fl. early fourth century BCE). Roy, *Plum*, V1: xxiii-xxiv.

only for determining authorial motivation behind the work, but also for assigning a date to the work. When scholars can view the author as an historical figure, we can relate his or her life to various aspects of the work.⁷² For example, the *Jin ping mei* reads as a thinly-veiled criticism of certain political figures and undertakings. Regarding political allegory in the *Jin ping mei*, Hegel notes that "Throughout this process [the process of the main characters causing the collapse of their household through self-destructive behaviour], parallels between events within the Ximen household and the attitudes and activities of the emperors of the time suggest a scathing condemnation of petty self-indulgence on the part of Ming imperial house."⁷³ Roy points out that the author could not have explicitly criticized his society, because any overt denunciation would have put his life and his work at risk.⁷⁴ Roy writes that the author of one of the prefaces to the *Jin ping mei* "tells us that the book was intended by its author to be a serious moral critique of the age."⁷⁵ Learning about the author's political and moral views by reading the *Jin ping mei* might help us gain a better understanding of the state of the political and social world at the time and place he wrote the novel. It may also help us to narrow down authorial candidates.

Learning the author's identity may also help scholars discover more about conceptions of gender during the late Ming. It seems very likely that the author of the *Jin ping mei* was male, but the way he writes for his female characters is interesting. They are

⁷² Xu, "A New Candidate," 56.

⁷³ Hegel, introduction to *The Golden Lotus*, 6.

⁷⁴ Roy, *Plum*, V1: xli.

⁷⁵ Roy, *Plum*, V1: xxii. See the "Editions" section of this chapter for more information on Roy's translation.

strong, intelligent, tenacious women. They do not embody all of the womanly virtues that were expected of women at that time. Even Wu Yueniang, who seems to be the embodiment of Confucian virtue, frequently reprimands and belittles Ximen Qing. She is clearly much more intelligent and morally upright than her husband, and she does a much better job of managing the household than he does. Ximen Qing's concubines and the women he visits in the brothel also seem to eclipse him (and many of the other male characters) in cleverness. Why would the author represent female characters in this way? Perhaps he represented women as strong and intelligent out of satire, but this seems unlikely to me. As I will discuss in detail in chapter four, the mockery in *Jin ping mei* seems to be directed squarely at the male characters. At times, they are stupid and inept to the point of absurdity; whereas the author does not push his representations of the novel's many resourceful, capable females to this degree. Perhaps if we knew his identity, we could find an answer to this question. We could look into his history, and compare the *Jin ping mei* to his other works, if any are extant. The author's depiction of women certainly does not seem to align well with the expectations of women described in books such as *Instructions for Women*. Given the level of discord between the *Jin ping mei* and popular prescriptive texts, can we view this novel as a true reflection of elite life during the late Ming? In Chapter Five, I will support the assertion that we can indeed understand aspects of the *Jin ping mei* as a loyal representation of the life of wealthy families at the time it was written. While there is a great deal of historical and literary evidence to support my aforementioned assertion, knowing the author's identity would add yet another layer of certainty. Indeed, many of the scholars who have studied the *Jin ping mei*, regardless of

their focus, include a brief (or not so brief) discussion about authorship in their studies. I believe that more information on the author would greatly strengthen this study on gender and religious practices in the novel, while also benefitting studies with other focal points. Even though scholars have yet to identify the elusive Scoffing Scholar of Lanling, there have been many attempts to do so, and it is interesting and informative to read their work.

Some scholars have tried to identify the author of *Jin ping mei* through his or her use of voice—the language of government officials, that of popular romantic songs, and dialects.⁷⁶ Hegel concludes that this method is ineffective:

Pan Jinlian seems to mimic the language of popular romantic songs, even though their plaintive lyrics contrast sharply with her often cold-blooded plots against her rivals. Ximen Qing adopts the language of official documents when communicating with his prospective patrons. Efforts to identify the native place of the author through these voices and that of the narrator have been unconvincing; the novelist was simply a master of many voices.⁷⁷

Hanan seems to agree with Hegel that determining the author's native place or dialect based on terms he used in his writing is improbable.⁷⁸ He conducts his own, complicated linguistic analysis of the *Jin ping mei*, but his conclusions only relate to inconsistencies between chapters within the novel. Generally speaking, scholars seem to agree that traditional linguistic methods are not effective when it comes to identifying the author of the *Jin ping mei*. Yet, with newer, more technologically-advanced approaches to the problem of authorship, some scholars are making interesting discoveries.

⁷⁶ Hegel, *Introduction to The Golden Lotus*, 6.

⁷⁷ Hegel, *Introduction to The Golden Lotus*, 6.

⁷⁸ Hanan, "Text," 29.

The importance of determining authorship is reflected in the innovative ways in which scholars are approaching this problem. Paul Vierthaler, who is an Assistant Professor of Digital Humanities at Leiden University, employs text mining (a type of computer-based data analysis) in his pursuit to identify the *Jin ping mei's* author. Using this method, Vierthaler analyses a large number of the sources referenced in the novel, as well as its author's use of language. He describes his work as follows: "This analysis can situate the *Plum in the Golden Vase* within the broader stylistic context of its source materials...The goal of this research is to distill the original voice of the author to facilitate the larger task of determining his or her identity."⁷⁹ By combining his data analysis with a social-historical analysis, Veirthaler is able to narrow down authorial candidates for the *Jin ping mei*.

Vierthaler also uses a method called Stylometry, which uses the language of the *Jin ping mei* to help him narrow down the author. According to Vierthaler, Stylometry is "used extensively in authorship attribution studies."⁸⁰ For this method, Vierthaler parses sections of the *Jin ping mei*, as well as contemporary works for which we know the author's identity. Based on his analyses, Vierthaler has found evidence that points to Wang Shizhen (王世貞, 1526—1590 CE) or Xu Wei (徐渭, 1521—1593 CE) as authorial

⁷⁹ Veirthaler, P. 2017. *Podcast 8: Paul Vierthaler on Text Analysis and Stylometry*. DH East Asia Podcast: Conversations on Digital Humanities in East Asian Studies. podcast internet programme. <http://www.dheastasia.org/>; Paul Veirthaler, "Digital Approaches to Intertextuality and Stylistics in the Plum in the Golden Vase" (presentation, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, February 24, 2017). I did not attend this presentation. I found these quotations on Veirthaler's talk poster: <https://www.pvierth.com/>.

⁸⁰ Paul Vierthaler. "Digital Research into the Authorship of the *Jin Ping Mei*." (Lecture, Stanford CA, February 9, 2016), Vimeo, <https://vimeo.com/163570659>.

candidates for the *Jin ping mei*.⁸¹ However, he is still working through some of the challenges associated with his methods, and does not yet feel confident enough to assign authorship to either of the aforementioned candidates. He is working with computer programmers and statisticians in order to ensure that his mathematics is correct, and to find a way to adjust the algorithms so that they control for genre. Vierthaler is also in the process of digitizing more texts in order to achieve a higher accuracy.⁸² His analytical methods may be very rewarding for authorial attribution studies in the future.

3. Editions

It is clear that in addition to authorship, the compilation history of the *Jin ping mei* is also difficult to ascertain. According to Roy, we have no extant references to the *Jin ping mei* from prior to the late sixteenth century. As early as 1596, its incomplete manuscript likely circulated among a small group of "avant-garde intellectuals."⁸³ The author may not have completed the entire novel before 1606, since the earliest reference to the manuscript dates to this year.⁸⁴ Roy paints a picture of a manuscript that passed through many hands and potentially underwent many changes over time. There are fourteen extant print editions, dating from 1616 to the late seventeenth century, in addition to many lost editions, for which we find references but no printed copies.⁸⁵ It is evident that Hegel agrees with Roy regarding the *Jin ping mei*'s publication date and its various editions:

⁸¹ Vierthaler, "Digital Research," 2016.

⁸² Vierthaler, "Digital Research," 2016.

⁸³ Roy, *Plum*, V1: xx.

⁸⁴ Roy, *Plum*, V1: xx.

⁸⁵ Patrick Hanan, "The Text of Chin P'ing Mei," *Asia Major* 9.1 (1962): 1.

Golden Lotus [*Jin ping mei*] was written during the early years of the Wanli era (1573—1620) of the Ming Empire, late in the sixteenth century. Several prominent scholars of the day commented on it as it circulated in manuscript around 1605; its earliest extant printed edition, entitled *Jin Ping Mei cihua* ("Ballad Tale of..."), is dated 1618. A second version, impoverished in style by some critical estimates, was produced somewhat later, during the Chongzhen reign period (1628—1644); it deletes a number of poems from the older edition and other wording throughout to shorten the text somewhat.⁸⁶

Hanan classifies the extant editions of the *Jin ping mei* into A, B and C "systems," based on textual grounds.⁸⁷ He notes that there are several major and minor differences between the A and B systems; whereas the differences between the B and C systems are mostly in the illustrations, prefaces and comments.⁸⁸ Regarding these systems, Hanan notes the following: "In no case is the earliest edition of any of any of the systems extant. This fact, together with the obviously high mortality rate of the novel, makes it difficult to determine the precise relationship of one edition to another."⁸⁹ Hanan has further divided the A, B and C systems into subsystems; however, these details are not essential to this study.

For Roy's translation of the *Jin ping mei* into English, he uses the A edition of the text. He defends this choice by noting that an editor made significant and adverse changes (additions and deletions) to the B edition well after the author's death, and that the text of the C edition, despite its high-quality commentary, varies little from that of the B edition. Roy also mentions that scholars generally agree that the earliest (and therefore closest to

⁸⁶ Hegel, *Introduction to The Golden Lotus*, 13.

⁸⁷ Hanan, "Text," 2. By "systems," Hanan seems to mean groups of editions derived from an earlier version.

⁸⁸ Hanan, "Text," 2.

⁸⁹ Hanan, "Text," 2.

the author's original work) of these three editions is the A edition.⁹⁰ He has translated the A edition in its entirety, including prefaces, lyrics and colophon.

For this study, I rely most heavily on Roy's translation of and annotations to the *Jin ping mei*. I also refer to a Chinese edition of the novel, which appears to be a reprint of the A version.⁹¹ The Chinese edition contains the same lyrics, poetry, etc. as Roy's translation. There exists one other English translation of this Novel, by Clement Egerton. According to Roy, Egerton worked with the C edition for his translation, likely because the A edition was rediscovered in 1932, well after Egerton completed his translation.⁹² In his introduction to Egerton's translation, Hegel notes that while the C edition is missing a large portion of the poetry found in the original edition, it retains its "numerous scenes of sexual activity."⁹³ Hegel also informs us that in his original 1939 translation, Egerton rendered these "problematic scenes" into Latin. He tells us that "A subsequent edition (1972) translated the Latin passages into an English that is often more anatomically correct than the original, as they appear in this version [the version to which I refer for this study]."⁹⁴ I find that Egerton's translation is missing many of the details that are present in Roy's translation, which is why I only refer to Egerton's translation for the sake of comparison and thoroughness.

⁹⁰ The A edition is the *The Ballad of Jin ping mei (Jin ping mei cihua 金瓶梅詞話)*, dated 1618 CE. Hegel, *Introduction to The Golden Lotus*, V1: 13.

⁹¹ Lanling Xiao Xiao Sheng (蘭陵笑笑生), *Jin Ping Mei 金瓶梅* (Taipei: Sanmin Book Company Ltd., 1999). This Chinese-language version also includes the two original prefaces and a colophon from the aforementioned A system. I chose this version for the sake of completeness. It also closely resembles Roy's translation.

⁹² The C edition was produced during the Chongzhen period (崇禎, 1628 - 1644 CE).

⁹³ Hegel, *Introduction to The Golden Lotus*, 6-7.

⁹⁴ Hegel, *Introduction to The Golden Lotus*, 7.

4. Commentaries

When the *Jin ping mei* first began to circulate, many authors wrote commentaries on it. While there are numerous commentaries on this novel written in Classical Chinese, many of these works have yet to be translated into English.⁹⁵ Andrew Plaks notes that while commentaries are an excellent tool for studying late imperial Chinese literature, their qualities vary greatly.⁹⁶ In this section of the chapter, I will discuss one of the most thoroughly-studied commentaries on the *Jin ping mei*.

Zhang Zhupo (張竹坡, 1670—1698 CE)

Zhang Zhupo, who lived during the reign of the Kanxi Emperor (康熙, r. 1670—1698 CE), wrote several commentaries on the *Jin ping mei*. Zhang lived during the fall of the Ming dynasty (1644 CE), and his reading of the novel became very personal, because the fall of the Ximen family is meant to mirror the dynastic decline.⁹⁷ Zhang also felt that the author of the *Jin ping mei* was frustrated by his society and his failure to succeed at his ambitions. Regarding Zhang Zhupo, Peter Rushton asserts that:

Zhang Zhupo, intelligent, articulate and extremely fond of the novel [sic] lived, only a century after its anonymous author, in an environment closely approximating the latter's social and cultural milieu. Zhang is an indispensable guide for those of us who view this novel from the vantage point of a distant culture and a time gap of more than three hundred years, and we must never underestimate our foreignness to the object under scrutiny. We owe him an

⁹⁵ Junjie Luo, "Annotated Translation of Four Early Commentaries on *Jin Ping Mei*," *Asian Literature and Translation* 1.3 (2013): 1-2.

⁹⁶ Andrew H. Plaks, "The Chongzhen Commentary on the *Jin Ping Mei*: Gems amidst the Dross," *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 8 (1986): 19.

⁹⁷ Peter H. Rushton, *The Jin Ping Mei and the Non-Linear Dimensions of the Traditional Chinese Novel* (Lewiston: Mellen University Press, 1994), 132.

expression of gratitude, criticism of his thinking notwithstanding. Moreover, in the sensible writings of later commentators and analysts of the novel, there is little which was not inspired or at least mentioned in embryonic form by Zhang.⁹⁸

Zhang's commentaries are invaluable for those studying the *Jin ping mei*. He wrote most of his comments in the margins or between lines, and he created a reading guide for the novel, along with two prefaces.⁹⁹ Shang notes that Zhang over-read the *Jin ping mei*, and at times he found patterns that did not necessarily exist. Carlitz notes that "The critic Jin Shengtian (1610? —1661) and his follower Zhang Zhupo sometimes write as though they were preaching to the heathen, lazy readers content with the surface of a text."¹⁰⁰

Regardless of his shortcomings, Zhang's respect for and knowledge of the *Jin ping mei* and vernacular fiction are evident throughout his commentaries.

Zhang's commentaries are based on the Chongzhen (B) edition of the *Jin ping mei*, which had already been edited and abridged before he read it.¹⁰¹ According to the scholar of Chinese Literature, Jianjun He, the Chongzhen commentator and Zhang Zhupo differ in their interpretations of the novel's female characters.¹⁰² The Chongzhen commentator is much more sympathetic toward the female characters than Zhang, even when these characters' behaviour violates contemporary social norms.¹⁰³ According to He:

⁹⁸ Rushton, *Non-Linear Dimensions*, 131.

⁹⁹ Rushton, *Non-Linear Dimensions*, 132.

¹⁰⁰ Katherine Carlitz, *The Rhetoric of Chin p'ing mei* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 144.

¹⁰¹ Shang, "Late Ming Print Culture," 195.

¹⁰² Jianjun He, "Burning Incense at Night: A Reading of Wu Yueniang in *Jin Ping Mei*" *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 29 (2007), 85.

¹⁰³ He, "Burning Incense," 86.

Zhang Zhupo, in contrast [to the Chongzhen commentator], reads the novel essentially as a didactic book. Projecting male elites, the potential editors and writers of morally didactic fiction, as his ideal readers, Zhang Zhupo exhaustively trains his readers to explore the moral depths of the novel.¹⁰⁴

The Chongzhen commentator was much less concerned than Zhang with assigning any didactic functions to *Jin ping mei*. Zhang's commentaries are misogynistic at times, blaming women for the corruption of the family and Ming society. He also takes pleasure in their gruesome deaths and sexual exploitation.¹⁰⁵

Jianjun He notes that Zhang's "aesthetic reading of the novel" is admirable and very useful for scholars, and he agrees with Zhang's portrayal of Wu Yueniang as shrewd, manipulative, and insincere.¹⁰⁶ In chapter twenty-one of *Jin ping mei*, Ximen Qing observes Yueniang lighting incense and praying at night. Professor He argues that based on literary sources, that by the Ming dynasty, only women burned incense at night, and they do so in order to invite illicit love affairs.¹⁰⁷ According to He, traditional Chinese drama and fiction associate burning incense at night with inviting the male gaze, and that "In the logic of Ming narratives, voyeurism leads to seduction."¹⁰⁸ He seems to feel that by including this scene in *Jin ping mei*, its author is employing the aforementioned Ming literary motifs. I cannot argue that in *Jin ping mei* Yueniang's evening prayer does lead to voyeurism and seduction, yet I do not agree with Zhang Zhupo that the author of *Jin ping*

¹⁰⁴ He, "Burning Incense," 86.

¹⁰⁵ He, "Burning Incense," 86-87.

¹⁰⁶ "Aesthetic reading," refers to Zhang's concern with the author's writing techniques, design, and the manipulation of narrative passages. He, "Burning Incense," 85; 87.

¹⁰⁷ He, "Burning Incense," 90.

¹⁰⁸ He, "Burning Incense," 92.

mei intended this scene to represent a cunning ruse, devised by Yueniang.¹⁰⁹ While it is possible that the author was employing literary conventions, it is also possible that he was simply describing a common behaviour among elite women in Ming China. Both Zhang and He seem to overlook that fact that when Ximen discovers Yueniang, she is less than forgiving and she rejects his attempts at reconciliation. She tries several times to have the maid kick her husband out of her quarters, and only agrees to hear him out after he begs her on his knees. She does not invite him to have sex with her; he simply forces himself on her.¹¹⁰ Throughout *Jin ping mei*, the author represents Yueniang as an exemplary wife and household manager. It would not be in keeping with her character up to this point in the novel, as well as later in the novel, to have her conduct an insincere ritual in order to seduce her husband. As I will discuss in great detail in chapter four, I maintain that the author of *Jin ping mei* portrayed women in a more nuanced way than Zhang would have us believe. Female characters do engage in immoral behaviour in the novel, but this is not always the case, particularly with respect to Wu Yueniang. Unlike He, I believe that the author relied more on what he observed in his social milieu than he did on literary conventions. I am much more sympathetic to the Chongzhen commentary than to Zhang Zhupo's; however, I feel compelled to introduce Zhang's commentary because of its reputation among scholars of *Jin ping mei*.

Clearly, Zhang's commentary was extensive and changed the experience of those who succeeded him in reading the *Jin ping mei* significantly. Having read through some

¹⁰⁹ He, "Burning Incense," 94.

¹¹⁰ Roy, *Plum*, V21: 5-7. It was not necessary for a husband to obtain consent from his wife with respect to sexual acts in China at the time this novel was written.

translations of Zhang's work, I feel that while it may not be directly relevant to this study, as scholars, we can learn an important lesson from it: We must be careful not to impose any particular value system on the author of the *Jin ping mei* (or perhaps, on any anonymous author). While it may be tempting to assign a certain moral or religious perspective to an author, we must also consider the intricacies of the text in our analyses. Certainly this lesson applies to a study of gender in the *Jin ping mei*, especially given the ambiguity with which the author portrays women.

In this chapter, we have learned about the characters and basic plot of the *Jin ping mei*. I provided a brief introduction to scholarship concerning the history and authorship of this novel, and briefly explained the different versions of the text. Lastly, I discussed Zhang Zhupo's commentary on the *Jin ping mei*, which is just one of a myriad of commentaries that are extant. Having familiarized ourselves with the text and its history, we may now proceed to a brief study of the sources that informed the author of the *Jin ping mei*. In Chapter Two, I will examine the sources of the *Jin ping mei*, and use these sources to defend my use of this novel to study female religious practices.

Chapter Two: A Discussion of Sources in *Jin ping mei*

In this chapter, I will defend my use of *Jin ping mei* as a source for studying women's religious practices in early modern China. I will analyze some of the sources that influenced *Jin ping mei's* author, in order to demonstrate that in many ways this novel faithfully reflects the social milieu in Ming-dynasty China. For this reason, it is an appropriate arena for studying religious practices. The scholar of Chinese Literature, Patrick Hanan, identifies two categories of sources for *Jin ping mei*: sources that the characters refer to directly, such as songs, religious scriptures, and plays; and sources that the author wove into the narrative more subtly.¹¹¹ He notes that the author of *Jin ping mei* borrowed many portions of an earlier novel, entitled *The Water Margin* (*Shui hu zhuan* 水滸傳), which is set in the Song dynasty (960—1279 CE).¹¹² *Jin ping mei* begins with an episode borrowed from *The Water Margin*; however, the author of *Jin ping mei* uses this incident as a starting point for his novel, and changes the outcome. This is, perhaps, one of the reasons that *Jin ping mei* is set in the Song dynasty. There is also a myriad of references to poems, plays, and religious texts throughout *Jin ping mei*. In this chapter, I will focus on the author's references to texts that were prevalent in Ming China, paying special attention to religious texts and literary works.

All scholarly sources have their own unique shortcomings. In her study of *Jin ping mei*, Katherine Carlitz cautions readers to avoid simply viewing this novel as a realistic description of family life during the Ming dynasty. Instead, we must take care to decipher

¹¹¹ Patrick D. Hanan, "Sources of the Chin P'ing Mei," *Asia Major* New Series 10.1 (1963): 25.

¹¹² The original author and publication date(s) of this novel are unclear.

which aspects of the novel are reflections of its contemporary literary conventions, which are based on the author's ideology, and which are faithful depictions of historical fact.¹¹³ Carlitz warns scholars of *Jin ping mei* to be mindful of some of the literary conventions its author drew upon. She also notes that these conventions change over time, and that we cannot necessarily apply the same set to all Ming vernacular literature.¹¹⁴ In some ways, the Ximen family departs from the ideal family as represented in other art forms, such as drama. Many Ming dramas emphasize the harmonious family, which is the epitome of "filial, conjugal and political loyalty."¹¹⁵ Characters in these dramas struggle with decisions regarding the remarriage of widows, as well as bouts of jealousy between wives and concubines. Yet in *Jin ping mei*, the Ximen family is not able to achieve harmony, and characters do not make the right decisions. Like most authors of vernacular literature during the Ming, the author of *Jin ping mei* was concerned with the morality (or lack thereof) of his period.¹¹⁶ Carlitz notes that there is a "confusing vision of karma in the final chapter" of the *Jin ping mei*, yet it still has much in common with other vernacular stories (*huaben* 話本) of its era, in that "the fates of the major characters are directly related to their actions in the book, and the 'sordid details' of their illnesses are punctuated by visions that remind us of the sins for which they die."¹¹⁷ According to Carlitz and Hanan, in novels such as *Jin ping mei*, the family's breakdown is the result of its earlier

¹¹³ Carlitz, "Family, Society, and Tradition in Jin Ping Mei," *Modern China* 10.4 (1984): 389. In the absence of the author's identity, we can incorporate other sources, including historical documents, and compare them with the text.

¹¹⁴ Carlitz, "Family," 390.

¹¹⁵ Carlitz, "Family," 397.

¹¹⁶ Carlitz, "Family," 398.

¹¹⁷ Carlitz, "Family," 400. Carlitz agrees with Patrick Hanan, who refers to a group of tales of the *huaben* genre as "folly-and-consequences" stories. See Patrick Hanan, "The Early Chinese Short Story: A Critical Theory in Outline," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 27 (1967): 192-197.

nefarious deeds.¹¹⁸ Yet, I feel that this understanding of *Jin ping mei* is slightly simplistic—this novel is not merely a didactic text. It is precisely the author's allusions to karma and other, non-Confucian themes, as well as his sense of irony, which pushes this novel beyond the confines of this Confucian reductionist model.¹¹⁹ As I discussed in my introductory chapter, Ming dynasty Confucianism was comparatively eclectic, and incorporated some elements of Buddhist thought. Rushton notes that during the Ming dynasty, "The serious exploration of multiple systems of thought was common even among many of the most dedicated Confucian civil servants of the empire."¹²⁰ *Jin ping mei* can perhaps serve as a microcosm of this social phenomenon. This novel is far from being a straight-forward lesson in Confucian morality, and as such, I argue that it differs from other vernacular literature of its time. Therefore, it is perhaps more useful as a source for studying the Ming dynasty than its antecedents. Carlitz acknowledges that *Jin ping mei* differs from other so-called "folly-and-consequence" stories in several ways, and that this novel does in many ways reflect some of the historical realities of its time.¹²¹ Yet she cautions that:

The size, composition, and pastimes of the Ximen family cannot be studied simply as historical fact. Rather than using *Jin ping mei* to fill gaps in the historical record, we should probably be probing historical accounts to see whether it is possible to corroborate what we find in *Jin ping mei*.¹²²

¹¹⁸ Carlitz, "Family," 400.

¹¹⁹ I borrow the "Confucian reductionist mode of interpretation" from Peter Rushton, who was a scholar of Chinese language and literature. See Peter Rushton, *The Jin ping mei and the Non-Linear Dimensions of the Traditional Chinese Novel* (Lewiston: Mellon University Press, 1994). For an explanation of what I mean by "Confucian," please refer to my introductory chapter, pp. 6-11.

¹²⁰ Rushton, *Jin ping mei*, 3-4.

¹²¹ Carlitz, "Family," 405-407.

¹²² Carlitz, "Family," 408.

Some of the festivals the Ximen family celebrates in the novel can also be found in Ming gazetteers, for example. Carlitz concludes that in order to determine to what extent *Jin ping mei* represents historical realities, scholars must approach this novel using a combination of historical sources and literary criticism.¹²³

Shang, who has written a great deal on late imperial fiction, does an excellent job of linking historical sources to this novel. In his essay "The Making of the Everyday World: *Jin Ping Mei cihua* and Encyclopedias for Daily Use,"¹²⁴ He notes that this novel was ground-breaking in its descriptions of the ordinary details of daily life. *Jin ping mei* served as a model for later authors. Its design, narrative patterns, and descriptions of the mundane are also evident in Qing dynasty novels.¹²⁵ One well-known example of a Qing novel written in the same style as *Jin ping mei* is *A Dream of Red Chambers* (*Honglou meng* 紅樓夢).¹²⁶ Shang demonstrates that the author of *Jin ping mei* drew from many of the same sources as the popular *Encyclopedias for Daily Use* (*Wanbao quanshu* 萬寶全

¹²³ Carlitz, "Family," 410. Gazetteers were local publications, produced at the county level. Most counties had published at least one edition of their gazetteer by the early seventeenth century. These publications were concerned with dynastic history and official life. They contained sections on rites and customs, and these sections often included descriptions of funeral practices. One example of a Ming Gazetteer is the *Shexian zhi*, 歙縣志 (The Gazetteer of She district) which was published in 1609. Timothy Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1999), 4-5. See also: Timothy Brook, "Funerary Ritual and the Building of Lineages in Late Imperial China," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 49.2 (1989): 465-499.

¹²⁴ Shang Wei, "Everyday World: *Jin Ping Mei cihua* and Encyclopedias for Daily Use." In *Dynastic Crisis and Cultural Innovation From the Late Ming to the Late Qing and Beyond*, edited by David Wang and Shang Wei, (Cambridge; London: Harvard University Asia Centre, 2005), 63-92.

¹²⁵ Shang, "Encyclopedias for Daily Use," 64-65.

¹²⁶ The author of *Honglou meng* is Cao Xueqin (曹雪芹, d. 1764 CE). Cao Xueqin, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, trans. Jizhen Wang (New York: Anchor Books, 1958; 1989), xv. This novel tells the story of the Jia 贾 family, who live in a large family compound similar to the Ximen family's home.

書).¹²⁷ Shang also finds many similarities in the content of *Jin ping mei* and these encyclopedias.¹²⁸ For example, descriptions of the various games people played at the banquets that Ximen Qing attends closely match descriptions of games described in a chapter of an encyclopedia entitled *Santai's Orthodox Instructions for Myriad Uses for the Convenient Perusal of all the People in the World, Newly Engraved* (*Xingke tianxia simin bianlan Santai wangyong zhengzong* 新刻天下四民便覽三台万萬用正宗).¹²⁹ Shang goes on to assert that while *Jin ping mei* offers a "fictive ethnography" of the merchant life during the late Ming, it is not a product of pure imagination—the author was clearly influenced by the society he lived in.¹³⁰ The *Encyclopedias for Daily Use* are an invaluable source for scholars of *Jin ping mei*, for many reasons. They refer to many of the same sources that we encounter in the novel, and as such, we know that the author of the novel looked to the world around him when creating his masterpiece, rather than creating a purely fictive piece of writing.

These encyclopedias brought together useful information from a large variety of sources, and appealed to people of all social classes. Shang notes that Zhu Xi's *Family*

¹²⁷ These were first published in 1599, around the same time that the manuscript of *Jin ping mei* began to circulate, and became extremely popular around the turn of the seventeenth century. Therefore, the author of *Jin ping mei* would not have drawn on these sources directly. Shang suggests that he likely drew upon the same sources as these encyclopedias; as such, they are an appropriate source for studying daily life during the late Ming dynasty [from approximately the mid-sixteenth century to 1644]. Shang, "Encyclopedias for Daily Use," 66-67.

¹²⁸ For example, approximately one third of one of these compendia is devoted to the pursuit of personal well-being. This volume provides advice on geomancy, divination, exorcisms, physiognomy, astrology, methods for determining auspicious and inauspicious dates, etc. This encyclopedia was published in 1599 CE. Shang, "Encyclopedias for Daily Use," 70.

¹²⁹ The editor of this encyclopedia was Yu Xiangdou (余象斗, ca. 1560—ca. 1640 CE). Its publication date was 1599, and a modified version appeared in 1607. Shang, "Encyclopedias for Daily Use," 66; 77.

¹³⁰ Shang, "Encyclopedias for Daily Use," 65.

Rituals (*Jiali* 家禮) is one source that is cited in the *Wanbao quanshu*. This book is an instruction manual for families on how to properly perform rituals at weddings, funerals, and initiations (rites of passage), as well as how to perform sacrifices to one's ancestors.¹³¹ This book, along with the *Analects* of Confucius, was extremely popular during the Ming dynasty. At this time the printing industry flourished in China, and families such as the Ximens would very likely have been familiar with *Family Rituals*, and likely would have owned a copy for personal consultation.¹³² Ximen Qing's family is wealthy, and some of its members (both female and male) are literate, so it is plausible to assume that they were familiar with this text. Zhu Xi's instructions for performing ancestral rites influenced the author of *Jin ping mei* and his society. Throughout the novel, Ximen Qing's wives are anxious to provide him with a son, so that the son will inherit the family fortune and preside over the family's ancestral rites. According to Zhu Xi, funeral rites are to be performed by the eldest son:

The presiding mourner is always the eldest son. If he does not survive, then the eldest main-line grandson can, as a double heir, make the offerings of food and wine, with a senior relative who lives with the heir managing the entertainment of guests.¹³³

In every case of a husband's death in *Jin ping mei*, the wife serves as the presiding mourner, which is in accordance with Zhu Xi's recommendations.¹³⁴ However, as I will discuss below, there are some aspects of Zhu Xi's detailed descriptions of correct family rituals that the Ximen family clearly modifies or ignores. In accordance with human

¹³¹ Patricia Ebrey, *Chu Hsi's Family Rituals*, xiii.

¹³² *Analects* was the most well-known books in early modern China. *Family Rituals* was slightly lesser-known, but most families had a copy in their home. Ebrey, *Chu Hsi's Family Rituals*, xiii.

¹³³ Ebrey, *Family Rituals*, 71.

¹³⁴ Ebrey, *Family Rituals*, 71.

nature, they pick and choose from prescriptive texts in order to suit their needs and desires.

Encyclopedias for Daily Use contain a mixture of sources, some of which contradict others. Perhaps this availability of a hodgepodge of advice is the reason that the funerals in *Jin ping mei* deviate from Zhu Xi's ideals. For example, Zhu Xi strictly prohibits Buddhist rites at funerals. He quotes Sima Guang (司馬光, 1019–1086 CE), who was a politician, author and historian of high rank during the Northern Song dynasty:

The venerable Ssu-ma said: "It is the current custom to believe the falsehoods of the Buddhists. At the moment of death, at each of the seventh days until the seventh seventh day, at the hundredth day, the full year, the second full year, and the removal of mourning clothes, they feed monks and hold ceremonies. Some perform the great assembly of water and land, copy sutras, make statues, and build stupas and temples. They say that they are obliterating the sins of the dead before heaven, so that they will surely be reborn in heaven's palace and receive all kinds of pleasures; and that if they do not do this for them, they will just as surely enter hell, be sliced, roasted, pounded, and ground, receiving unlimited waves of suffering. They do not realize that when a human being is filled with blood and breath he feels pain; but should he trim his nails or shave his hair and then roast or slice them, he suffers nothing. How much more true is this for the dead, where the body and spirit are separated from each other.¹³⁵

Zhu Xi agrees with Sima Guang that Buddhist rites are ineffectual and pointless. He also goes on to quote a Tang-dynasty prefect from Luzhou named Li Tan (李憺), who lived during the eighth century. Li Tan wrote a letter to his sister, in which he outlined the ways in which praying to the Buddha on behalf of one's deceased relatives is unfilial:

¹³⁵ Ebrey, *Family Rituals*, 79. For a study on funerary rites in late imperial China, see: Timothy Brook, "Funerary Ritual and the Building of Lineages in Late Imperial China," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 49.2 (1989): 465-499.

This is assuming one's parent was not a person of virtue but an inferior person who had accumulated bad deeds and sins. Could there be a less kind way to treat one's parents?¹³⁶

Every funeral that takes place in *Jin ping mei* involves some kind of Buddhist ritual.

Funerals and memorial rites in this novel often involve a mixture of Buddhist, Daoist and Confucian rites. The Ximens did indeed follow many of Zhu Xi's prescriptions for funerary and other rites. However, they incorporated rites from other traditions, as did the *Encyclopedias for Daily Use*.

Interestingly, those who administer funerals in novels such as *Jin ping mei* and *Honglou meng* are typically female. Yet, regarding funeral directors, Zhu Xi advises families to

Choose a younger male relative who knows ritual and is a competent manager. All the business of the funeral will be delegated to him.¹³⁷

One might assume that a lack of male relatives resulted in women directing funerals by default, but this is not always the case in *Jin ping mei* and *Honglou meng*. When Ximen Qing dies, his principal wife plans his funeral from the inner chambers, even though he has a son-in-law, and there are many male servants available for the family to adopt after his death. In *Honglou meng*, there is no shortage of sons and sons-in-law in the Jia family, yet a young woman who had married into the family serves as a funeral director on several occasions. One can conclude that while families in late imperial China were familiar with texts such as Zhu Xi's *Family Rituals*, they used these sources as they saw

¹³⁶ Ebrey, *Family Rituals*, 79-80.

¹³⁷ Ebrey, *Family Rituals*, 71.

fit. Certainly families like the Ximens and the Jias consulted other sources quite regularly, and selected the rituals that worked best for their circumstances.

Another compelling reason to believe that we can learn about life during the late Ming dynasty from *Jin ping mei* is that its author drew from the same sources (such as joke books, guidelines for drinking games, etc.) as other literary sources, compendia and encyclopedias. He also drew from sources that dealt with exorcism, divination, magic, and spirits. Shang notes that encyclopedias from the late Ming also dealt with these arts, which addressed people's daily concerns about childbirth, old age, sickness, and death.¹³⁸ According to Shang, Yu Xiangdou's encyclopedias "introduced the arts of divination, geomancy, physiognomy, exorcism, magic, spells, and interpretation of dreams, which again involved topics Confucius refused to discuss—prodigies, feats of strength, disorders, and spirits (*guai li luan shen* 怪力亂神)."¹³⁹ Confucianism may have been the "dominant official ideology"¹⁴⁰ during the Ming dynasty, yet people from all social backgrounds relied on the aforementioned arts. Shang informs us that Yu Xiangduo had accessibility in mind when he addressed the title pages of his encyclopedias to the four major strata of society in Ming China: the elite, agricultural workers, artisans, and merchants.¹⁴¹ Therefore, we cannot assign an interest in divination, geomancy..., etc. to one particular social stratum. Indeed, we cannot assume that any religious practices during the Ming dynasty belonged to any group of people in particular.

¹³⁸ Shang, "Encyclopedias for Daily Use," 70.

¹³⁹ Shang, "Encyclopedias for Daily Use," 70.

¹⁴⁰ Shang, "Encyclopedias for Daily Use," 71 n.14.

¹⁴¹ Shang, "Encyclopedias for Daily Use," 72.

References to specific Buddhist texts and practices in *Jin ping mei* also seem to be in agreement with historical fact. One interesting example is a detailed reference to the legend of Woman Huang in Chapter seventy-four. Religious Studies scholar Beata Grant, and Wilt Idema, a scholar of Chinese Literature, published a study on the Legend of Woman Huang.¹⁴² They infer that this legend appeared during the Song dynasty (960—1279 CE), or perhaps earlier. There is a reference to the legend of Woman Huang in a precious scroll associated with Luo Menghong (羅孟洪, 1442—1527 CE), or Patriarch Luo (羅祖), who influenced the development of new religious sects, which used precious scrolls as tools for propagation.¹⁴³ This reference appeared at some point during the sixteenth century, and is the first reference to the legend of Woman Huang in precious scroll format. The ladies of the Ximen household gather to listen to the *Precious Scroll on Woman Huang*.

It is significant that the author of *Jin ping mei* chose to write about the Ximen wives listening to a Buddhist nun recite the legend of Woman Huang. This story is about a laywoman who saves her family and herself by reciting the *Diamond Sutra*.¹⁴⁴ Grant and Idema note that during the Ming dynasty, the most common medium for this legend

¹⁴² In some versions of the story, the protagonist's name is Woman Wang, rather than Woman Huang. Beata Grant and Wilt Idema, *Escape from Blood Pond Hell* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011), 11.

¹⁴³ Precious scrolls (*baojuan* 寶卷) are a genre of vernacular literature. They incorporate vernacular prose (usually popular stories) with songs from operas, as well as folk songs. Stephen Teiser, *The Ghost Festival in Medieval China*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 111; Grant and Idema, *Blood Pond Hell*, 11. Patriarch Luo was associated with the White Lotus tradition, which was lay-oriented. He formed a new, syncretic school, which generated other schools. Orthodox Buddhists often accused him of being heretical.

Whalen W. Lai "The Origins of Ming Buddhist Schism," in *Heterodoxy in Late Imperial China*, ed. Kwang-Ching Liu and Richard Shek (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 112.

¹⁴⁴ The *Jinggang jing* 金剛經. Grant and Idema, *Blood Pond Hell*, 5.

was precious scrolls, and it was most popular among female audiences.¹⁴⁵ While women could attend recitations of the legend of Woman Huang (in various formats) at temples and nunneries, the most popular venue for the ritual recitation of this story was lay women's homes.¹⁴⁶ I provide a synopsis of the legend of Woman Huang, as it appears in *Jin ping mei*, in chapter four of this study. Several versions of this legend are set in Shandong Province, which is also the setting of *Jin ping mei*.¹⁴⁷ Perhaps it is safe to assume that the story of Woman Huang was popular in the Shandong region, and that when the author of *Jin ping mei* wrote about the Ximen women inviting nuns to their home to recite it, he did so because this activity was popular in his community.

Wu Yueniang and Woman Huang have much in common. It is no doubt that a woman like Yueniang would have enjoyed the story of Woman Huang, because it was so relatable to her own life. Both women are married to uncouth men, and both women save their families by means of their exemplary acts of Buddhist piety. Yueniang and Woman Huang both study Buddhist texts and recite the name of the Buddha. Yueniang gives her son to a Buddhist monk as a disciple; whereas Woman Huang's son becomes successful in the state bureaucracy. Yet both sons provide their families with some semblance of redemption and accomplishment. It is likely that Woman Huang's story would have appealed to many women during the Ming dynasty, for the same reasons it appealed to Ximen Qing's wives. It likely provided a sense of hope for pious women who found

¹⁴⁵ Grant and Idema, *Blood Pond Hell*, 11.

¹⁴⁶ Grant and Idema, *Blood Pond Hell*, 11.

¹⁴⁷ Grant and Idema, *Blood Pond Hell*, 13.

themselves in unhappy arranged marriages, and whose purpose in the family was to produce male children.

The legend of Woman Huang also informs us about pollution related to the female body—specifically the blood associated with menstruation and childbirth. During the Ming dynasty, the concept of a Blood Pond Hell for women was widespread. Women were ostensibly punished for polluting their environments with menstrual blood, and the blood that they lost during childbirth.¹⁴⁸ Upon reading certain versions of the legend of Woman Huang and *Jin ping mei*, we learn that these ideas about female pollution were deep-seated by the late Ming.¹⁴⁹ There is one incident in particular in *Jin ping mei* that reflects late-Ming attitudes toward female pollution. Just before she dies, Li Ping'er is unable to control the vaginal hemorrhaging she has experienced since the birth of her son. When a nun comes to visit her, she requests that several nuns regularly recited the *Blood Pool Sutra* (*Xuepen jing* 血盆經) on her behalf.¹⁵⁰ On the night before Li Ping'er dies,

¹⁴⁸ Grant and Idema, *Blood Pond Hell*, 23-24.

¹⁴⁹ Some versions of this legend focus less than others on female pollution. The story of Woman Huang that we find in *Jin ping mei* highlights understanding impermanence and karmic retribution, as well as the benefits of reciting the *Diamond Sutra*.

¹⁵⁰ Roy, *Plum*, V4:51. The *Blood Pool Sutra* (or *Blood Bowl Sutra*) is an indigenous Chinese text, which appeared in the imperial Buddhist canon by the year 1437. According to Buddhist Studies scholar Alan Cole, this sutra appears in multiple Ming-dynasty novels. Cole also notes that there were Daoist versions of the *Blood Pool Sutra*. In the one version of the *Blood Pool Sutra*, Mulian (Skt. Mahāmaudgalyāyana), one of the Gautama Buddha's devoted disciples, happens upon a hell that is just for women. A warden in this hell makes women drink from the blood that surrounds them. When Mulian asks the warden why this hell contains only women, the warden informs him that "Teacher, it is not something that involves men. It only has to do with women, who every month leak menses or in childbirth release blood which seeps down and pollutes the earth gods." This edition of the *Blood Pool Sutra* (translated by Alan Cole), is from Makita Tairyō's *Study of Apocryphal Scriptures* (*Gikyō kenkyū* 偽經研究). This sutra was printed during the fifteenth century.

See: Alan Cole, *Mothers and Sons in Chinese Buddhism*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), Chapter Nine; and Makita Tairyō, *Gikyō kenkyū*, Kyoto: Jinbun Kagaku Kenkyūsho, 1976.

Ximen Qing wishes to spend the evening in her room. She tries to dissuade him, citing the polluting effects of her hemorrhaging:

To resume our story, Old Mother Feng and Nun Wang were keeping Li Ping'er company in her room that night, when who should appear but Ximen Qing, who came to see her after the conclave in the front compound broke up and wanted to go to sleep there. Li Ping'er objected to this, saying, "You mustn't think of it. This room is: Polluted and unclean, and the two of them are also here."¹⁵¹

She is referring here to the blood that constantly drips from her body as she wastes away.

Servants must place grass mats underneath her, and remove them frequently, and Li Ping'er insists on burning incense to cover up the odour of her bodily waste.¹⁵² After forbidding her husband from spending the night with her, she pays Nun Wang very well to gather a group of nuns and recite the Blood Bowl Sutra on her behalf. Reference to the *Precious Scroll on Woman Huang* and the *Blood Bowl Sutra* are only two of a large number of allusions to religious texts in *Jin ping mei*. To discuss them all is beyond the scope of this chapter. I intend only to provide my readers with a sampling of religious texts that informed the author of *Jin ping mei*, and were popular during the Ming dynasty.

In this chapter, I have supported my assertion that *Jin ping mei* is a valuable source for scholars of the Ming dynasty, particularly those scholars studying the intersection of religious practices and gender. I have addressed some of the shortcomings associated with using this novel for these purposes, and I have discussed other scholars' opinions on this topic. It is my hope that this chapter complements and resonates with my final chapter, which is an analysis of female religious practices in *Jin ping mei*.

¹⁵¹ Roy, *Plum*, V4: 57.

¹⁵² Roy, *Plum*, V4: 45.

Chapter Three: Gender and Agency in Religious Studies

Scholars studying gender in a context outside of their own time and space must approach this topic with caution. Terminology is one major issue with which to contend. For example, how does one define "gender"? Is gender understood differently in other areas of the world? How was it conceived of in the past? The term "agency" also poses challenges. How do we define agency in a contemporary Western context? How can we recognize agency outside of a Western, liberal feminist milieu, and what does will it look like? How would one conceive of agency in early modern China? "Freedom" also presents challenges, because scholars must determine what freedom might have meant to their research subjects. As a service to our research subjects and in the interest of academic rigour, we must be careful not to project our own assumptions and biases onto others. For this study, I rely on the work of several scholars whose research focuses on gender in Asian religious traditions. These scholars move beyond the Western feminist perspective, in order to better imagine and understand the ways in which women in sixteenth-century China perceived their participation in religious practices.¹⁵³ As I discuss each of the aforementioned terms, I will explain the ways in which I employ each of them in this study, and why it is important to conceive of gender, agency and freedom in particular ways when studying other cultural milieu.

¹⁵³ In the West, first-wave feminism was concerned with suffrage and property ownership, while second-wave feminism was concerned with rape, reproductive rights, and sexual harassment. These movements failed to address differences in lived experience that were based on race, class, religious identities, sexual orientations, etc. The third-wave feminist movement, which began during the 1990's, purportedly addresses the intersections of gender with other facets of identity and thus avoid any single, over-arching definition of feminism. There remains much work for Western feminists to do in order to live up to this ideal.

Religious studies scholars working on gender will inevitably have to contend with the term gender itself. This term has taken on different meanings over time and space. During the 1990s, scholars such as Daniel Boyarin began to think about and write about gender in innovative ways. He wrote the essay "Gender" around the time of the inception of third-wave feminism in the West. Boyarin begins by noting that we can no longer think of gender as a social construct based on biological sex.¹⁵⁴ Boyarin favours the definition of gender that was formulated by material feminists, such as Judith Butler and Monique Wittig. Wittig asserts that there is no such thing as biological sexes, and that the concept of sexual difference is created for a particular reason:

...For there is no sex. There is but sex that is oppressed and sex that oppresses. It is oppression that creates sex, and not the contrary. The contrary would be to say that sex creates oppression, or to say that the cause (origin) of oppression is to be found in sex itself, in a natural division of the sexes pre-existing (or outside of) society.¹⁵⁵

Wittig not only denies a binary conception of gender based on sex; she refutes the very idea of naturally-occurring biological sexes. The notion of sexes based on biological differences is merely a tool of oppression. Boyarin notes that scholars working on gender must bear this new conception of gender in mind:

Accordingly, now when we study gender within a given historical or existing culture, we understand that we are investigating the praxis and process by which people are interpellated into a two- (or for some cultures more) sex system that is made to seem as if it were nature, that is, something that has always existed.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ Daniel Boyarin, "Gender," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago; London, University of Chicago Press, 1998): 117.

¹⁵⁵ Boyarin, "Gender," 117; Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 2.

¹⁵⁶ Boyarin, "Gender," 117.

As such, gender can indeed take on differing meanings, depending on the historical actors one studies. Scholars must be mindful of this relatively new paradigm for conceiving of gender, particularly when studying groups of people outside of their own settings.

Judith Butler, a scholar of poststructuralist feminist thought, challenges the distinction between sex and gender that has existed in feminist debates since the 1940s. She concurs with Wittig that there are no "prerepresentational" sexes or embodiments on which to base notions of gender.¹⁵⁷ In her discussion of poststructuralist feminist theory and agency, Saba Mahmood also refers to and agrees with Butler's work.¹⁵⁸ Having outlined this innovative understanding of sex and gender, Boyarin proceeds to apply it to his study on conceptions of gender in early Christianity and early rabbinic Judaism. I will employ a modified version of this approach in my study of *Jin ping mei*. While a gender binary based on perceived biological sexes is apparent in this novel, gender *roles* and women's impression of these roles are very specific to the novel's setting.¹⁵⁹

For this study, I certainly must consider early modern Chinese conceptions of gender. By this time in Chinese history, Chinese cosmological thinking associated female and male with *yin* (陰) forces, and *yang* (陽) forces respectively.¹⁶⁰ These forces are both composed of primary *qi* (氣), or vital energy, and they connect the body to the cosmos in

¹⁵⁷ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005): 18.

¹⁵⁸ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 17-18.

¹⁵⁹ Palace eunuchs were common in Ming-dynasty China. While they may have constituted a separate category of gender, they do not seem to play a significant role in *Jin ping mei*. The Ming state employed Eunuchs as bureaucrats and officials, and the author of *Jin ping mei* only mentions them in passing as members of the local government. See: Gilbert Chen, "Castration and Connection: Kinship Organization among Ming Eunuchs," *Ming Studies* 74 (2016): 27-47.

¹⁶⁰ Charlotte Furth, "Androgynous Males and Deficient Females: Biology and Gender Boundaries in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century China," *Late Imperial China* 9.2 (1988): 3.

Chinese medicine. As one waxes, the other wanes, and accordingly, they maintain a state of dynamic equilibrium.¹⁶¹ According to this theory, biological sex is determined by relative abundances of *yin* and *yang* forces at the time of conception, and both of these forces are present in all males and females when they are born. Physical features (including genitals and the presence or absence of breasts) typically determined one's sex in Ming China, and particular gender roles corresponded to each sex. In modern Chinese, the term *xingbie* 性别 refers to both gender and sex. In medieval Chinese, *xing* refers to one's "inborn nature," or "endowment at birth."¹⁶² It is apparent that over time, gender and biological sex have been linked in China. Regarding cases of uncertainty based on the body during the Ming dynasty, Furth notes that:

Bodily ambiguity was translated into social gender according to patterns that identified the female with sexual deficiency and the male with androgynous erotic capabilities. These patterns show that although social gender overshadowed sexuality, this dominance was not total.¹⁶³

While the usual practice was to determine gender based on sex, we can see here that a spectrum of physical manifestations represented biological sex, and that decisions had to be made in cases wherein sex was not obvious based on a person's bodily features. Assignments of gender were also based on conduct and social station—those perceived as having power and influence (such as Eunuchs, for example) fit into the male category, regardless of their organs or sexual behaviours. Ming society associated those who were

¹⁶¹ Furth, "Gender Boundaries," 3.

¹⁶² Paul Kroll, *A Student's Dictionary of Classical and Medieval Chinese*, 510.

¹⁶³ Furth, "Gender Boundaries," 23.

powerless and passive with the defective and the female.¹⁶⁴ Furth points out that this method of dealing with transgressions of gender served to reinforce social hierarchies, and that in Ming China, these hierarchies were structured around Confucian kinship conventions.¹⁶⁵

Confucian kinship and gender ideals are certainly apparent in *Jin ping mei*, which portrays the family as a microcosm of the state.¹⁶⁶ Socially-enforced practices, such as filial piety, widow chastity, arranged marriage, patriarchy, patrilocal residence, and patrilineality necessarily come to mind when thinking about gender in traditional China. Many factors influenced one's gendered experience in early modern China. Ko points out that scholars must consider "the integral links between gender and other formulations of equality and hierarchy" such as class and politics.¹⁶⁷ Flexibility with respect to gender roles occurred, depending on one's class, locale, and age.¹⁶⁸ According to Fred Blake, Neo-Confucianism commends industrious, virtuous women; it is largely left up to different communities to decide how this should be accomplished. A Neo-Confucian maxim that is interpreted a certain way by the government or by a gentry family such as the Ximens may have been interpreted quite differently in rural areas, where women's labour was required for survival.¹⁶⁹ As such, opportunities (including opportunities related to religious practices) that were available to Ximen Qing's wives would not necessarily have been available to all Chinese women at that time.

¹⁶⁴ Furth, "Gender Boundaries," 23-24.

¹⁶⁵ Furth, "Gender Boundaries," 1; 24.

¹⁶⁶ Katherine Carlitz, "Family, Society and Tradition in Jin Ping Mei," *Modern China* 10.4 (1984): 389.

¹⁶⁷ Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, 5.

¹⁶⁸ Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, 6. Ko cites the "Thrice Following" as an example here.

¹⁶⁹ Fred Blake, "Foot-Binding in Neo-Confucian China and the Appropriation of Female Labour," *Signs* 19.3 (1994): 694.

Agency is one of the most challenging terms encountered by the scholars whose work I examine for this chapter. A discussion of agency and the way in which I plan to employ this term in my study is important here, because one cannot equate agency in early modern China with conceptions of agency in Western countries in the present day. Mahmood points out that during the 1970s, feminist scholars began their quest to uncover agency in women's religious practices. Even though this trend is very important, feminist scholars tend to appeal to a certain brand of agency, which centers on a subject's moral and political autonomy.¹⁷⁰ Mahmood suggests that feminists must identify the assumptions and omissions that are implicit in an agency that is couched in political and moral freedoms.¹⁷¹ For example, scholars have a tendency to seek out resistance to male domination among women whose actions appear to reinforce this domination. Mahmood notes that "Agency, in this form of analysis, is understood as the capacity to realize one's own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles (whether individual or collective)."¹⁷² She points out that some scholars of Anthropology and Asian Religions, such as Janice Boddy and Lila Abu-Lughod, fail to address and problematize the tendency of scholars coming from progressive and liberal backgrounds to assume that all humans desire to be free from male domination and subordination.¹⁷³ Scholars must understand that agency is not in all cases akin to resistance.

¹⁷⁰ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 7. Here, Mahmood refers to the civil wars that were occurring in Pakistan (her home country) and Algeria at the time she was conducting her research.

¹⁷¹ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 7.

¹⁷² Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 8.

¹⁷³ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 8.

McCaffery and Marsden understand agency as "the active part played by individuals in making sense of their experiences and trying to shape their own lives."¹⁷⁴ They borrow this definition from Anthropologist Laura Ahearn's 1999 article on agency.¹⁷⁵ In her article, Ahearn notes that the term agency gained popularity among scholars in the 1970s, when they began to realize the need to consider individual actions. This concern was heretofore overlooked by Structuralists.¹⁷⁶ Definitions of agency have evolved over time, and there are several issues associated with using this term. For example, does agency belong solely to individuals, or can it be understood as collective? How is it understood differently between cultures?¹⁷⁷ Ahearn notes that:

Whichever aspects of agency researchers pursue, it is crucial that scholars interested in agency consider the assumptions about personhood, desire, and intentionality that are built into their analyses. Some studies of agency reinforce received notions about Western atomic individualism, while others deny agency to individuals, attributing it instead only to discourses or social forces.¹⁷⁸

Clearly, there are many different ways to conceive of agency. McCaffery and Marsden, as well as Mahmood, tend to promote an understanding of agency that is tailored to a subject's individual experiences and cultural background. These scholars would not likely subscribe to the tendency to attribute agency solely to social forces. The type of agency I seek out in *Jin ping mei*'s characters is individual, but not necessarily concerned with resistance. It is akin to the brand of agency that East Asian Studies scholar Grace Fong identifies in her book *Herself an Author: Gender, Agency, and Writing in Late Imperial*

¹⁷⁴ McCaffery and Marsden, *Cultural History Reader*, xix.

¹⁷⁵ Laura M. Ahearn, "Agency," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 9, no. 1-2 (2013): 12-15.

¹⁷⁶ Ahearn, "Agency," 12.

¹⁷⁷ Ahearn, "Agency," 13.

¹⁷⁸ Ahearn, "Agency," 14.

China.¹⁷⁹ In this study, Fong cautions that agency in late imperial China signifies an unmitigated ability to act. She defines agency as it applies to early modern China as follows:

Agency, then, was an uneven and limited experience, as there did not exist social or political support for women to make wider connections and to organize and mobilize themselves into any sustained social movement for gender equality across regional and class divides.

In other words, early modern Chinese women did not have the resources (women's shelters, support lines, state welfare, etc.) that now exist in Western countries, for example. For scholars studying gender in early modern China, removing the concept of gender equality from our understanding of agency is critical. In *Jin ping mei*, women's agency is apparent through their ability to participate in society in ways that would not normally be available to women of their social status, and in ways that are meaningful to them. Religion provided one avenue through which the women in this novel could transcend some of the more restrictive gender-based norms of early modern China. Whether or not women engaged in religious practices with the intention of achieving gender equality or as an act of rebellion, these activities presented them with opportunities that were outside of the ordinary.

I will discuss two more (related) terms that are problematic for scholars of gender and religion, although the terms I have examined in this chapter by no means provide a comprehensive list. In addition to gender and agency, characterizing terms such as "freedom" and "free choice" creates challenges for scholars. In her discussion about

¹⁷⁹ Grace Fong, *Herself an Author: Gender, Agency and Writing in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008).

footbinding, Ko avoids what she refers to as "free choice," which carries with it the same baggage as the term agency. On the topic of free choice, Ko states the following:

In seeking female incentives I have avoided the language of "free choice." Modern critics often imagine that traditional Chinese women would have rebelled if given a choice, and the fact that they did not attests to the draconian success of Confucian patriarchy. This erroneous view derives from a modern, individualistic valorization of free choice that structures our desires but not theirs.¹⁸⁰

This view is reinforced by literary sources such as *Jin ping mei*. For example, Ximen Qing's wives all have bound feet, but there is never any indication throughout the novel that they would undo the bindings if given the chance to do so. Conversely, these women use their husband's weakness for small feet to their advantage. Pan Jinlian would not have had the opportunity to marry a wealthy man such as Ximen Qing if she did not have such beautiful, tiny feet. Since marriage into a wealthy family was considered to be one of the more desirable options available to women in early modern China, Jinlian's feet served as a very powerful tool. As Ko notes in several of her written works, foot-binding (along with other practices that are often perceived as evidence for the subordination of women) would never have flourished to such an extent without the largescale cooperation of women. It is clear that as scholars, we must examine the assumptions we make, and the values that we project upon our research subjects.

Freedom is another problematic term for scholars with various research interests. Mahmood discusses the concepts of positive and negative freedom, and connects both of these ideas to individual autonomy.¹⁸¹ In short, negative freedom pertains to "the absence

¹⁸⁰ Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters*, 228.

¹⁸¹ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 10-11.

of external obstacles to self-guided choice and action, whether imposed by the state, corporations, or private individuals."¹⁸² This category of freedom does not apply to women in early modern China, since they lived in a patriarchal society and there were restrictions on their actions. Positive freedom refers to "the *capacity* to realize an autonomous will, one generally fashioned in accord with the dictates of 'universal reason.'"¹⁸³ Positive freedom is being able to choose one's actions without being burdened by the will of others or societal norms. According to both positive and negative freedom, individual will must necessarily dictate one's actions in order for one to be free. Mahmood cites John Christman's example of a slave who chooses to continue working as a slave, even after being released.¹⁸⁴ According to Christman, so long as one can autonomously make decisions about one's aspirations, (even if they are illiberal in nature), this person is free. Understandings of free will and autonomy have expanded to include ethnicity, race, class, etc., ever since the concepts of positive and negative freedom entered feminist discourse.¹⁸⁵ The idea of positive freedom is more applicable to early modern Chinese women than negative freedom. This study will focus on the types of freedoms women obtained in their own spaces, without any male influence (i.e. in the inner quarters, in sex-segregated spaces, and in sex-segregated activities). As such, women had the capacity to carry out certain activities, even though their negative freedom was not intact. I will remain mindful of the fact that women in early modern China may not have actively sought out such freedoms. Nevertheless, they did obtain various

¹⁸² Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 10-11

¹⁸³ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 10-11. I added the italics for emphasis here.

¹⁸⁴ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 10-12. John Christman is a political theorist. Mahmood cites his 1991 article "Liberalism and Individual Positive Freedom," *Ethics* 101: 343-59.

¹⁸⁵ Mahmood, *Politics and Piety*, 13.

opportunities through their religious practices, and these opportunities resemble what we might think of today as freedoms.

Mahmood also seeks to overcome the problems associated with studying a group of women outside of one's own cultural milieu. She notes that she was not born or raised in Egypt, and that by conducting her study in this unfamiliar place, she had the opportunity to "undertake the labour of thought—a labour that cannot thrive under a pace of events that constantly demands political closure and strategic action."¹⁸⁶ As such, *Jin ping mei* presents me with an opportunity for the labour of thought. Yet, one must be mindful of the responsibilities that come along with studying "the other." Mahmood identifies two major issues with respect to feminist theory as it relates to women's participation in Islamist movements in Egypt. First, she notes that feminists tend to assume that "women Islamist supporters are pawns in a grand patriarchal plan, who, if freed from their bondage, would naturally express their instinctual abhorrence for the tradition Islamist mores used to enchain them."¹⁸⁷ Mahmood refers to this idea as the "false-consciousness thesis."¹⁸⁸ As I noted above, this type of thinking is also present in feminist responses to footbinding in China. Mahmood observes among feminist critiques of women Islamist supporters a tendency to project their "own interests and agendas" on these women.¹⁸⁹ Feminists assume that women involved in the Islamist movement have more freedom to thwart this movement than they had in the past, and persist in wondering why these women do not do so. Both of the aforementioned ways of thinking assume that

¹⁸⁶ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, xii. Here, Mahmood refers to the civil wars that were occurring in Pakistan (her home country) and Algeria at the time she was conducting her research.

¹⁸⁷ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 1-2.

¹⁸⁸ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 2.

¹⁸⁹ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 2.

women are inherently opposed to the ideals and mandates of the Islamist movement.¹⁹⁰

Mahmood's study embodies her attempt to challenge and move beyond such ways of thinking. She states that:

In this book I will explore some of the conceptual challenges that women's involvement in the Islamist movement poses to feminist theory in particular, and to secular-liberal thought in general, through an ethnographic account of an urban women's mosque movement that is part of the larger Islamic Revival in Cairo, Egypt.¹⁹¹

These challenges apply not only to the Islamic revival in Egypt, but to the many other phenomena which Western scholars encounter and study today.

Barbara Ambros, a scholar of Japanese religions, is in agreement with Mahmood. She champions the need for scholars of Japanese religions to move away from their focus on the ways in which religions are oppressive for women in Japan. She mentions Bernard Faure's work in particular, which she claims "falls in line with much existing scholarship - particularly Japanese scholarship influenced by Marxist paradigms - that depicts religion as a mere means of oppression, especially for women."¹⁹² In her discussion on women's reasons for participating in traditionally male-dominated activities or traditions, Ambros cites the aforementioned work of Saba Mahmood and Dorothy Ko. She agrees with these scholars' assertions that such patriarchal systems would not continue to exist if women did not willfully participate in them.¹⁹³ As scholars, we must recognize that women have

¹⁹⁰ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 2.

¹⁹¹ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 2.

¹⁹² Ambros, *Women in Japanese Religions*, 2. Bernard Faure is another scholar of premodern Japanese Buddhism. Ambros refers here to Faure's book *The Power of Denial: Buddhism, Purity and Gender* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

¹⁹³ Ambros, *Women in Japanese Religions*, 2-3.

their own reasons for engaging in certain religious and secular activities which replicate patriarchal standards; they are not simply giving in to male authority.

It is important for scholars to question and challenge previous scholarship when doing their own research. In her study of women's roles in the Jōdo Shinshū, Jessica Starling points out that in prescriptive writings from the Edo period, there is a clear distinction between the inside sphere (that of the woman) and the outside sphere (that of the man) in marriage.¹⁹⁴ Yet if we turn to other sources, there is a wealth of evidence which suggests that this segregation was not always observed. Anne Walthall (as cited by Jessica Starling) notes that this blurring of gender roles existed for farm women, and Starling feels that temple wives may have also experienced opportunities to perform typically-male duties.¹⁹⁵ It is certainly the case that a blurring of gender roles existed in the Ximen family, particularly in the sphere of religious practice. Beginning in the modern period, women became even more likely to (and were expected to) serve as substitute priests in Japan. During the 20th century, in the Nishi and Higashi Honganji Shin sects, temple wives could be ordained and often managed the temple in the absence of the male priest, particularly during the war years when priests were required to perform military service.¹⁹⁶ Starling notes that "Thus, for female religious professionals in the Jōdo Shinshū –whether in the central institution or in local congregations – their religious status was consistently derived from their identities as wives (or widows), mothers, and

¹⁹⁴ Jessica Starling, "Women's Religious Affiliation in the Jōdo Shinshū," *Religion Compass* 7, no. 8 (2013): 277.

¹⁹⁵ Starling, "Women's Religious Affiliation," 277.

¹⁹⁶ Starling, "Women's Religious Affiliation," 277.

daughters."¹⁹⁷ Not only does Starling's study demonstrate the importance of studying a variety of sources, it also exemplifies a type of agency with which Western scholars may not be familiar—that is, an agency unrelated to resistance. In the Jōdo Shinshū, temple wives have power and authority within a male-dominated societal framework. This phenomenon is also apparent when studying the wealthy households of early modern China, such as the Ximen household.

In this chapter, I have explored a small sampling of fairly recent scholarship pertaining to the study of gender in religious traditions. My goal was to select certain aspects of this scholarship which might work well together in formulating a cultural-historical study of gender in Asian (particularly East Asian) religious traditions. While far from comprehensive, this chapter has isolated several matters that must be addressed, regardless of the method one uses, or the location of one's study in time and space. Meanings of terms such as gender and agency vary across cultures and over time. Indeed, these terms may not even be applicable or useful under certain circumstances.

Scholars must learn to be critical of our biases, as well as our tendencies toward ethnocentrism and over-simplification. By using the cultural-historical approach, scholars can come closer to accessing individual lives, and are able to move away from focusing on broader social issues, in which individuals get lost. Lastly, we learn to be critical of previous scholarship in our fields. There is a large body of work from which scholars can draw, but we must remember to question even the most brilliant work. As I mentioned

¹⁹⁷ Starling, "Women's Religious Affiliation," 277.

above, Ambros feels that Faure's work is valuable, yet she has reservations about his understanding of religion as a means of oppression for women.

By employing a cultural-historical approach, I will demonstrate that through various religious pursuits, women gained access to opportunities that would otherwise be inaccessible to them in the patriarchal milieu of sixteenth-century China. The field of Cultural History is concerned with the ways in which people found meaning in and made sense of their daily endeavours. The goal of Cultural History is to access subjective experiences, as opposed to making generalized conclusions about a particular group (i.e. women). Artwork, music, drama, and literature are examples of sources used by cultural historians in their research.¹⁹⁸ With proper contextualization, the author's descriptions of religious practices in *Jin ping mei* will create a snapshot of people's interactions with and interpretations of religious texts in the late Ming dynasty. The cultural-historical method is particularly well-suited to studying gender, because it considers sources which represent those historical actors whose voices were not well-preserved in more conventional historical sources. By conventional sources, I mean those to which Susan Mann refers as "familiar historical sources written by men."¹⁹⁹ Mann does not discourage using these familiar sources; rather, she uses them in combination with women's writings. This creative use of sources "opens a new window on the world of Chinese women."²⁰⁰ Therefore, *Jin ping mei* can serve as an innovative primary source for the study of Chinese religious history.

¹⁹⁸ Peter McCaffery and Ben Marsden, eds., *The Cultural History Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2014): xviii.

¹⁹⁹ Mann, *Precious Records*, 1. These sources include (but are not limited to) government documents, biographies, epitaphs, local histories, and essays about statecraft.

²⁰⁰ Mann, *Precious Records*, 1.

In my analysis of *Jin ping mei*, I intend to be especially cognizant of Dorothy Ko's work on foot-binding. Ko identifies several issues with scholars' attempts to write a history of footbinding, which she encountered before writing her book. Regarding these attempts, and how they relate to her work, she states the following:

I started with a simple goal: to write a history of footbinding, which has never been attempted except in derision. All of the erudite books and articles that bear titles to that effect, I maintain, are histories of *anti*-footbinding. They begin with the premise that footbinding is despicable and generally end with the same conclusion. Many of these works focus on the heroic achievements of the anti-footbinding movement, or they extrapolate from the anti-footbinding polemics the pitiful ordeal premodern women suffered. Condemnation seems the goal of writing history.²⁰¹

As Ko suggests, much of the existing scholarship is rife with moralistic tones, modern bias, and over-simplification.²⁰² Indeed, Ko's book is the first English-language work I have come across wherein the author attempts to understand footbinding from the point of view of the women who experienced it. Her work on foot-binding serves as an excellent model for scholars who are executing cultural-historical studies and it reminds us to avoid criticizing practices we encounter in our research based on our own assumptions and biases.

In my analysis of *Jin ping mei*, I will begin with the assumption that a gender binary based on biological sex was the dominant paradigm for the assignment of gender roles in Ming-dynasty China, since I have not come across any evidence to the contrary. I neither affirm nor deny that an actual sex-based binary existed, and I do not take my

²⁰¹ Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters*, 1.

²⁰² Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters*, 4.

assumption as licence to presume that gender relations were similar in any way to those that are present in the contemporary Western world. As Mann points out, "The structure of the late imperial Chinese family assigned women *roles* and *relationships* that are unknown in Euro-North American culture."²⁰³ It is the gender roles themselves—those that were prescribed, as well as those that were practiced according to conventional historical sources—which I intend to reconsider here.

While the women of the Ximen family may not have had any desire to abolish their gender roles or escape their patriarchal environment, it is true that their religious practices presented them with opportunities that differed from their day-to-day lives in the inner chambers. Indeed, these opportunities were often highly beneficial, and could be interpreted in terms of Western understandings of freedom and agency. The women of the Ximen family may not have been seeking moral and political autonomy; in fact, I have not encountered any evidence whatsoever that they were doing so. Yet, as I will demonstrate in Chapter Four, religious practices provided this ability to transcend the mundane world, both physically and spiritually.

²⁰³ Mann, *Precious Records*, 9. The emphasis placed on *roles* and *relationships* is my own.

Chapter Four: Religious Practices in the Novel and Analysis of these Practices

Religious practices appear frequently throughout *Jin ping mei*, scattered among the infamous meticulously-described sex scenes. The Ximen family does not subscribe exclusively to any sole religious tradition. They hire Buddhist monks, Daoist priests and other religious specialists on a continuous basis as required. Ximen and his son-in-law engage in various traditional Confucian practices, such as tending to the family tombs and making offerings to the ancestors.²⁰⁴ Ebrey explains that in imperial China, Confucian family rituals included rites of passage, weddings, initiations, and funerals, and caring for one's ancestors. All of these rites together comprised "the cult of the ancestors."²⁰⁵ The "ritual head" of the family communicated with the ancestors on his family's behalf.²⁰⁶ We see evidence of the cult of the ancestors in *Jin ping mei*, as well as rites of passage, marriage rites and death rites. With respect to funerary rites, which take place frequently throughout the novel, the women of the household are in charge of the planning, including the hiring of various religious specialists and attending to visitors. Planning and executing funerals presents women with unique opportunities to assert their managerial skills, and to escape the boredom of being confined to the inner chambers. Women were

²⁰⁴ According to Zhu Xi's *Family Rituals*, which I introduced in Chapter Two, and which was popular among gentry families during the Ming dynasty, men must make sacrifices for the four seasons, for taboo days, at graves, and to their ancestors. Regarding rites for the earliest ancestors, "Only those who are successors of the descent line of a first ancestor may perform this sacrifice." In the case of the Ximen family, Ximen Qing is the only surviving relative who can perform these rites. Ebrey notes that while formulating his liturgy, Zhu Xi drew upon Confucian scholarship dating back to the classics, but he also made his own modifications. The resulting ritual manual was more accessible to the general population than the Chinese classics. See: Ebrey, *Family Rituals*, ix; 153-155.

²⁰⁵ Ebrey, *Family Rituals*, ix. According to Zhu Xi's *Family Rituals*, Ximen Qing would serve as the ritual head of his family. His son-in-law assists him, but he hopes for a son of his own, so that this son can perform the necessary ancestral services for him when he dies.

²⁰⁶ Ebrey, *Family Rituals*, ix.

in charge of household management, including finances, religious undertakings, entertaining of guests, etc. In her book *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China*, Ko notes that:

"The domestic lives of gentry men and women studied in this book suggest that even if the assumptions of patriarchy were not being challenged outright in the seventeenth century, in practice they were being constantly mitigated. Although men still claimed legal rights over family property and fathers enjoyed authority over women and children, the housewife as de facto household manager, mother, and educator of children had ample opportunities to influence family affairs. In the context of everyday life, women were hardly outsiders to the family system."²⁰⁷

Ko's remark about women as household managers is particularly significant for this study, because religious practices, including the management of funerals, fall under that category. Throughout the pages of *Jin ping mei*, it is evident that Ximen Qing's wives, although technically living under their husband's thumb, have many responsibilities that are crucial to the functioning of their household. As principal wife, Wu Yueniang shoulders a particularly large portion of household management responsibilities.

In this chapter, I will describe and analyze the religious lives of the female characters in *Jin ping mei*. The religious scene during the Ming dynasty was eclectic and dynamic, and this is certainly evident in *Jin ping mei*. New and changing opportunities for religious practice, such as practices associated with Buddhism, afforded women agency and freedoms that were, in some cases, unique to this historical period. I have identified the freedoms they experienced: mundane freedoms (opportunities to work outside of typical gender roles in the family and society) and supramundane freedoms (salvation, or

²⁰⁷ Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, 11.

freedom from evil phenomena, based on the concept of retribution (*bao* 報). Mundane freedoms benefitted the women of *Jin ping mei* in the short term, by providing them with new and exciting opportunities that were not typically available to or acceptable for women. Supramundane freedoms benefitted these women in the long term, and could only be gained through sincere acts of piety. In this chapter, I argue that from *Jin ping mei*, we learn that religious practices afforded the women of Ming China the opportunity to transgress the gender roles dictated by Ming society, whether or not these transgressions were intentional. Furthermore, the variety in religious practices and traditions available during the Ming dynasty bolstered this phenomenon.

Funeral Administration and Chaste Widowhood

Death and funerals commonly appear in *Jin ping mei*. Characters die from disease, murder, suicide..., etc. Funerals are typically held in the home, while burials take place at temples or family burial grounds.²⁰⁸ As household managers, Ximen Qing's wives take on many of the responsibilities related to funeral administration. In order for the family to save "face," funerals have to follow social conventions.²⁰⁹ Therefore, female family members have to take this task very seriously, no matter how they feel about the deceased.

²⁰⁸ Ximen Qing is buried in a family graveyard, which is located outside of the city, near the Chan Temple of Eternal Felicity (Roy, Plum, V4: 679).

²⁰⁹ "Face," or *mianzi* 面子, refers to one's honorific face, as opposed to one's physical face (*lian* 臉). It includes the value a person places on his or her self with respect to social relationships and his or her society, as well as the social standing of a person according to others in his or her society. In simpler terms, it includes one's perceived social standing and one's actual social standing. Face can be lost, gained, given away, retained, or taken from a person. Losing face is associated with a loss of dignity. The Chinese concept of face is rooted in Confucianism, which has always emphasized the importance of social relationships. Chung-ying Cheng, "The Concept of Face and Its Confucian Roots," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 13.3 (1986): 331-334; 337.

The women in *Jin ping mei* do not seem to view funeral planning as an extra burden; nor do they show any obvious signs of taking pride in it. Yet they do a thorough job, if for no other reason than to fulfill a social obligation. Women are also responsible for funeral planning in the Qing dynasty (1644—1911) novel *A Dream of Red Chambers*; one woman in particular openly takes pride in her talent for funeral planning.²¹⁰ The planning and execution of funeral rites provided women with an opportunity to maintain their family's "face," while presenting them with atypical managerial challenges. Funerals and memorial rites were social events, during which women could visit with guests from their own and other large families. Ko notes that death presented women with the opportunity to expand their social networks.²¹¹ They could visit with relatives from their natal homes, and enjoy religious services and other types of entertainment.²¹² To commemorate the fifth week of Ximen Qing's death, Wu Yueniang invites several nuns over, in order to "recite sutras, and perform a litany of repentance, in order to release Ximen Qing's soul from purgatory and allow it to be reborn in Heaven."²¹³ Several family members also participate in this all-female commemoration.

The first funeral one encounters in *Jin ping mei* is that of the Wu the Elder. His young wife, Pan Jinlian, murders him so that she can become one of Ximen Qing's

²¹⁰ Wang Xifeng 王熙鳳 (Phoenix) administers her sister-in-law's funeral in *A Dream of Red Chambers*. She is proud to flaunt her ability to take on such a large and complicated project (Hawkes V1, Chapter 13).

²¹¹ Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, 209.

²¹² For example, after the second day of commemorations for Ximen Qing, his wives hosted a puppet show for friends and neighbours (Roy, *Plum*, V4: 672-673).

²¹³ Roy, *Plum*, V4: 680. At no time does the author indicate why commemorative ceremonies occurred in this particular order (i.e. inviting Buddhist nuns to perform a repentance ceremony on the fifth week rather than the fourth week, the sixth week, etc.). The order in which commemorative ceremonies occurred varies between the many funerals that occur throughout the novel.

concubines. Social convention dictates that his wife should conduct certain funerary rites and mourn him for a particular period of time.²¹⁴ Pan Jinlian hires Buddhist monks to chant sutras for her late husband. An old widowed neighbour, Dame Wang, is instrumental in planning many aspects of Wu the Elder's funeral. Of course, it is no secret to neighbours that Pan Jinlian and her lover, Ximen Qing, are the ones who murdered Wu the Elder. All of the neighbours fear Ximen Qing's wealth and influence, and nobody dares to hint at the truth. Dame Wang gives Jinlian the idea to murder her husband, and assists in procuring poison for this purpose. She also assists Jinlian with the funeral arrangements, including the purchasing of a coffin for Wu the Elder. Ximen Qing, who is befuddled by Jinlian's beauty, funds the entire endeavour, including all funeral expenses. Dame Wang hires two monks from a nearby temple, escorts the coroner and his assistant to Jinlian's home, and supports Jinlian with the social aspects of the funeral.²¹⁵ In order to feign genuine grief, Jinlian prepares a spirit tablet for her late husband. She maintains a vigil lamp, and burns incense and paper money, ostensibly to help Wu navigate the hardships of the afterlife.²¹⁶ She follows through with the religious observances that are

²¹⁴ According to the Ming legal code, wives were required to mourn their husbands for a full three years. Nevertheless, the state was often remiss in enforcing mourning regulations (MacCormack 60, 75). This is certainly the case in *Jin ping mei*. A woman who remarried as a concubine during the three-year mourning period for her husband should have been beaten with a heavy bamboo stick as punishment, and the marriage should have been dissolved, based on the Ming Code (Article 111). Pan Jinlian remarries well before the end of her three year mourning period, but she goes unpunished because of Ximen Qing's money and influence. Jiang, *Great Ming Code*, 6; 8; 84.

²¹⁵ Pan Jinlian gives a feast for neighbours and friends, and leads her guests to the crematorium via a funeral procession. Dame Wang hires the cooks and supervises the preparation of vegetarian offerings for Wu the Elder's spirit. In *Jin ping mei*, the term for coroner is *wu zuo* 仵作. Roy, *Plum*, V1: 116; 164.

²¹⁶ The burning of paper money for dead relatives occurs frequently in *Jin ping mei*. Teiser explains that in medieval China, people burned paper money in order to aid deceased relatives during their journey through purgatory; this practice was common in traditional Chinese "family religion" Stephen Teiser, *The Ghost Festival in Medieval China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1988),

required of her, and repeatedly sends Dame Wang to fetch Buddhist Monks on the anniversaries of Wu the Elder's death.²¹⁷ At first glance, it may seem that Jinlian does not gain much freedom after her husband's death, since she sends Dame Wang to hire religious practitioners and acquire food and other necessities. Yet Jinlian orchestrates the entire proceedings from behind closed doors, and is able to spend her time as she wishes with Ximen Qing. It would not have been acceptable for a young woman like Jinlian to appear in public in China at that time. She cleverly exploits her social conditions and conventions in order to create a funeral that is socially-acceptable on the surface, while enjoying a pleasant new social life with her lover, Ximen Qing.

199 n.5.

The practice of burning paper money for the deceased clearly endured, and still occurs in China and among some of the Chinese diaspora. Blake points out that the burning of paper money may have represented a way in which common people could "participate in the reproduction of cosmic and imperial order yet at the same time mock (in both senses of the word) the sumptuary rules by which imperial order maintained itself" Burning paper money for deceased relatives provided a way for women, who could not participate in traditional Confucian ancestral rites, to assist their loved ones in the afterlife. This is true regardless of whether or not women conceived of burning paper money as an act of resistance or mockery. Fred Blake, *Burning Money: The Material Spirit of the Chinese Lifeworld* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011):63.

Sons inherited spirit tablets (or ancestral tablets) from their fathers. These wooden tablets contained inscriptions of the deceased's name, as well as the name of his heir. They represented a patrilineal family's deceased ancestors. At funerals, liturgists and their assistants handled the spirit tablets. Families stored them in their ancestral hall, and on occasions that called for sacrifices, the living family members would offer these sacrifices to the spirit tablets. Ebrey, *Family*, xxiii; Brook, "Funerary Ritual," 474.

²¹⁷ Based on the *Scripture on the Ten Kings*, family members were responsible for making sacrifices on the seventh, fourteenth, twenty-first, twenty-eighth, thirty-fifth, forty-second, forty-ninth and one hundredth day after the death of a relative (regardless of class or gender); sacrifices were also required on the days marking one year and three years after death (Teiser, *Ghost Festival*, 451).

There is evidence in *Jin ping mei* that the characters are familiar with the *Scripture on the Ten Kings*, or at very least, the concept of the ten kings. At one point, a Buddhist monk approaches Wu Yueniang and requests a donation in order to build a temple for the ten kings, and she immediately assists him (Roy, *Plum*, V5:145). Since the *Scripture on the Ten Kings* likely materialized by the ninth century and became quite popular, it is reasonable to assume that families such as the Ximens would have had some familiarity with it.

The second funeral that occurs in *Jin ping mei* is that of the Ximen family's neighbour, Hua Zixu. His wife, Li Ping'er, does not murder him. Yet, when he falls gravely ill, she does not provide him with the necessary medical care to make him well. She enlists the services of a certain Dr. Hu, but later sends him away in order to save money.²¹⁸ Ping'er hastily organizes a funeral for her late husband, with some help from Ximen Qing's wives. She also ostensibly honours her husband during each of the seven-day periods of commemoration. One hundred days after Hua Zixu's death, Ping'er hires monks to read sutras on his behalf, and burns his spirit tablet. She invites his family members to attend the funerary rites and eat a vegetarian meal. By planning a respectable funeral and presenting her in-laws with gifts, Ping'er cleverly manipulates them into letting her remarry before the mandated grieving period passes. Early in the novel, Li Ping'er and Ximen Qing begin a romantic affair and hasten the death of Ping'er's husband. Li Ping'er superficially mourns for her husband (she wears mourning attire and begins to hold the seven weekly observances); however, she marries into the Ximen household as a concubine before the fifth week after her husband's death.²¹⁹ While planning her husband's funeral and attending to all of the social and religious obligations, Ping'er has the opportunity to hire a new female servant and meet new people. This phenomenon of women taking on funeral planning and hiring religious practitioners for other purposes is also present in the novel *A Dream of Red Chambers*. In both novels, women are entirely responsible for planning funerals. Pan Jinlian and Li Ping'er of *Jin ping mei* have to do so

²¹⁸ Roy, *Plum*, V1: 285.

²¹⁹ Roy, *Plum*, V1, 274-287.

under comparatively reduced circumstances.²²⁰ Based on evidence from these literary sources, many (if not all) aspects of funeral planning were left to women in the wealthy families of early modern China.²²¹ In the case of *Jin ping mei*, it is principal wives and not concubines who shoulder the largest portion of these responsibilities.

Ximen Qing's untimely death surprises and saddens friends and family members. After he dies, his wives are largely responsible for his funeral and memorial rites. Wu Yueniang has just given birth to Ximen Qing's son, yet she still manages all aspects of the funeral (which is held in their home) from her bed, largely by delegating tasks to servants and her sister wives. Family and friends participate in the seven weekly commemorations for Ximen Qing.²²² These commemorations involve maintaining the spirit tablet, hiring Buddhist monks and Daoist priests, serving meals to multitudes of guests, and ensuring that all guests wear appropriate mourning attire. From the moment her husband dies, Yueniang proudly and wholeheartedly embraces her new role of chaste widow. There is no need for her to devote her time to the traditional requirement of serving her late husband's parents, because Ximen Qing's parents were already dead. Yueniang carefully attends to her husband's spirit tablet and meticulously performs all of the necessary religious duties. As I will discuss later in this chapter, Yueniang also performs

²²⁰ In *A Dream of Red Chambers*, widows have the support of the wealthy and influential Jia family. Although women planned and administered funerals without the assistance of their male family members, they can cooperate to do so. Financial resources are abundant, and personnel are plentiful. Pan Jinlian receives financial support from Ximen Qing in order to cover the expenses of her husband's funeral. However, she has only Dame Wang and a very young stepdaughter to help her fulfill all funerary obligations.

²²¹ This may not be the case for ethnic minorities in early modern China, but there is much literary evidence to support female members of wealthy families organizing and directing funerals among the Han majority population.

²²² Roy, *Plum*, V4: 668.

pilgrimages on her husband's behalf, and she consistently supports religious practitioners, both for personal cultivation and to benefit her late husband. These, along with many other pious acts help Yueniang and her late husband considerably at the end of the novel.

Female Religious Practitioners and Healers

In sixteenth-century China, women of wealthy households hired religious practitioners for healing (and other) purposes. I use the umbrella term "religious practitioners" to cover a variety of vocations that are mentioned in *Jin ping mei*. These include shamans and spirit mediums, (unlicensed) medical practitioners, etc.²²³ Richard Smith points out that during the Qing dynasty, women engaged in "shamanistic services," usually for female customers. These shamans also provided medical care, oral prognostications, and exorcisms.²²⁴ In both *Jin ping mei* and *Honglou meng*, when a family member falls ill, the women of the family seek out female healers; the authors demonstrated these healers to be more effective than male doctors. These healers employed a combination of medical and spiritual methods in order to heal their clients. Women sought out female healers for various illnesses, including but not limited to disorders associated with menstruation and childbirth, mental disorders, and childhood

²²³ Richard Smith, *Fortune-tellers and Philosophers: Divination in Traditional Chinese Society* (Boulder; San Francisco; Oxford: Westview Press, 1991), 230. Many female shamans had bound feet, yet the dancing portion of their ritual sequence was very similar to that of their male counterparts. The word "shaman" is derived from a Tungusic term, *šaman*, which means "one who is aroused." Shamans are able to form a connection between humans and the spirit world. Often, a shaman's spirit can visit the gods' realm by leaving his or her body temporarily. Shamans can serve as spirit mediums by means of spirit or divinity possession. They may also act as faith healers, curing diseases through the elimination of evil influences.

Paul R. Goldin, "The Lyrics of Chu and the Aesthetic of Shamanism," in *Hawai'i Reader in Traditional Chinese Culture*, ed. Victor Mair et al. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 99.

²²⁴ Smith, *Fortune-tellers*, 230.

illnesses. These female healers used a combination of spiritual and medicinal therapies in order to cure their patients. When Pan Jinlian becomes despondent and ill due to her jealousy regarding Ximen Qing's lengthy stay at a nearby brothel, Wu Yueniang calls upon the services of a healer named Dame Liu, who frequently visits the Ximen household for such purposes. Jinlian wishes to force Ximen to spend all of his time with her, and care more for her than for any of the other women in his life. After meeting with Jinlian, Dame Liu leaves behind some herbal concoctions and promises to return the following day with her husband, who is a fortune-teller from the Yin-yang School. For her initial consultation, Dame Liu is rewarded with food, drink, and three mace of silver.²²⁵ She receives five additional mace for the materials she and her husband will need the following day in order to assist Jinlian. The next morning, Dame Liu returns with her blind husband, who was nicknamed Stargazer Liu.²²⁶ Both of these healers speak with Jinlian and determine an appropriate course of action. The following day, Dame Liu returns alone in order to prepare the prescribed elixir and carry out the various rituals. Jinlian tricks her husband into drinking the burnt remnants of the spell that Dame Liu cast, and he immediately behaves according to her wishes. The effects of this medication seemed to wear off gradually with time, but the author does not give a reason for this phenomenon.

²²⁵ A mace, or *qian* 錢, was a measurement for currency. The *qian* became the standard unit for measuring currency in China in 621 CE. A *qian* is equal to 0.1 ounce [approximately 2.8 grams] Paul W. Kroll, *A Student's Dictionary of Classical and Medieval Chinese* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2015), 361.

²²⁶ Several Westerners who visited China during the Qing dynasty observed blind diviners. In the eighteenth century, the majority of diviners working in cities seem to have been male; whereas female diviners were popular in the countryside. In both cases, the majority of their clientele were women (Smith, *Fortune-tellers*, 206).

When Li Ping'er's son becomes ill, Ximen Qing urges Wu Yueniang to invite a licenced pediatrician to their home to treat him. Yet, Yueniang waits until her husband leaves for work the following day, and promptly sends for Dame Liu. The medication she prescribes works instantly, and peace is briefly restored in the inner quarters.²²⁷ Likewise, when Yueniang suffers a miscarriage, Dame Liu's treatments work miracles. She gives Yueniang two large black pills, and instructs her to take them with Artemisia-flavoured wine. In a few hours, Yueniang's body discards the fetus. One of her sister wives suggests drinking pot soot-laced wine in order to stop the bleeding.²²⁸ Female healers and family members handle the entire miscarriage and its aftermath, and nobody tells Ximen Qing about it. When discussing the efficacy of Dame Liu's services, the author notes:

Gentle reader take note: No matter whether your household be great or small, it is best to avoid the services of priests and nuns, Buddhists and Taoists, wet nurses and go-betweens. There is no telling what they will do behind your back. A poet of yore has left us some words of admonition, in the form of a quatrain, that express 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 them admission.
If you have a well in your courtyard,
repair even the slightest fissure;
Then your catastrophes will be few
and your stars of good fortune many.²²⁹

From this quotation, it is evident that in the late Ming dynasty, while female healers did not always enjoy good reputations, people regarded them with suspicion and even fear

²²⁷ Roy, *Plum*, V2: 260.

²²⁸ Roy, *Plum*, V2: 275; V2: 544, n. 41. Roy notes that pot soot was a traditional remedy, used in China for hemorrhaging.

²²⁹ Roy, *Plum*, V1: 252. Roy does not provide a source for this poem, and I have not been able to locate its author.

due to their success. Their presence suggested a transgression of social conventions: they earned money and supported themselves, and women had more faith in them than they had in licenced male physicians. Based on several incidents involving female healers in *Jin ping mei*, there seems to be little doubt regarding the efficacy of their endeavours,²³⁰ even if such labours were considered to be destructive or harmful to the status quo. The fact that Dame Liu is a frequent patron of the Ximen ladies also testifies to the efficacy of her treatments. She consults her blind husband for certain cases, but she is the one who solicits clients, carries out various treatments, and receives payment. In many ways, Dame Liu's career as a healer creates a gender role reversal in her household. Regardless of whether she intends to do so, her actions threaten the sixteenth-century social order.

By hiring female healers, the ladies of the Ximen household can receive the best medical care. They do not have to be hidden behind a screen during their consultations, they can speak freely and describe their own symptoms, and they can have a say in the development of their own treatment plans. Indeed, both novels portray female medical practitioners as much more effective healers than their male counterparts. Wu Yueniang frequently demonstrates a marked mistrust for male doctors, and overrides her husband's decision to hire them for her and her fellow wives. When Yueniang suffers complications

²³⁰ Katherine Carlitz asserts that the author of *Jin ping mei* did not take the predictions of soothsayers and other religious practitioners seriously. However, if we take *Jin ping mei* to be a semi-factual representation of daily life in a large, wealthy household, we can assume that family members took these people seriously. Regardless of whether or not their methods were effective, the women of wealthy households hired them and had confidence in them. It is interesting that the author of *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢 (Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹) also depicts these religious practitioners' practices as both popular and effectual. Perhaps, then, the author's opinion is of no consequence. The fact that people believed in the abilities of religious practitioners (whether or not their belief was based on actual positive results) is apparent.

toward the end of her second pregnancy, she insists on calling Dame Liu. Ximen Qing calls Dr. Ren despite his wife's wishes, and her reaction is to angrily refuse to see him when a maid comes to summon her:

Yüeh-niang sat where she was, without making a move, and said, 'I told him not to summon the doctor, but he has insisted on asking this male figure to open wide his fervid eyes, and proceed to: Holding hands and squeezing wrists, with me, for no good reason. Who knows what else he will do. If he had invited Dame Liu instead, and I had taken a dose or two of her medicine, I would have been fine.'²³¹

Yueniang's sister-in-law finally convinces her to see Dr. Ren, who is so captivated by her beauty that he could hardly do his job. He is arrogant, and his treatments are not successful. The Ximen ladies always prefer Dame Liu's services to those of any licenced male physician, for their own ailments as well as those of their family members.

When Ximen Qing becomes ill from taking on too many sexual partners and over-exerting himself sexually, he insists on taking a medication that his trusted Dr. Ren had prescribed previously. When he loses his ability to walk, his wives summon a certain Dr. Hu. Dr. Hu prepares a treatment, but it proves to be ineffectual. A colleague of Ximen Qing's invites Liu Juzhai, a lay healer who specialized in treating infections, to examine him. Liu's treatments also fail to produce any results. No medication would be effective against the overdose of aphrodisiac Pan Jinlian administers to him and his sexually-transmitted disease. These ailments, combined with Mr. Liu's concoctions, ultimately cause Ximen Qing's scrotum to burst and his penis to rupture.²³² Having witnessed the shortcomings of these doctors and specialists, Wu Yueniang immediately sends for Dame

²³¹ Roy, *Plum*, V4: 501.

²³² Roy, *Plum*, V4: Chapter 79.

Liu, so that she can perform a shamanistic dance on Ximen Qing's behalf. She also promises to visit Mount Tai on a yearly basis, and to present a robe to the Goddess of Iridescent Clouds,²³³ if only her husband will recover. It is not clear whether Dame Liu actually arrives at the Ximen household to perform her dance. It seems that Ximen Qing may have died before she can be summoned, although the author does not include any details beyond having Yueniang suggest summoning her. As I will discuss later in this chapter, Yueniang's subsequent pilgrimage to Mount Tai, which she completes despite her husband's death, was beneficial on multiple levels.

Female healers had the opportunity to make a living for themselves, which was rare for women in the late seventeenth century. Women in wealthy households would pay for their services, provide them with food and drink, and at times invite them to stay at their homes. Likewise, the ladies of the household would often invite Buddhist nuns for extended visits. In exchange for their chanting and story-telling services, nuns would be treated to excellent food, gifts, monetary donations, and an opportunity to spend time with other women in luxurious surroundings. Clearly, these relationships were mutually beneficial. I have observed this tendency of ladies from wealthy families hosting female religious and medical practitioners in other early modern literary sources, such as the Qing dynasty novel, *A Dream of Red Chambers*.

Buddhist nuns also engage in healing and medical-type practices in *Jin ping mei*. After Li Ping'er gives birth to her son, Wu Yueniang desires to have a son of her own.

²³³ Roy notes that: "There is a temple to this goddess on the peak of Mount Tai that even today remains an important pilgrimage site" Roy, *Plum*, V4: 655; 848 n.51.

One evening, Abbess Xue, Nun Wang and two young disciples spend the night at the Ximen household, in order to "recite a tale of karmic cause and effect."²³⁴ Nun Wang sleeps in Yueniang's chamber, and they have an opportunity to discuss Yueniang's apparent inability to get pregnant.²³⁵ Nun Wang confides in Yueniang that one of her colleagues, a nun who serves as Abbess at the Lotus Blossom Nunnery, is accomplished at producing spells and concoctions in order to induce pregnancy. In order to make the necessary potion, Nun Wang has to obtain the placenta of a first-born son from a midwife, and Yueniang pays her well for her efforts. Women are responsible for the entire process of obtaining the placenta, preparing the potion, and delivering it to Yueniang with detailed instructions. Moreover, the nun's method is very effective. She has a broad network of female connections, and as such, she was able to obtain all of the necessary ingredients. After taking the medication, Yueniang seduces her husband according to the instructions that the nuns provide, and the nun's treatment proves to be effective.

Interestingly, the author of *Jin ping mei* often portrays male healers as ineffectual. Male doctors are particularly inept throughout the novel, and at times, their treatments cause more harm than good. Ximen Qing insists on inviting Dr. Ren to treat Li Ping'er for

²³⁴ Roy, *Plum*, V3: 427-432. This tale is about a wealthy householder named Chang, whose eight wives wasted their days partaking of mundane pleasures. One day, the householder encounters some lay Buddhists, who are about to partake in a vegetarian meal and listen to the scriptures. They tell him about the merits of these two activities, and he decides right away to pursue the religious life. His wives attempt to dissuade him. Chang is not convinced, and leaves with a case of incense, vegetarian food, money, etc. Abbess Xue and Nun Wang may have chosen this story in order to reaffirm the importance of listening to the scriptures and supporting the sangha. I have not yet been able to locate the source of this story; however Roy notes that it was derived from a text entitled *Wu deng hui yuan* [五燈會元] (Roy, *Plum*, V2: n.88, p. 572). According to Matthew McMullen (Digital Dictionary of Buddhism, s.v. 五燈會元), an English translation for this book is *Sources for the Five Lamps*. It is a Song-dynasty biography of Chan patriarchs.

²³⁵ Throughout the novel, the author implies that Ximen Qing is the one with fertility issues, not his wives. He depletes his vitality by frequenting brothels and over-indulging in sexual activity.

an ongoing illness, which stems from childbirth and the subsequent death of her baby. His medication helps at first, but proves to be ineffectual in the long term. The author notes that:

Ximen Qing invited Dr. Jen Hou-ch'i to come and examine her and obtained a prescription from him, but when she took it, it was about as effectual as if she had:

Attempted to irrigate a stone with water.
The more of his medication she took, the worse the hemorrhaging became.
In the space of less than half a month:
Her countenance lost color,
Her flesh became emaciated,
and her radiant good looks were no longer what they used to be.²³⁶

Clearly, Dr. Ren's medical treatments are consistently unreliable. At times, no medical interventions, whether provided by a licensed physician or an unlicensed healer, result in any positive outcomes. Dame Liu and a licensed paediatrician both attempt to help Li Ping'er's dying son, but he dies because Pan Jinlian relentlessly frightens him and subjects him to dangerous situations.²³⁷ There is an ongoing tension between fate and *bao* (particularly *karmic* retribution) throughout *Jin ping mei*. One issue of contention is lifespan, which at times seems to be pre-determined, and at other times seems to be impacted by a character's actions. This tension is not unique to *Jin ping mei*—it is also present in the Qing-dynasty novel *A Dream of Red Chambers*. As I will discuss later in this chapter, Wu Yueniang is able to influence her lifespan and manor of death through her pious lifestyle. Li Pinger's child is not able to do so. Not only does his mother fail to live in accordance with Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian ideals, he is also too young to

²³⁶ Roy, *Plum*, V3: 490.

²³⁷ Roy, *Plum*, V3: 472-476.

change the course of his fate. The author of *Jin ping mei* implies that in cases when no manner of healer can help with an illness, it is a consequence of a character's inability or unwillingness to alter fate.

Becoming a Buddhist nun or Daoist priestess was an option for young women who did not wish to marry or remarry. This option tended to be available primarily to lower-class women, although I have come across one example of an upper-class daughter opting to become a nun.²³⁸ Susan Mann notes that "Monastic Buddhism offered an alternative to family life, but Buddhist monasteries recruited nuns almost exclusively from the poorest families or among abandoned or orphaned girls."²³⁹ This seems to hold true in *Jin ping mei*. Towards the collapse of the Song dynasty in *Jin ping mei*, a woman named Han Aijie, who spends most of her life as a concubine and mistress, cuts off her hair, swears that she is through with marriage, and becomes a nun. While life in a Buddhist or Daoist temple may have been difficult, it was a choice that many women made. As I demonstrated above, nuns had a lot of freedom to travel and participate in social engagements. While their social status may not have been high, women such as Wu Yueniang and her relatives treat them with great respect.

In his writing, the author of *Jin ping mei* betrays his disapproval for female religious practitioners, through his comments to his readers and through Ximen Qing's criticisms of various female specialists. This attitude endured well into the Qing dynasty.

In his study on fortune tellers and philosophers in the Qing dynasty, Smith notes that:

²³⁸ In *A Dream of Red Chambers*, Jia Xichun 賈惜春, who is one of the young ladies of the elite Jia family, becomes a nun despite her family's disapproval.

²³⁹ Mann, *Precious Records*, 10.

...Qing elites tended to be particularly critical of women shamans and their 'foolish' women followers. But all spirit mediums proved threatening to the scholarly class by virtue of their willingness to flout social norms openly. They were everything people in traditional China were not supposed to be: extravagant, vulgar, unlettered and unrestrained. With the exception of elite-oriented spirit-writers, they lacked any semblance of decorum or any sensitivity to the social distinctions that defined Confucianism as the 'teachings of status' (*mingjiao*).²⁴⁰

Whether or not these female practitioners *sought out* to subvert the Confucian social order is not clear. What is clear is that they do so quite successfully, and certain members of society felt threatened by their capabilities. Not only could these practitioners criticize the social order under the guise of spirit possession, they also appropriated the clients of professional men, such as doctors. Indeed, each time Ximen Qing suggests inviting a male doctor into the household, his principle wife overrides his suggestion in favour of inviting a female religious practitioner. Fear and jealousy likely fueled the many criticisms female religious practitioners endured, but according to literary evidence, these women flourished nevertheless.

Hosting Nuns in the Inner Quarters and Supporting the Sangha

In the privacy and security of the inner quarters, upper-class women hosted parties for their female friends. Ko notes that in the seventeenth century, religious devotion created opportunities for women to convene in the inner chambers. This form of "domestic religion" was an important component of women's worldviews and identities.²⁴¹ Ximen Qing's principal wife, Wu Yueniang, is particularly fond of hosting parties, to which she often invites Buddhist nuns. These gatherings are beneficial for all in

²⁴⁰ Smith, *Fortune Tellers and Philosophers*, 231.

²⁴¹ Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, 198.

attendance; while the laywomen gain spiritual merit, the nuns enjoy all of the material comforts of a wealthy household. Yueniang hosts several get-togethers with Buddhist nuns throughout *Jin ping mei*, yet men are never allowed to attend. During one such gathering, Yueniang invites a certain Nun Xue²⁴² and her disciples to spend the evening and recite a precious scroll (*baojuan* 寶卷) for her and her guests.²⁴³ Meng Yulou and Li Jiao'er prepare high-quality tea for everyone to consume. The nuns provide a long preamble to the precious scroll, during which they thank the ladies for their generosity:

You are fated to bask in glory and luxury, and enjoy wealth and distinction. These are all the results of karma accumulated in your prior lives, which has bequeathed you a solid foundation, to which you are entitled without having to ask for it. For the same reason, I am fortunate to be here promulgating the scriptures and reciting Buddha's name, as well as enjoying such delicious refreshments, thanks to your benevolent hospitality.²⁴⁴

Wu Yueniang is an adamant supporter of the sangha (particularly nuns), and it is clearly a treat for them to visit her home. Neither Ximen Qing, nor his wives, make such arrangements for Buddhist monks to visit on a regular basis (aside from visits related to funerary rites).

The *Precious Scroll on Women Huang* is an empowering and relatable text for women. As a child, woman Huang recites the *Diamond Sutra*, observes a strict vegetarian

²⁴² Earlier in the novel, Nun Wang informs Wu Yueniang that Nun Xue is the Abbess of the Lotus Blossom Nunnery. According to Nun Wang, her conduct is exemplary, she is well-versed in Buddhist scriptures, and wealthy households often host her "for ten days or a fortnight before letting her go" (Roy, *Plum*, V2: 439).

²⁴³ Roy, *Plum*, V4: 435. The nuns recite a precious scroll entitled *The Precious Scroll on Woman Huang* (*Huangshi nü baojuan* 黃氏女寶卷). According to Beata Grant and Wilt Idema, the first textual reference to Woman Huang occurred in the late sixteenth century, but the story itself dates back to the Song dynasty (960-1279 CE).

Grant Idema, *Escape from Blood Pond Hell*, 4; 11.

²⁴⁴ Roy, *Plum*, V4: 439.

diet, and is steadfast in her filial piety. The Bodhisattva Guanyin is so impressed by the child's behaviour that she appears to her. After marrying a butcher and having three children, Woman Huang suggests to her husband that they pursue a life of religious cultivation. Her husband refuses and leaves her, but she continues to chant and burn incense undaunted. The sound of Woman Huang's chanting reaches King Yama in the underworld, and he sends for her. King Yama quizzes her on several details of the *Diamond Sutra*, and after she passes the quiz, determines that she will be reborn as a male child in a wealthy Buddhist household. In the body of a young man, Woman Huang passes the imperial examinations and gains an important administrative position. At the end of the story, Woman Huang and her former family ascend to heaven after performing religious rites for her dead body.²⁴⁵ The contents of this Precious Scroll demonstrate to women that spiritual progression is available to them, and that their practices will be rewarded. During the sixteenth century, the bodhisattva Guanyin was very popular in China, particularly with women.²⁴⁶ It is significant that she appears in this precious scroll as an exemplar of the Buddhist pantheon. Although she is female, she is a powerful mahā-bodhisattva, and she demonstrates that she will reward pious women. Woman Huang serves as a role model for Buddhist women. Her piety is rewarded on several occasions throughout the story. There are certain parallels between Woman Huang and Wu Yueniang. As I will demonstrate later in this chapter, Wu Yueniang's piety is also

²⁴⁵ Roy, *Plum*, V4: 437-452.

²⁴⁶ According to Mann, women of all ages turned to Guanyin for assistance. Guanyin remains popular to this day. Mann, *Precious Records*, 179.

In her study on Guanyin, Chün-fang Yü notes that "...the cult of Guanyin was not just a historical phenomenon, but a prominent feature of contemporary Chinese religion..."

Chün-fang Yü, *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteśvara* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 22.

rewarded. She is able to transcend various adversities, due to her lifetime of chanting sutras and supporting the sangha.

An itinerant Buddhist monk approaches Yueniang and her sister wives in order to solicit funds to build a sanctuary devoted to the Three Jewels,²⁴⁷ and a temple for the Ten Kings of the Underworld. Yueniang responds by donating clothing, rice, and copper cash to the monk. The author notes that:

It so happens that Yueniang had always been given to
Almsgiving, or providing vegetarian
meals for monks,
so that during her leisure hours she devoted herself to making monk's hats and
monk's sandals in order to give them to them.²⁴⁸

The author also shares a poem with his audience:

There is a poem that describes Yueniang's proclivity to
Cultivate her virtue by charity to monks.

Maintaining my widowhood and reading the sutras
the years and months flow by;
Private dissipation and meaningless indulgence
have long been anathema to me.
My person is just like the moon near the edge
of the horizon;
That will not let itself be intruded upon by
floating clouds.²⁴⁹

In other words, Yueniang is always unconcerned with material wealth and pleasures, which are merely "floating clouds," always on the verge of dissipation. Yueniang always practices charity towards monks and nuns (particularly Buddhist monks and nuns), and through this support, she influences her destiny at the end of the story.

²⁴⁷ Roy, *Plum*, V5: 144-145. The Three Jewels are the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha.

²⁴⁸ Roy, *Plum*, V5: 145-146.

²⁴⁹ Roy, *Plum*, V5: 147.

Temple Visits and Pilgrimages

Women from wealthy families did not typically leave their households to engage in labour, public activities or social events during the Ming dynasty. One exception to this constraint was women leaving the home in groups for temple visits, pilgrimages, and other religious activities. Susan Mann notes that during the eighteenth century, women would travel to shrines and attend funerals in groups. Groups of women also made pilgrimages to monasteries and shrines in the mountains. Regarding these trips, Mann suggests "Here women's piety became more transgressive and controversial, threatening to violate the familial roles and responsibilities that elite officials and scholars were comfortable with."²⁵⁰ Perhaps women did not intend to subvert the status quo by leaving home to pursue religious activities; it is possible that piety was their sole motive. Nevertheless, women had many opportunities to socialize and see the world outside of the inner quarters when traveling for religious purposes. Ximen Qing's wives often go to Buddhist temples, some of which are far away from their home, without their husband. They travel to the temple in their sedan chairs, accompanied by personal maids and servants. They consult with monks and nuns, visit family members and friends who are buried on the temple grounds, and at times they stay at the temple as guests for extended periods of time. This practice of women visiting temples unaccompanied by their husbands seems to have been common among wealthy women during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. I have observed several of these cases in *Jin ping mei* and in *Honglou meng*.

²⁵⁰ Mann, *Precious Records*, 179.

After Ximen Qing's death, Wu Yueniang is conscientious about her duties as a widow. In one instance, Yueniang, her brother, and some of her sister wives visit the Ximen family graveyard during the Qingming 清明 festival, in order to sweep his grave and make offerings to him. Afterwards, the group stumbles upon a secluded temple, called The Chan Temple of Eternal Felicity. At this time, Yueniang makes a generous donation to the Abbot, and asks that he recite some sutras in front of the Buddha.²⁵¹ Yueniang also plans to make a pilgrimage to The Temple of Iridescent Clouds, in order to burn incense on her late husband's behalf. She makes this promise during Ximen Qing's illness, and fulfils it promptly after his death.²⁵² At the base of Mount Tai, Yueniang and her entourage stop to rest at The Temple of the Eastern Peak.²⁵³ After an arduous journey to the top of Mount Tai, Yueniang reaches the Goddess' statue, where she offers incense and burns paper money for her husband. The abbot and acolytes of The Temple of the Goddess of Iridescent Clouds are uncouth and immoral characters. They devise plans to rape young female patrons, sexually abuse their young disciples, drink copious amounts of alcohol, and collude with local thugs. They arrange for a local gang leader to rape Wu Yueniang during her stay at the temple, but she is determined to maintain her chaste widowhood, and the plot is unsuccessful. Yueniang and her male escorts leave the temple in a state of fear, since the Abbot and his colleagues have connections with criminals all over Mount Tai and among the towns at its base. They are fortunate to come across a Chan Master named Pujing, who allows them to sleep in his cave that evening. Pujing

²⁵¹ Roy, *Plum*, V5: Chapter 89.

²⁵² Roy, *Plum*, V5: 54.

²⁵³ In the novel, The Temple of the Eastern Peak is a Daoist temple at the foot of Mount Tai.

will not accept any material compensation for his hospitality; instead, he asks that Yueniang give him her son as a disciple in ten years. Yueniang agrees to do so, although she feels unsure about whether she could actually comply. At the end of the novel, Yueniang receives a reward for her piety. When the empire is consumed with war, Yueniang fulfils her promise to Pujing, thus saving herself and her family members from a terrible fate.

Aside from alleviating the boredom associated with their secluded lives in the inner quarters, religious activities outside of the home clearly provided women with spiritual and intellectual stimulation. Furthermore, the benefits of pilgrimage and temple excursions extended beyond these mundane rewards. Had she not left the house on a pilgrimage, Yueniang might not have encountered the monk who eventually saves her and her remaining family members from a violent death. Thus, the benefits of leaving home to participate in religious activities occurred on both mundane and supramundane levels.

The Efficacy of Piety and Prayer

The rewards of piety and sincere prayer far are by far superior to the mundane rewards and freedoms gained through other types of religious activity in *Jin ping mei*. While I am in no position to determine whether or not real women actually benefitted from their piety on a supramundane level in Ming China, *Jin ping mei* does provide insight into its author's *attitudes* regarding *bao* 報 and the benefits of a pious lifestyle. The author of *Jin ping mei* was most likely male. His crafting of female characters was

certainly influenced by his social milieu. As such, we can learn about the ways in which women practiced religion, as well as social attitudes toward pious women, from *Jin ping mei*'s depictions of women being rewarded for their piety and punished for their lack thereof.

Wu Yueniang's piety is particularly noteworthy in this novel. Katherine Carlitz notes that one literary trope that is common among these works is the idea that by sincerely carrying out virtuous actions, one is rewarded with a positive change in fate:

Ming vernacular fiction and drama required pao or retribution to supercede any form of fate-manipulation. Formulations of pao can be found in all of the Three Teachings: Buddhism in its conviction that lack of compassion will be punished in the next life; Taoism in its abhorrence of distortion in man's equilibrium with nature; and Confucianism in its emphasis on the impartial justice of all-seeing Heaven.²⁵⁴

In the world of *Jin ping mei*, *bao* works on many levels. It is important to note that *bao* can be a positive or negative phenomenon. Pious and virtuous actions are rewarded; whereas evil actions are punished. Most significant for this study is the effect of *bao* on Ximen Qing's principal wife, Wu Yueniang. Throughout the novel, Yueniang is depicted as a pious individual and an exemplar of Confucian virtue. While most of Ximen Qing's impious concubines suffer a number of horrifying fates at the end of the novel, Yueniang is rewarded for her years of exemplary conduct and sincere devotion.

The efficacy of sincere prayer is evident in *Jin ping mei*. In one instance, after having a falling out with her husband, Wu Yueniang burns incense and prays to the

²⁵⁴ Carlitz, *Rhetoric of Chin ping mei*, 55-56.

Daoist Three Luminaries (*sanguang* 三光).²⁵⁵ According to Chinese literary scholar Jianjun He, it was common for women to burn incense and pray in the moonlight during the Ming dynasty.²⁵⁶ During her ritual, Yueniang asks for Ximen Qing to reform his ways, and to take the conventional household duties seriously.²⁵⁷ Ximen overhears her prayer, and although he does not reform his ways, he does gain a profound respect for his principal wife. That night, husband and wife reconcile, and Yueniang becomes pregnant with Ximen's son. Bearing a son to attend to a husband's family's ancestral rites²⁵⁸ was an extremely important accomplishment for a wife in sixteenth-century China. Mann notes that: "The most unfilial act of all was not to produce a son to carry on the family line; hence the significance of marriage in the young man's life course..."²⁵⁹ Thus, Yueniang and her sister wives would have felt a great sense of duty with respect to bearing a son. It is important to note that Yueniang and her sister wives do not resist societal pressures to give birth to sons. The fact that Yueniang chooses to embrace her duty to continue Ximen Qing's ancestral line actually frees her from tremendous suffering at the end of the novel.

²⁵⁵ The Three Luminaries are the Sun, the Moon and the Stars. Stephen Bokenkamp translates this term as "Three Phosphors." He encountered the *san guang*, which is a common term, in a Lingbao Daoist scripture entitled "The Wondrous Scripture of the Upper Chapters on Limitless Salvation" (*Lingbao wuliang duren shangpin miaojing* 靈寶無量度人上品妙經), which appeared at the beginning in the Ming-dynasty Daoist canon. According to Bokenkamp, this scripture was very popular during the Ming dynasty, and is still in use today. Stephen Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures* (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 374; 415.

²⁵⁶ Jianjun He, "Burning Incense," 2.

²⁵⁷ As a male householder, Ximen Qing would have been expected to support his family financially, and to produce a son, so that his son could perform posthumous ancestral rites for him. Rather than taking his duties seriously, he wastes time and money at local brothels. He also depletes his vitality by having several sexual partners, drinking excessively, and eating too much.

²⁵⁸ In eighteenth century China, the family system was defined by funeral rites and ancestor veneration. (Mann, *Precious Records*, 68).

²⁵⁹ Mann, *Precious Records*, 52.

The birth of Yueniang's son brings salvation to her and her family members, including Ximen Qing.

During the collapse of the Song dynasty, which occurs at the end of *Jin ping mei*, Wu Yueniang, her son, and several servants, opt to flee the city. Outside of the city, she encounters Chan Master Pujing, to whom she had promised her son. Yueniang, Master Pujing and the others take refuge in the nearby Temple of Eternal Felicity. After the refugees retire for the evening, Chan Master Pujing begins chanting sutras and reciting a *gāthā*²⁶⁰ for those who had perished in the war. A maid named Xiaoyu fails to fall asleep, and stays up observing the Master. To her amazement, several ghosts appear, including the ghosts of Ximen Qing, Pan Jinlian, Li Pinger, and Sun Xue'e. They identify themselves, and declare that because of the Master's deliverance, they have achieved rebirth as human beings.²⁶¹ While Xiaoyu observes the monk, Yueniang experiences a nightmare that reveals the forthcoming terrible fates of her and her son. After hearing from Xiaoyu about the monk's ability to communicate with ghosts, and discussing her dream with him, Yueniang decides to give up her son to the sangha. In giving up her son, Yueniang forfeits her original goal to continue Ximen Qing's family. Yet the advantages of this sacrifice far outweigh the disadvantages. Yueniang learns from her dream that her late husband's sworn brother, Yun Lishou, is fated to murder her son, her brother, her servant, and her Uncle Wu in his attempt to marry her. Had Master Pujing not intervened, Yueniang would have failed to maintain her chaste widowhood, thus she would have

²⁶⁰ *Gāthā* are Buddhist odes or religious verses (*The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, 1st ed., s.v. "gāthā").

²⁶¹ Roy, *Plum*, V5: 411-413. Human rebirth is ideal in Buddhism, since humans can cultivate and practice the dharma.

failed to follow through with her Confucian duty. In this scenario, she would have also failed at continuing the Ximen family, since her son would have perished. One scholar²⁶² argues that Confucian ideals actually *trump* Buddhist ideals in this situation, since Yueniang hands her only son over to a life of celibacy, and he would not be able to advance the patrilineal family. Yet Master Pujing ultimately affirms Yueniang's Buddhist piety with the following speech:

Since you have already achieved enlightenment,' the Master responded, 'there is no need for you to continue on this journey. Should you do so, things will turn out the way they did in your dream, and all five of you will lose your lives. The fact that you and your son encountered me is something that was: because in days past you planted the seeds of your good fortune. Where that not so, it would have been difficult for you to avoid: The splitting of your flesh and blood. Initially, your deceased husband Ximen Qing committed evil deeds and was anything but virtuous. This son of yours was reborn into your family in order to dissipate your wealth and destroy your property and would have ended up with: His body and his head in different places. I will now undertake to lead him to salvation as my disciple. As the saying goes:

Should a single son leave the home to be ordained,
Nine generations of one's ancestors will be saved.
This will also have the benefit for your late husband of:
Compensating for his evil Karma,
So that he too may achieve salvation...²⁶³

From this passage, it is clear that Yueniang's actions address both Buddhist and Confucian sentiments. Master Pujing also reveals to her that her son is actually a reincarnation of her late husband. Thus, by leaving her son in the Master's care, she effectively attends to Ximen Qing's afterlife care (about which she felt anxiety, since giving up her son to the sangha deprived the family of a male heir to perform ancestral duties), and her son's future. After Master Pujing disappears with her son, Yueniang

²⁶² For example: Katherine Carlitz *The Rhetoric of Chin P'ing Mei* (1986).

²⁶³ Roy, Plum, V5: 417.

returns home and adopts her loyal servant Daian. She bequeaths the Ximen estate and all of the family's property to him, and he takes care of her in her old age. Yueniang dies of natural causes at the age of sixty-nine. Her lifetime of sincere, pious behaviour pays off in the end. Through the *choices* she makes every day of her life, she is able to change her fate for the better.

In sixteenth-century China, women found ways to assert their agency and to attain opportunities outside of the inner quarters. Wealthy women, such as those in the Ximen family, planned and directed lavish funerals for husbands and family members. In cases of illness, they chose to hire female healers, who employed a mixture of spiritual and medical treatments, while abhorring their licenced male counterparts. They also left their homes in groups, without their husbands, in order to participate in pilgrimages and visit temples. Women of lower classes also had opportunities outside of their households. They could become nuns, midwives or healers. The one uniting factor in all of these opportunities is religion. Whether they engaged in healing, pilgrimages, prayer or other religious practices for mundane rewards, or to gain a higher level of spiritual attainment, pursuing these practices always created some type of benefit for the women in *Jin ping mei*.

Conclusions

I began this study by placing the novel *Jin ping mei* within its historical framework. The Ming dynasty was a time of social, political, and religious change for China, and these changes are evident throughout the pages of *Jin ping mei*. During the Ming dynasty, many religious traditions flourished in China. In *Jin ping mei*, we see the characters engaged in several Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist practices. There are also several references to religious rituals that cannot easily be categorized into any particular religious tradition. Women practiced religion, particularly lay Buddhism, mostly in their homes. They also engaged in pilgrimages and temple visits occasionally. Women read didactic texts that were based on Confucian gender ethics, and the cult of widow chastity flourished. Yet, women did not always do as these texts instructed, and they often subverted social expectations, whether intentionally or unintentionally. The female characters in *Jin ping mei* demonstrate these evasions of convention well.

Chapter one is an introduction to *Jin ping mei*. In it, I discussed theories on authorship, the basic plot, the main characters, and the novel's textual history, including some information on commentaries. In this chapter, I noted that studies on authorship of *Jin ping mei* have become very sophisticated, and this phenomenon reaffirms the importance of knowing the author's identity when studying such a complex piece of literature. From commentaries on the novel, I gained some insight into elite male attitudes toward women during the late-sixteenth to early-seventeenth century in China. I argued here that it is important to avoid assigning any moral or religious intentions to authors, particularly in the case of *Jin ping mei*, which is a very complex literary work.

In Chapter Two, I conducted a survey of secondary literature on the sources of *Jin ping mei*, such as *Encyclopedias for Daily Use*, followed by my own analysis of particular sources that come up in the novel. I addressed some drawbacks associated with using a novel to study Chinese history, and supported my assertion that despite these shortcomings, when properly contextualized, literary sources such as *Jin ping mei* are quite valuable as research tools.

In Chapter Three, I discussed my methods for this study. By examining recent work of Gender Studies scholars, I identified some of the key terms with which these scholars are concerned, and described how and why these terms are important to my study. I defended my claim that the cultural-historical method is especially well-suited for investigating the religious lives of women during the Ming dynasty in China.

Chapter four is a detailed analysis of female religious practices in *Jin ping mei*. In this chapter, I defended my assertion that women gained agency and freedom, as defined in chapter two, through their religious practices in early modern China. I investigated several categories of religious practice in the novel: funerary practices; female religious practitioners and healers; religious education within the inner quarters; pilgrimages and temple visits; and the efficacy of prayer and sincere practice. I concluded that women could and did earn a living as religious practitioners, either as shamans, Buddhist nuns, or as religious healers. Sometimes, their religious practices facilitated their breaking the law or circumventing social conventions. Religious practices always benefit women, either practically, or spiritually, or both in *Jin ping mei*. While the author does paint an ambiguous picture of women in this novel, it is clear that he wishes to convey the

message that sincerity and piety are essential in religious practice. By comparing instances of female religious activity in *Jin ping mei* with historical sources, I supported my claim that women acquired freedom and agency through religion in early modern China.

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