As the imperial state’s primary means for the recruitment of civil officials and political and ideological control over the literati, the civil service examinations functioned as the most important contact zone between the daotong and the zhengtong in late imperial China. What happened in the examinations seemed to embody a partnership that was mutually beneficial: it enabled the state to regularly replenish its bureaucracy with new talent, while it gave the educated elite elevated social status, ample economic gains, and confirmation of their belief in dao learning. As Benjamin Elman puts it, the examination system was “a cultural arena within which diverse political and social interests contested each other and were balanced.” Indeed, some of the features of the system may have resulted from the negotiations between the interests of the state and those of the literati. In the final analysis, however, the examinations were the lens through which the imperial state scrutinized intellectuals before it selected certain among them according to its own needs. The interaction between the state as an aggressive examiner/selector and scholars as largely passive examinees/selectees vividly reflects the power balance between the zhengtong and the daotong in late imperial times.

Quite surprisingly, perhaps, one literary representation of this power game of selection in the civil service examinations is in fictional works featuring an erotic scholar-lover, which parody the examinations by
using them as a metaphor for the sexual act. Many works in the “scholar-beauty” (caizi jiaren) fiction that flourished during the late Ming and early Qing—roughly the seventeenth century—are, to various degrees, erotic in nature. This erotic subgenre typically features a scholar of remarkable talent and a young woman—or in many cases, two or even more—of outstanding beauty. The topics of the examinations and sexual escapades are often parallel and coeval, and the protagonist’s status as a scholar and his possession of beautiful women become his two insignias that are equally indispensable and mutually complementary.

Chinese erotic literature, of course, has a history longer than that of the scholar-beauty fiction. Early erotic narratives in classical Chinese (wenyan), such as An Unofficial History of Zhao Feiyan (Zhao Feiyan waizhuan), Previously Unrecorded Accounts of the Daye Reign (Daye shiyiji), and An Unofficial History of Yang Taizhen (Yang Taizhen waizhuan), are typically about a historical emperor and his favorite consort or consorts. The anonymous Story of the Lord of Perfect Satisfaction (Ruyijun zhu), probably written in the fifteenth century, tells of Empress Wu Zetian’s (r. 695–704) excessive sexual indulgence with her lover Xue Aocao. A closer precursor to the seventeenth-century erotic scholar-lover is, of course, Ximen Qing in the late sixteenth-century novel Plum in the Golden Vase (Jin Ping Mei). To some extent, one may consider the oversexed polygamist and adulterer Ximen a cross between the depraved ruler in the earlier erotic works and the enamored scholar in the scholar-beauty tradition. Indeed, having six wives and numerous mistresses, Ximen bears remarkable resemblances to an emperor surrounded by his harem. At the same time, the novel’s presentation of cai (wealth), a major source of vice that often functions as Ximen’s capital for sexual conquests, may be seen as a parody of cai (literary and scholarly latent). At any rate, this unpolished merchant, who is perhaps no more than functionally literate, is no scholar; much less does he have any experience in the civil service examinations. By contrast, the protagonist in the seventeenth-century erotic fiction is usually a young scholar who seeks an examination degree and an official career. By coupling the scholar’s sexual experience with his experience in the examinations, these works represent a unique breed of fictional eroticism.

Examined against the sociopolitical context of the time, the rise of the erotic scholar-lover in fiction, with the frequent use of the examinations as
a metaphor for his sexual act, may be considered a response to the situation of official selection. By displacing the political setting of the examination system with a sexual setting, fiction writers relocated the scholar to a different framework of power relations. In the meantime, the examination metaphor highlights polarized positions shared by the two situations, the positions of the active and passive players in the power game: the selector and examiner on the one hand and the selectee and examinee on the other. When the scholar transmutes into a virile and potent man often possessing multiple sexual partners, he discards the passive position of the examinee and the selectee and assumes instead the active position of the examiner and the selector. Most important, by juxtaposing the valorized official selection process with the morally questionable sexual selection, this metaphor brings down the examination system from its lofty height and undermines its moral basis. The erotic fiction centered on the scholar-lover thus becomes a subversive parody of the imperial state's selection of scholars.

**THE IDEOLOGICAL SETTING FOR SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY FICTIONAL EROTICISM**

It is possible to see the erotic scholar-lover in fiction as a product of the hedonistic literati mores supposedly promoted by the intellectual trend under the sway of the left-wing Taizhou school. Indeed, for Li Zhi (1527–1602), “love for wealth and women” (*haohuo haose*) was among the passions shared and bespoken by all men, and is therefore a “proverbial truth” (*eryan*).5 Yuan Hongdao (1568–1610), Li Zhi’s friend and follower, expressed in a private letter his strong yearning for what he called “five cardinal pleasures” (*wu da kuaihuo*) in human life, with the first pleasure being that of “meeting the best beauties, hearing the best music, tasting the best delicacies, and delivering the best talks in the world.”⁶ In his famous—or infamous—autoepitaph, Zhang Dai (1597–1679) presented a portrait of himself in the younger years as a sensualist who was fond of “nice houses, pretty girls, good-looking catamites, delicious food, fine steeds, brilliant lanterns, fireworks, theatric performances, and music.”⁷ No doubt, such manifestos of unbridled individual desires by these influential scholars contributed significantly to the general intellectual and moral environment for fiction writing, as corroborated by what we know about some
of the fiction writers’ personal lives. One example is Feng Menglong (1574–1646). Having “celebrated liaisons with at least two beautiful and accomplished Suzhou singing girls,” Feng was perhaps even more “abandoned to sensual pleasures” and more often “out of bounds of the codes of propriety” than his fellow Wuxian natives of the previous century, Zhu Yunming (1460–1526) and Tang Ying (1470–1523). However, it is difficult to explain the burst of fictional eroticism centered on the scholar-lover entirely in terms of the newfound candor about sexual desire. After all, libertinism was by no means the predominant ideological discourse of the time, and the influence from the left-wing Taizhou school was usually more than offset by Zhu Xi’s orthodox teaching of “preserving the heavenly principle and mortifying human desires” (cun tianli, mie renyu). While not a thoroughgoing ethics of asceticism in itself, Zhu Xi’s doctrine cast a morally questioning light on sexual passion. Yet the neo-Confucian mistrust of human desires was not the only deterrent to libertinism. In the immediate context of official selection, there was a form of thinking that was largely a hybrid of neo-Confucian moral rigidity and the Daoist and Buddhist ideas of karmic retribution. As the examinations became progressively competitive and the results increasingly unpredictable, it was widely believed that a scholar’s moral behavior—and indeed his parents’ and ancestors’, for that matter—could have a direct bearing on the outcome of his examinations. Under the influence of this conviction, many educated men kept in their households different versions of gongguoge (ledgers of merits and demerits), handbooks purported to provide moral guidance for personal behavior and to register one’s good and bad deeds, which allegedly would function as the basis for the eventual reward or punishment from heaven. Having originated perhaps as early as the fourth century, these moral manuals became truly popular during the late Ming and early Qing. Since in most cases an educated commoner’s chance for upward social mobility hinged on his academic performance, he would be inclined to believe that the highest reward for his accumulated merits would be success in the examinations. What was supposed to carry a particularly heavy weight on the moral scale was sexual ethics. In the so-called Ledger of Merits and Demerits Regarding the Ten Precepts (Shi jie gongguoge) and Ledger of Merits and Demerits to Warn the World (Jingshi gongguoge), two moral manuals that were popular during the late sixteenth century, specific numbers of
demerits were set for different sexual transgressions. In *Ledger of Merits and Demerits Regarding the Ten Precepts*, for instance, having “lustful thoughts in oneself” would count for ten demerits, any behavior “with the intent to excite lust in women” would count for twenty, and even having a “lewd dream” would result in one demerit. Much harsher penalties for sexual sins were spelled out in *Ledger of Merits and Demerits to Warn the World*: one thousand demerits for “producing erotic books, songs, or pictures,” five hundred for “showing preference for one special wife or concubine” (amazingly, the same punishment for burning down someone’s house), fifty for each time “sporting with a prostitute or a catamite,” and fifty for simply “joking about women.” For a scholar, accumulation of such demerits for sexual misconducts would supposedly lead to the ultimate penalty in the examination hall.

The prevalence of this belief in the connection between a scholar’s sexual ethics and his chance in the examinations is corroborated by a large number of anecdotal accounts from different Qing sources, some possibly semifactual while others blatantly fictional. These anecdotes often provide the name of a historical scholar, typically from the Ming or the early Qing, and a specific year for the examination. Despite all the variations in narrative details, the storyline is largely stereotypical, either about sexual abstinence that was rewarded or about licentiousness and lechery that incurred a punishment in the examinations. The temporal gap between the alleged occurrence of the story and the date of the text suggests a period of circulation of rumors about the particular scholar, which in turn testifies to the prevalent attitude toward sexual behavior among the educated elite.

One such anecdote concerns Cao Nai, *zhuangyuan* of 1433. Once, while Cao is serving as a prison warden years before his success in the examinations, he persistently resists the seduction of a beautiful female thief in his custody by repeatedly writing the line *Cao Nai bu ke* on paper slips. Later, during his metropolitan examination (*huishi*), he sees a piece of paper fluttering about in his cell upon which is written the line *Cao Nai bu ke*. The sight inspires him to win the *zhuangyuan* status. Another anecdote is about Wang Maitao, a late Ming scholar from Luanzhou. Wang, according to the story, was once kidnapped by roving bandits. In order to retain Wang as their bookkeeper, the bandits seize a pretty girl and force Wang to take her as his wife. While living with the girl in the same room,
Wang sleeps on a separate bed every night, and eventually escapes with the girl and returns her to her parents. During the provincial examination (xiangshi) of 1648, Wang suffers a nose bleed, and the blood stains his examination paper. When the dejected Wang is about to quit the examination, the spirit of the girl’s father appears and removes the stains from the paper with a magic touch.\textsuperscript{16} In still another anecdote, an early Qing scholar from Zhejiang takes shelter from the rain in an oxcart shed. Seeing a young woman in the same shed, he stands outside under the eave all night, ensuring the woman’s safety and avoiding compromising her reputation. Six years later, the scholar takes the provincial examination in 1654. His paper is not passed initially, but each time the chief examiner is about to throw it away, it starts to emit a radiance, finally forcing the examiner to reverse his decision.\textsuperscript{17}

While these anecdotes demonstrate reward for sexual prudence, many others show the dire consequences of improper sexual conduct. Zhao Fushan, a provincial scholar (juren) from Dengzhou, travels to Beijing for the metropolitan examination in 1655. As he is in a hotel holding a courtesan in his arms, Zhao does not notice that he is next to a statue of the Prince of Wu’an (Wu’an Wang).\textsuperscript{18} While Zhao remains in the capital, back at home his father has a dream in which a messenger from the deity declares a postponement of Zhao’s success. Zhao indeed fails in the examination that year, and has to study hard for twenty-four more years before he finally wins the jinshi status in 1679.\textsuperscript{19} Another story is about a provincial scholar in Zhejiang. As his friend covets his neighbor’s wife, the scholar tries to help his friend by spreading a rumor about the woman’s infidelity. When the neighbor divorces his wife, the scholar offers to write the divorce announcement for him. Afterward, he inadvertently stuffs the draft of the announcement in the hollow shaft of his writing brush. Later, when the scholar takes the metropolitan examination in 1658, the paper in the brush shaft is discovered during the body search. As punishment, he is pilloried and flogged, and then has his status as provincial scholar nullified.\textsuperscript{20} In still another case, a talented licentiate from Hanyang has repeatedly failed the provincial examinations. His friend sends for a Daoist master to practice divination for him. The result of the divination shows that the licentiate had been originally destined to become a provincial scholar, but he ruined his fate by seducing a maidservant. On hearing that, the licentiate becomes determined to reform. He compiles a ledger of
merits and demerits to warn people against sexual dissolution, and raises
money for its publication. In 1696, he finally wins the *juren* status.21

The message in these short tales, as in the ledgers of merits and demer-
its in many scholars’ households, helped valorize the moral status of the
examination system. According to that message, the acquisition of a civil
service degree through the examinations was not only a scholar’s ultimate
vocational goal but also a sign of moral endorsement from heaven. As the
examination system was presented here as a platform for moral judgment,
it would appear, almost a priori, morally unassailable in itself. Since it was
a mystic force—a deity like the Prince of Wu’an or the law of retribution—
that determined the fate of an examination candidate, the institution of
official selection, just like its supernatural agents, was elevated above any
moral scrutiny. The spiritualistic cloak of these tales and moral manuals
thus covered up all the secular filths and institutional defects of the civil
service examinations.

Most interesting in these sources is the perception of sexual impropi-
ety as one of the worst symptoms of moral infirmity that a scholar had to
overcome before winning a civil service degree. Cai Qizun, *zhuangyuan*
of 1670, expressed his sense of moral dilemma in a poem allegedly com-
posed right after he rebuffed a courtesan when he was in the capital for the
metropolitan examination:

The pursuit for fame and success
And the passion for the breeze and the moon:
These are what one is obsessed with everyday,
Again and again they place one’s mind in turmoil.
While one yearns to embrace the verdant and lean against the crimson,
He cannot let go the green lamp and yellow volumes
As well as the prestige of the jade hall and golden horse.
While one wants to rank with the dragons and phoenixes,
He cannot tear away from the jade faces and flowery smile
As well as the tender love behind the hibiscus screen.
How can one have it at both ends—
To achieve fame and relish amour?22

By lamenting not being able to “have it at both ends,” Cai places sexual
passion and examination success at the opposite ends of an antithetical
axis. If a courtesan like Li Wa in the early days of the examination system could hatch a successful examination candidate in her warm and tender embrace, her late Ming and early Qing counterpart was sometimes perceived as an enchantress siphoning a scholar’s talent and ruining his chance for a bureaucratic career. From the broad circulation of the moral manuals and the sermonizing anecdotes about sexual ethics, we see a picture notably different from the decadence and dissipation often associated with the sensualist trend that supposedly was all the rage in the late Ming and lingered into the early Qing. It testifies to the complexity and diversity of the ideological situation of the time, with multiple discourses interacting upon and contending with each other. This understanding of the intellectual conditions has important ramifications for the interpretation of the fictional erotic scholar-lover. If the hedonistic thinking was after all not as permeating as it might appear, and if there was actually a powerful discourse policing sexual ethics in the immediate precinct of the examination system, one has good reason to ask whether the creation of the erotic scholar-lover could have been driven by something other than sheer sexual libido.

**Two Selections by the Imperial Power**

In Li Yu’s (1611–80) story “Tower of the Returned Crane” (He gui lou), Emperor Huizong (r. 1101–25) of the Northern Song conducts two processes of selection simultaneously. To reinvigorate his empire, which has been weakened by a prolonged military confrontation with its belligerent northern neighbors, the emperor wishes to replenish the civil bureaucracy with fresh talents, and so issues a decree that all the licentiates across the empire take the examinations that year. At the same time, he wants to recruit women for his harem, and sends eunuchs to all the provinces seeking outstanding beauties. From the examinations, two young men, friends with each other, emerge as the top scholars of the empire, while the search for beauties results in two top candidates, daughters of the same family. The emperor is about to take the girls into his inner palace when one of the ministers daringly remonstrates that the emperor show his virtue of “preferring the worthy over the beautiful” (yuanse qinxian); the ruler reluctantly agrees at the last minute to have the sisters married off instead. Under a careful arrangement, the two beautiful young women
are married to the two top scholars, with the matching based on the men’s respective ranking on the roster of the successful examination candidates.

Li Yu thus presents the selection of scholars for officialdom and the selection of women for the imperial harem as parallel and comparable undertakings. One may find a similar example in *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Jia Baoyu’s older sister Yuanchun is selected to be an imperial concubine and Baoyu’s female cousin and future wife Xue Baochai arrives in the capital as a candidate in the selection of palace staff, while Baoyu himself is expected to prepare for the official selection in the examinations. It may not be far-fetched to say that Yuanchun’s tearful return to visit her family and, later, her forlorn death in the high-walled palace may have contributed to Baoyu’s understanding of imperial selection and to his rejection of a bureaucratic career.

Historically, the selection of women and selection of scholars were often almost equally important on a Chinese ruler’s agenda. Unlike the civil service examinations, however, the process of selecting palace women has remained relatively obscure. Fortunately, Ji Yun (1724–1805) left us an informative account of a late Ming selection. Following Emperor Xizong’s (r. 1621–27) inauguration, the court launched the process of selecting girls to refill the inner palace. Five thousand maidens aged between thirteen and sixteen from all over the empire were assembled in the capital, where they were then divided into dozens of groups. On the first day, the eunuchs gave each girl a preliminary visual assessment, and those who were considered not of the appropriate height or weight were immediately dismissed. On the second day, those who had defects in their facial features, skin, or shoulders and those whose voices were deemed unpleasant were eliminated. On the third day, the eunuchs measured each girl’s arms and legs and asked her to walk a few dozen steps in a circle. About one thousand were again sent home for shorter-than-pleasing forearms, bigger-than-desirable toes, or a less-than-elegant gait. The remaining one thousand girls were accepted as palace maids (*gongnü*). Soon after they were admitted to the inner palace, each was taken to a closed room, where an old palace woman felt the girl’s breasts by hand, sniffed her armpits, and examined other parts of her body. As a result of this round of examination, three hundred were selected as leaders of the new palace staff. After another month, fifty were chosen to be imperial concubines (*feipin*) based on their temperament and behavior as well the emperor’s own observation.
The final round of the selection was a comprehensive test on calligraphy, arithmetic, poetry, and painting. Three candidates emerged as winners, one made the empress and the other two top imperial concubines.24

During the Qing, the recruitment of palace maids, known as xuanxiu, was conducted every three years from among daughters of the Manchu “banner” (qiren) families. Banner leaders and company captains were required to submit to the Department of Revenue (hubu) a roster of girls who had reached the age of twelve. On the first day of the selection, each girl was escorted by her relatives to the Shenwu Gate of the Forbidden City, where they waited in line for the girl’s turn to be ushered in for the preliminary inspection. The girls who passed it would have their names registered (jiming) for the next round of inspection, and those who did not would be allowed to go home to be betrothed or married. If a girl married without first participating in the xuanxiu selection, her parents, the leaders of the clan, and the company captains were all to be punished.25 Girls who had not been inspected would not be allowed to marry even after they reached the age of twenty.26 Qing emperors, just like their predecessors in earlier dynasties, took it as their birthright to select and collect as many women as they pleased. When Emperor Kangxi lectured his sons on sexual moderation, the father of fifty-six children said this in all seriousness: “I keep only three hundred women around the palace and those who have not served me personally I release when they are thirty years old and send them home to be married.”27

In the late Qing, the emperor became much more personally involved in the selection of palace maids. The candidates, after entering the inner palace in a file, would stand still at a designated place. Upon the report from the eunuchs, the emperor would arrive in person. Following a “long and deliberate inspection,” he would decide on “whom to select and whom to dismiss.” The procedure for selecting imperial concubines was more complicated. The candidates who survived the initial sifting would assemble at the Banners Quartermaster’s (baqi lingmiguan) residence for the second round of selection. Girls from all banners arrived in mule coaches before sunrise. Those who passed the inspection of the banner chiefs became qualified for another round of selection conducted by the Minister of Palace Affairs (neiwufu dachen). The final round of selection was in the inner palace, under the supervision of the empress dowager and the emperor himself.28
Palace maids had very limited personal freedom, and life for them was often tedious and miserable. Not surprisingly, most parents were reluctant to give their daughters to palace service. For some of the women, however, it could be the first step toward power and prestige. If they were lucky enough to be selected as imperial concubines, they would have a chance to climb the rungs in the elaborate inner-palace hierarchy to become a high-ranking imperial consort (guifei or huangguifei) or even an empress. With the exception of the empress, the titles for palace women, including the imperial consorts and palace staff, differed from dynasty to dynasty, but the ranking system closely resembled that of civil bureaucracy in general.

The selection of palace women thus entailed multiple rounds of rigorous and meticulous examinations, which indeed makes the process remarkably comparable to that of official selection. An even more significant affinity between these two institutions, however, lies in the candidates’ relationship to the imperial power. While talented scholars were recruited to serve the interests of the state, of which the emperor was the supreme representative, beautiful women were selected for palace service or for the carnal gratification of the ruler as man. In both selections, the empire-wide pool to select from was totally at the mercy of the will of the ultimate selector, the emperor. Both processes were usually under the management of the emperor’s handpicked agents: top officials in the civil service examinations and trusted eunuchs in the selection of palace women. In either selection, the bias and fraud of the imperial agents could lead to corruption. In the examinations, nepotism and bribery often ran rampant, resulting in elimination of best scholars and selection of mediocre ones. The same thing could happen in the selection of palace women. Thus Wang Zhaojun, the most beautiful woman in the empire, could not be chosen to be an imperial concubine after she became a palace maid. As she and her family refused to bribe the court artist Mao Yanshou, the latter deliberately painted a portrait of her that did not do justice to her beauty. Based on that misrepresentation of her looks, the emperor mistakenly considered her the most dispensable woman in the palace and married her off to the king of the northern “barbarians” as a ransom for peace. This legend of a woman exiled from the palace without having her outstanding beauty recognized can be read as an allegory of talented men rebuffed from civil bureaucracy after being unjustly deemed unworthy by
the examiners. That may be a reason for the enduring popularity of the Wang Zhaojun story as subject matter in traditional Chinese literature.33

LITERATI AS IMPERIAL HAREM?

As Li Yu’s story “Tower of the Returned Crane” suggests, the parallel between these two selections—of women and scholars—is revealing of the literati’s position in the power structure of late imperial Chinese society. Of course, passing the examinations at the provincial and metropolitan levels would bring about covetable honor and prestige to a scholar and his family, and even success in a preliminary examination at the prefectural level (yuanshi) would be accepted as an indicator of gentry status. The examinations thus could have an empowering efficacy on the literati. However, if it had always been the dream of Chinese intellectuals to acquire knowledge and abilities in order to “sell them to the kings and princes” (shouyu diwangjia), employment in officialdom had become increasingly a “buyer’s market” during late imperial times in the wake of more widespread education. In general terms, the balance of power within the apparatus of official selection tilted further in favor of the selector, leaving the scholars in a state of passivity and dispensability not unlike that of the candidates in the selection of women.

Additionally, the comparability of these two selections is akin to a long-standing discursive practice in traditional Chinese culture, the practice of likening the plight of intellectuals to that of women. Qu Yuan’s (340?–278? BCE) celebrated trope of “fragrant flowers and beautiful women” (xiangcao meiren) is a well-known example.34 Zou Yang’s (2nd century BCE) comparison of the shi to palace women is another.35 During late imperial times, the literati-women analogy became all the more prevalent. In the early Ming, Zhu Yuanzhang summoned the scholar-poet Yang Weizhen (1296–1370) to Nanjing with the intention of placing him in charge of preparing the rituals and music for the new dynasty. Yang, who had served under the Yuan, declined the offer by presenting a poem titled “Ballad of an Old Woman” (Lao kefu yao), in which he compared himself to a widow too old to remarry. Perhaps inspired by Yang’s poem, Zhu Yuanzhang, who was unhappy about his civil officials, complained about their ineptitude by saying: “As I see it, even women of the Tang would surpass the scholars today” (Tang furen you guo jin zhi ruzhe).36 Ironically, some Ming scholars
themselves would not take issue with the emperor on that disparagement. Shen Defu (1578–1642), for instance, referred to some effeminate scholar-officials of his time sardonically as ciru, or “female scholars.”

Likewise, some scholars during the period of Ming-Qing transition expressed an intense anxiety over the literati’s debilitation and considered it one of the reasons for the demise of the Ming dynasty. In the meantime, they repeatedly evoked female chastity as a trope for the literati’s political loyalty to the toppled Ming house. As martyrdom of chaste widows almost became a standard metaphor for the self-sacrifice of Ming loyalists, “Men’s stories and women’s stories converged to become identical with each other.” That gender-based political discourse continued to flourish during the High Qing. When the licentiate Zeng Jing attempted to instigate Yue Zhongqi, governor-general of Shaanxi and Gansu, to revolt against Emperor Yongzheng, he could not think of a rhetorical device more effective than the minister-woman analogy. He tried to convince Yue—a descendant of the Southern Song general Yue Fei known for his patriotic devotion and political loyalty—that an official who served the wrong ruler would be like a married woman who lost her chastity to a second man. In his rebuttal, Emperor Yongzheng disputed that Yue Zhongqi would have indeed turned himself into an unchaste woman if he had followed Zeng Jing’s seditious advice and rebelled against the Manchu court. Obviously, the emperor and the licentiate were diametrically opposed to each other on almost everything, but they both agreed that a subject to his ruler was just like a woman to her husband.

Thus, the comparability of the selection of palace women and the selection of civil officials goes much deeper than their similar technical procedures. Both selections operated within similarly lopsided power structures, which warranted the imperial court the unchallengeable privilege as the foremost selector of the nation’s human resources. While the emperor would “separate all daughters across the empire from their families for his own pleasure as one man,” as Huang Zongxi accused him indignantly, he would also want to put all the most talented scholars across the empire within his fold, as Emperor Taizong of the Tang had once boasted. Indeed the comparability between selection of officials and selection of women—as exemplified particularly by the recruiting of palace women—renders the power relations involved in the civil service examinations meaningfully analogous to those in a sexual act.
AN EXAMINATION FOR WOMEN

In fictional eroticism centered on the scholar-lover, the protagonist’s escapades usually constitute the main body of the narrative, with his examination experience kept in the background. The “scholar” becomes displaced by the “lover,” and the scholarly selection by the sexual selection, in an operation of metaphorical substitution. In many works, not only is the man’s examination experience intertwined with his sexual experience, but the positions involved in the examinations—the ones of the examiner(selector) and the examinee(selectee)—also become transplanted into an erotic context. The writer deliberately conflates the process of selecting officials with that of selecting women, and by doing so renders what seems to be an erotic narrative profoundly problematic in meaning.

One case in point here is the relatively obscure twelve-chapter novel *An Examination for Women* (Nükaike zhuan). Set in the Ming period, the novel features a group of courtesans who become candidates in a simulated examination arranged by their scholar-lovers seeking official appointments. It closes the gap between the two selection processes, and the fact that the women being examined and selected here are lowly courtesans only adds to its subversive force. At the outset of the narrative, the male protagonist, a young and brilliant scholar by the name of Yu Mengbai, avows his aspiration to marry a girl with “unequaled talent and matchless beauty in this world.” By this announcement he assumes the position of the “selector” and encloses all young women “in this world” in the pool of candidates. With two other young scholars, Yu launches a quest for ideal women, and they meet three beautiful courtesans who are well versed in poetic composition. As a gesture of love, Yu sponsors a simulated examination known as “flower adjudication” (*hua’an*), in which he and his two scholar friends serve as examiners and the three girls and their fellow courtesans are the candidates. As result of the examination, the three beauties win respectively the first, second, and third places. However, as a local ruffian accuses them of “conspiring for a rebellion by secretly setting up spurious government offices,” the scholars have to flee, and the three courtesans subsequently set out in search of their scattered lovers. The young men eventually reunite with the courtesans after their successes in the metropolitan examinations.

The literatus-courtesan bond in late imperial China, in addition to
being a sexual liaison, could be a companionship based on mutual appreci-
cation and even commiseration.\textsuperscript{45} There was indeed good reason for a
scholar, especially at a low ebb of his career, to identify with a woman
forced into a disdained profession despite her outstanding beauty and
talents. In the misfortune of the courtesan, the scholar could see that of
his own, and in that sense the liaison became almost an expression of
narcissistic self-pity.\textsuperscript{46} More interesting in \textit{An Examination for Women},
however, is the juxtaposition of the simulated examination in the brothel
with the “real” examinations for the scholars. It should be pointed out
that Yu Mengbai’s launch of the examination for the courtesans is not an
act of impulse. Even before he meets his beloved courtesan, he is already
thinking of the comparability between selecting a woman and selecting
a scholar in the civil service examinations: “In selecting a girl, beauty is
after all of primary importance. It is like grading a piece of writing. A
crisp and palatable opening will lead one to mark the lines approvingly
with dots and circles, which will promote the merits of the writing.”\textsuperscript{47}

The simulated examination is, therefore, his premeditated manner of
courting, which meticulously models all the formal details in the civil
service examinations. The hall for the \textit{hua’an}, just like an examination
compound, is heavily guarded at all entrances. Inside the hall, there are
several women “officers,” each in charge of a specific duty. In addition to a
general coordinator (\textit{tidiao guan}), there is a roll caller (\textit{changming guan}), a
distributor (\textit{sanjuan guan}) and a collector (\textit{shoujuan guan}) of examination
papers, a sealer of the candidates’ names on the papers (\textit{mifeng guan}), and
two patrol officers (\textit{xunchuo guan}) who keep all candidates under close
surveillance.\textsuperscript{48} After calling the roll, all the entrances are closed, and all
the contestants are requested to write a poem in regulated verse on the
topic of “Spring Boudoir” (\textit{chungui}).

Based on the evaluation of the chief examiner Yu Mengbai and his two
associates, eighteen poems are passed and ranked. The next day, as all the
courtesans wait outside the entrance of the “examination hall,” the names
of the successful candidates are announced, and the top three winners
receive the titles of \textit{zhuangyuan}, \textit{bangyan}, and \textit{tanhua} respectively, exactly
the same titles as for the top three graduates from the palace examination.
Adorned with golden flowers in their hair and red satin cloaks over their
shoulders, they lead the file of new “\textit{jinshi}” in a flashy parade on the street,
each riding a white horse with a golden saddle and covered by an ornate
parasol. The women finally arrive at the celebratory banquet, where they cluster around their examiners amid all the pompous singing and fanfare. In the meantime, however, the narrator does not forget to remind the reader that all this solemnity is for nothing but a travesty of the real examinations. At the beginning of the examination, all the women candidates have to undergo a thorough body search at the entrance, presumably to prevent them from bringing in any notes. A woman guard reports that one of the courtesans is carrying notes on her. When the guard uncovers the “notes” from their most surreptitious hiding place in the candidate’s body and presents them to the superintendent, everyone bursts into embarrassed laughter, as they turn out to be a bloodstained wad of tissues.

Such meticulous, although playful, simulations of the state examinations drive home the analogy between the selection of scholars and the selection of women. The ranking order of the three courtesan winners of the hua’an, as it turns out later in the novel, corresponds to that of their scholar lovers in the “real” examinations. Clearly, these two ranking systems take place in the two worlds that do not only parallel each other but also, as a modern scholar has pointed out insightfully, are “ruled by the same logic and arbitrated by the same successful men.” Yet scholars take completely different positions in these two worlds. In the real examinations, even the “successful men” were no more than passive examinees and selectees, and had no control over their own fates. Not surprisingly, Yu Mengbai has failed repeatedly in the examinations before he sets up the mock examination for the women. By suspending his experience as an examination candidate and assuming instead the role of an examiner and selector of women, he turns the tables and thoroughly changes his position in the power game. When he confers the title of zhuangyuan on the first place winner of the hua’an, he not only wins his beloved woman but also gains the empowered status as the selector.

THE POTENT AND POLYGAMOUS SCHOLAR: 
ROMANCE OF THE EMBROIDERED SCREEN
AND SHADOWS OF THE PEACH BLOSSOMS

This sexual selector’s fantasy is even more piquant in the works that feature a scholar as an oversexed polygamist. One example is the twenty-chapter novel Romance of the Embroidered Screen (Xiu ping yuan). The protago-
níst Zhao Yunke is a young and handsome scholar from Hangzhou. In the opening chapter, Zhao, like the erotic scholar-lover in many other works, is determined to “win the first place in the examinations” and “marry the first-rate beauties under heaven.” That declaration establishes the analogous relationship between scholarly pursuit and sexual pursuit. In a series of adventures, he meets four beautiful women one after another, all of whom become his sexual partners. Unlike the unseducible Cao Nai, Zhao is in each case easily captivated. His route of romantic conquests eventually takes him to the capital of the empire, where he wins the status of zhuangyuan in the examinations. Obviously, Zhao’s sexual escapades incur no penalty for him in the examinations, contrary to the scenarios in those moralizing anecdotes discussed earlier in this chapter. Instead, Zhao’s academic success immediately translates into his augmented desirability on the marriage market: a high-ranking official insists on marrying his beautiful daughter to him, an offer he once again finds himself unable to decline. So the scholar who has just been ranked number one among the successful examination candidates now performs another kind of ranking by himself, the ranking of his five wives.

A similar subversive thrust is even more evident in *Shadows of the Peach Blossoms* (Taohua ying), another twenty-chapter novel. Set in the middle of the Ming, the novel is about the young scholar Wei Yuqing who has a series of sexual encounters while pursuing a bureaucratic career through the examinations. After winning his jinshi status, Wei is first appointed a county magistrate, then promoted to be a prefect, and finally a governor. While traveling from one office to another, he picks up his women who have been scattered in different places, all of whom become his concubines. The last woman he marries is his principal wife, obviously the biggest prize of his quest and the top-ranked candidate in his sexual selection, and the wedding quite befittingly coincides with the pinnacle of his bureaucratic career. Accounting for his dramatically increased sexual appeal is an itinerant monk’s aphrodisiac that enlarges his penis and promotes his virility. Apparently, sexual prowess, replacing scholarly talent, becomes the male protagonist’s foremost quality.

As a potent polygamist, Wei Yuqing enjoys a sexual privilege that very few men in late imperial China could possibly have had. Yet the man who had the ultimate sexual privilege was the emperor, as he could select women before any other men. Indeed Wei Yuqing’s womenfolk bear a
strong resemblance to an imperial harem. The principal wife, who governs the home, looks serious and is ostensibly more interested in homemaking than lovemaking. The concubines, whose ranking is determined by arbitrary rules, are more animated and playful. These depictions tally with what people generally perceive to be the difference between an empress and other imperial consorts. In a metamorphosis of fiction, the scholar Wei Yuqing, who is repeatedly tested in the civil service examinations before he can be selected by the imperial state, becomes a miniaturized version of emperor, the ultimate selector of women.

**LI YU’S STORIES: THE EXAMINATION EROTICIZED**

In Li Yu’s “Tower of the Returned Crane,” as we recall, the two most beautiful girls are finally married to the top two examination candidates. Female beauty becomes a trophy for male talent, and the process of official selection thus changes into one of marital selection. As success in the examinations is reduced to a prelude to the consummation of a sexual union, civil service, which is presumably the purpose of passing the examinations, is simply replaced by a wedding service. A similar maneuver is seen in Li Yu’s “Tower of Winning the Contest” (Duo jin lou). A pair of discordant parents promises each of their two daughters to two different men. As the beautiful sisters and four ugly men all appear in court for adjudication, the prefect annuls the mismatches. He then sets an examination for the licentiates in his prefecture and promises to marry the girls to the two highest-ranking candidates who are not married or betrothed. The top two examination essays, as it turns out, are actually written by the same young man. Against the student’s initial reluctance, the prefect makes him husband to both sisters. That arrangement of polygamy, which is common in Li Yu’s fiction, is justified by the narrator’s comment that he is the only candidate with “true talent” (zhen cai). Again, female beauty, substituting an official appointment, becomes the true award for male talent. Little wonder that the young scholars in the story “all wished to have Chang’e, the moon goddess, before they even have a chance to snap off a cassia twig.”

Li Yu’s many other love stories are also replete with references to the examinations. In “Tower for Summer Pleasure” (Xia yi lou), a young scholar, equipped with a telescope, “examines” the girls in the neighbor-
hood from his vantage point on a tower before he “selects” his prospective bride. In “Tower for Stroking Clouds” (Fu yun lou), a group of frivolous youth, during the celebration of the Dragon Boat Festival in Hangzhou, stand at an intersection in the midst of a heavy storm appraising the looks of each passing young women. Hoping the downpour will wash off the women’s makeup and reveal their true facial features, these young men call the rain “a godsend opportunity for us to give the examination and select genuine talents.” As two beautiful girls pass by, these “examiners” are unanimous in their selection: “Now we have our zhuangyuan and bangyan, what a pity that we can’t find a tanhua to round out the top trio! We can only leave the third place unfilled until next year’s festival and then hopefully pick up some new talent that we have overlooked.”

A similar scene is in “A Male Mother Meng Thrice Changes His Residence” (Nan Mengmu jiaohe sanqian), a story about a young man who castrates himself to repay his same-sex lover and, after the latter’s death, brings up his lover’s son. In the story, a group of scholars evaluate the looks of teenage boys and rank them in a roster, which they call “register of the examination for beautiful boys” (meitong kao’an). “ Exactly as in the yellow roster for the palace examinations,” the top boys are ranked in three classes (san jia), and You Ruilang, the protagonist of the story, is given the title zhuangyuan by all the “examiners” unanimously. Evidently, the boys, as substitutes for women, become the sexual examinees and selectees.

Li Yu’s “A Widow Sets a Ruse to Get a Bridegroom, and Several Beauties Join Their Efforts to Seize a Talented Scholar” (Guafu sheji zhui xinlang, zhongmei qixin duo caizi), a story collected in Jade That Is Worth Cities (Liancheng bi), can be read as a satire of the moralization on sexual asceticism. The protagonist Lü Zaisheng, a handsome young scholar, has been taught since his boyhood that “one’s moral performance during his lifetime will be responsible not only for his own well-being but also his offspring’s.” It is exactly the same moral message as in many of the ledgers of merits and demerits and the short tales about examination scholars’ sexual ethics discussed earlier in this chapter. The assiduous preaching and close surveillance by his father and tutor result in Lü’s behavioral pattern of misogyny, as he is afraid that any personal contact with a young woman can make him succumb to the temptation, which will in turn ruin his chance in the examinations. After his parents’ deaths, how-
ever, Lü Zaisheng, now a licentiate at the Imperial Academy in Nanjing, becomes the local courtesans’ favorite. As the most handsome scholar in town, he virtually becomes a “prostitute” for the prostitutes, as the women scramble to pay in order to sleep with him. As his service is in such great demand, a courtesan’s access to him becomes a barometer of her status: those who are fortunate enough to have been “appraised and appreciated” (jianshang) by Lü become known as top courtesans and have their market value enhanced, and those who have not become regarded as low-class hookers and see their business diminish. As “his personal choice becomes the criterion in classifying good courtesans from bad ones,” the young scholar who once tended to shun all women in order to protect his chance in the examinations now plays the role of “examiner” of women. When a beautiful but jealous widow, Cao Wanshu, wishes to marry Lü, she sends a matchmaker for the scholar; upon his arrival, the “examiner” once again conducts a meticulous “examination”:

He saw Cao Wanshu dressed plainly and wearing light makeup, with thousands of charms but not the slightest affectation. The matchmaker had encouraged her to exhibit all her feminine tenderness. The woman accordingly let him scrutinize every part of her body. She even allowed him to lift her three-inch golden lotuses in his hands and hold her waist in his arm to check on its exquisite slenderness. After that, she took out a writing brush, an ink stone, and paper, and asked him to set a topic and give her a test in poetic composition. Lü Zaisheng therefore chanted a poem and then told her to compose another one on the same rhyming scheme.

The result of this “examination” is quite satisfactory to both the “examiner” and the “examinee,” leading to a blissful wedding soon afterward.

**THE CARNAL PRAYER MAT:**
**AN EROTIC GAME OF EXAMINATION AND SELECTION**

In Li Yu’s twenty-chapter novel *The Carnal Prayer Mat* (Rou putuan), one finds the most fully developed figure of erotic scholar-lover and most sophisticated narrative operation based on the metaphoric bond between official selection and sexual selection. Much of the narrated eroticism
in *The Carnal Prayer Mat* is driven by an intriguing dynamic between the opposite positions in visual experience, the positions of the examiner and the examinee. The sexual escapades of the libertine scholar Weiyang Sheng, whose name Patrick Hanan has felicitously rendered Vesperus, usually starts with his sneaky peeping at a woman in order to appraise her beauty. If she is truly beautiful in his judgment, he appears before her in person, trying to attract her attention to his handsome features. Other characters in the narrative participate in similar visual games. The one who initially sets his or her eyes on the sexual prey thus shifts into a position of being preyed upon by the eyes of the person of the opposite sex. The economy of the narrative hinges on this constant alternation between looking and being seen, between the active and the passive, and between the masterful and the mastered. Since the polarity of looking and being seen between the lovers suggests a relationship of assessment and appraisal, it becomes associated with the dichotomy of the examiner and the examinee. While *The Carnal Prayer Mat* is remarkably exuberant in figurative imagery and the use of multiple metaphors, the examination metaphor is the only one that is consistently evoked throughout the entire work.

As do many other works of fictional eroticism, the novel establishes the symmetry between success in academic pursuit and success in sexual conquest early in the narrative. In chapter 2, when Vesperus visits the reclusive monk Lone Peak (Gufeng Zhanglao), it becomes clear from their conversation that the scholar's top two wishes are “to be the most brilliant poet in the world” and “to marry the most beautiful girl in the world.” To justify that symmetry, Vesperus cites what he considers the perfect compatibility between a beautiful girl (*jiaren*) and a brilliant poet (*caizi*): “The two terms *beautiful girl* and *brilliant poet* have always been inseparable. For every brilliant poet there has to be a beautiful girl somewhere to form a pair, and vice versa.”

However, Li Yu is obviously much more interested in the same set of positions that is involved in both the examination experience and the erotic experience—the positions of examiner and examinee—and the power relations suggested therein. The heightened narrative interest in those positions renders the narrated erotic experience remarkably comparable to the experience in the examinations. Much of the narrative therefore revolves around the metaphorical bond between selection of scholars
and selection of women. One example is Vesperus’s use of the Daoist temple as his vantage point for assessing female beauty. Here the narrator states that “it was Vesperus’s idea to treat the temple as an examination hall,” and then he goes on to liken the young man’s peeping at the worshipping women to the state examiner’s evaluation of the candidates. One realizes that the analogy is indeed driven home in light of Miyazaki Ichisada’s description of the Baohe Palace, the site of the palace examinations during the Qing period, and the ceremony of the examination therein:

Early in the morning of the twenty-first day of the fourth month the candidates passed through the main palace gate, the Wumen, or Meridian Gate, and assembled in front of the Taihe Gate, which rose straight ahead. . . . At the top of the ramp, under the curving eaves of the palace, an incense table had been set up. When the candidates had finished lining up on the terrace below, the senior academician of the grand secretariat appeared beneath the eaves at the east, bearing a packet containing the printed examination papers. . . . The master of ceremonies led the examination officials, from readers on down, to the table, where he lined them up to perform the full kowtow in unison at his command. Next it was the candidates’ turn to do the same, again at the command of the master of ceremonies. . . . Deep in the interior of the Baohe Palace was the emperor’s throne. During the examination he was supposed to show himself and review the candidates.  

The resemblance between the temple in *The Carnal Prayer Mat* and the Baohe Palace is quite clear. Just like the ceremony in the palace examination, the religious worship in the Daoist temple involves kowtowing and incense burning. Even the purposes of praying are not very different: while the women in the temple pray for a divine bestowal of fertility, the scholars in the palace sought the imperial grant of a *jinshi* degree so that their many years spent studying the classics would not end up being fruitless.

However, the analogy is not so much between the two venues per se as between Vesperus’s visual testing of the women and the examiner’s screening of the candidates. Indeed, as a record of his visual examination of each woman, Vesperus enters a note for her in his notebook, with her personal information as well as his comment on and grade for her beauty.
In doing so, according to the narrator, he works in the same manner as an examiner “lenient about admitting people to the examination, but . . . extremely strict in his grading.” Even the symbols that he uses in ranking a woman, a certain number of circles in red ink by her name, are precisely those that a state examiner would use in grading an examination candidate: “Beside her name, Vesperus drew in red ink to indicate her ranking: three circles for summa cum laude [tedeng]; two for magna cum laude [shangdeng], and one for cum laude [zhongdeng]. After each name he added comments in parallel-prose style like those written on local examination papers, to describe the woman’s good points.

Having observed and examined many women, Vesperus comes to realize that his wife, beautiful as she is, is by no means “the most beautiful girl in the world” as he used to think. Like a state examiner, Vesperus refuses to settle for a bangyan or a tanhua, and is determined to find a zhuangyuan, the most beautiful. He is equally enthusiastic about two young women whom he calls Pale Rose Maid and Lotus Pink Beauty in his notes and draws three circles beside each of their names. Indeed, as the two women look equally beautiful to him, he has to admit that mere visual testing is not sufficient for ranking and that “only the Oral Examination will determine the top candidate.” Later in the novel, when Vesperus meets the two beauties again through the good offices of Cloud, he has to add one more circle to the original two for Cloud, “raising her from a magna to a summa,” in order to avoid a possible storm of jealousy among the three women. He does not completely succeed, however. When these young women find in Vesperus’s notebook that Flora (Huachen), an older woman, has received the same ranking as they have, they quickly become resentful of his grading methods and criteria. The narrative here carefully maintains the examination metaphor, referring to the women as “pupils” (mensheng) and Vesperus as “the chief examiner” (zhusi): “Vesperus wanted to make a clean breast of everything and persuaded them that one person’s luck rubs off on everyone present, but his three pupils were raising such a commotion that the examiner could not get a word in edgewise.

What is closely “examined” in The Carnal Prayer Mat is very often not only a woman’s physical looks but also her sexual skills, and the intensity of the testing in this regard is also likened to that in the civil service examinations. Speaking of his preference of experienced women to vir-
gins, Vesperus compares the skills of lovemaking to those of writing the eight-legged essay. Again, he puts himself in the position of the examiner, evaluating and judging the performance of his sexual partner: “For real enjoyment you need a woman in her twenties who will know something about opening, development, reversal, and closure. Because sex is really like an essay, in which each section has its mode of organization and each stage its type of parallelism. This is well beyond the capacity of a child just learning how to write.”

In this vein, the women who have convincingly proved themselves to Vesperus as good sexual partners are likened to candidates who have successfully passed the examinations. As Cloud’s affair with Vesperus becomes known to her two cousins who had once attracted Vesperus’s eyes but have not yet begun their liaisons with him, they “resembled nothing so much as two failed candidates for the provincial examinations meeting a newly successful one—a mixture of humiliation and envy.” They ask Cloud all kinds of questions about Vesperus, obviously hoping to get ready for their own turns. The analogy to the examinations continues, for the two girls are said to be “like candidates for an examination buttonholding a friend outside the hall and asking them about the paper.”

Such erotic examination and selection has a most hilarious moment in chapter 17, where Flora and her three younger rivals have a contest to settle the order for wine and sex. The four women play “prima guess-fingers” (zhuangyuan quan), a drinking game similar to the one called Name the Candidate played by many late Ming courtesans as described by some modern scholars. Again, the titles decided by the game are exactly the same as those by a palace examination. All three winners of the finger-guessing game—zhuangyuan, bangyan, and tanhua as they are called respectively—are all privileged to have sex with Vesperus, the examiner and selector, while the loser, who is called disparagingly Old Scholar (laoru) or a “perennial failure in the examinations,” is only allowed to stand by watching the orgy.

The testing and examining of a sexual partner can go both ways between the male and female lovers. Sometimes it is the woman who is compared to the examiner, judging not only the looks but also the virility and stamina of the man, who is likened to a scholar under the examiner’s stringent scrutiny. When Vesperus, on realizing the limits of his sexual
prowess, plans to resort to aphrodisiacs, his friend the Knave ridicules him by comparing him to a desperate and untalented examination candidate who counts vainly on the help of ginseng. He says sardonically that there is no way for an “empty-headed” candidate to impress the examiner “even if he swallowed pounds of the tonic.” Before Vesperus embarks on his adventure with Fragrance, the Knave again admonishes the young scholar to try his very best to pass the woman’s test: “You’ll have to do your damndest not to let her flunk you. Otherwise you’ll be admitted to a first examination but not to a second or a third.” The narrator does not lose the opportunity to create suspense at the end of the chapter: “The time would come for Vesperus’s examination. But we do not yet know what method the examiner will adopt and will have to wait until the questions are handed out.” When the time arrives for the questions to be delivered, they are indeed tough ones. Fragrance makes an unusual arrangement, letting her ugly neighbor serve as her substitute to test the young man’s capacity, while she herself monitors the examination in the darkness. Vesperus’s performance during the examination turns out to be very impressive. At the end, when the ugly woman, with her true identity revealed, declares to the man that he has “passed the test,” Fragrance comes to the foreground and takes the man into the second round of the “examination.” In such situations, the woman briefly plays the role of the examiner only before she allows herself to be further examined by the man. As Vesperus is always the epicenter of the sexual game, ultimately it is up to the scholar to test and select his sexual partners.

The inextricable intertwining of the examination experience and the erotic experience punctuates Vesperus’s transformation from a scholar into a lover. As Vesperus relinquishes his aspirations in the examinations and sets out to “look for the most beautiful girl in the world,” he refuses to be examined and assumes instead the role of an examiner: to look, to appraise, and to select. Instead of striving to become a top candidate in the examinations, Vesperus makes himself the judge to determine the selection of the top women candidates. Unlike the thousands of scholars who competed with each other through the examinations hoping to be “netted” into civil bureaucracy, Vesperus now becomes the one who casts the net, catching the most beautiful girls in the empire. In this light, The Carnal Prayer Mat is a story about an examinee’s desire to become an examiner in a changed power game.
THE OPERATION OF THE EXAMINATION METAPHOR

The motif of examination is omnipresent in many works of the seventeenth-century fictional eroticism centered on the scholar-lover. While the examination experience is incorporated in the narrative in different ways, most often it serves as the central metaphor for the erotic experience. Its relationship to the scholar's sexual quest is both disjunctive and conjunctive, both digressive and congruous. As a rhetorical device, a metaphor is the locale for the meeting of two concepts that are assigned the roles of “tenor” and “vehicle” respectively. While they are comparable because of certain shared attributes, the tenor is the subject to which the attributes are ascribed and the vehicle is the object whose attributes are borrowed in order to heighten those of the subject. Obviously, the tenor is the real topic of the discussion or thinking, while the vehicle, just as the term itself suggests, facilitates the discussion or thinking. Thus the tenor is primary and essential whereas the vehicle secondary and subsidiary. However, this hierarchical order can become destabilized or even reversed when the vehicle becomes more active than usual in correlation with the tenor.

If the erotic scholar-lover’s sexual adventures function as “a mere excuse” for the introduction of the metaphor of the examinations, the work would cease to be an erotic narrative but become an allegory instead. That, however, is obviously not the case in the works discussed here, where the scholar-lover’s escapades are narrated in such exuberant details that they defy any consistently allegorical reading. Nevertheless, the motif of examination is so extensive throughout these narratives that it is clearly not merely subservient to local rhetorical or stylistic purposes. In fact, since the examination appears to be such a master trope, it becomes a hallmark of the fictional eroticism surrounding the scholar-lover.

Based on the erotic scholar-lover’s personal experience in the two worlds, the one of an aspiring office-seeker and the one of a cynical womanizer, the narrative generates two different sets of signifiers, substituting each other by turns. One can see how this has changed the relationship between the tenor and the vehicle: each set of signifiers becomes both the tenor and the vehicle because the movement of signification leads both to it and away from it. Indeed, if the juxtaposition of academic experience and sexual experience results in the eroticization of the examina-
tions, arguably the most venerated social institution in premodern China, one can perhaps say equally well that it somehow academicizes the erotic experience. The examination metaphor, in this light, becomes a “metaphor for metaphor,” creating a mirror effect of metaphorizing. Such a reading turns the meaning of the erotic scholar-lover problematic, transforming him from a Don Juan-like rake into a more complex figure loaded with intriguing ambiguities.

Metaphor, in Paul Ricoeur’s words, “is the trope of resemblance par excellence,” resemblance between two things that are otherwise apparently incongruous. It hinges on the affinity in one signifier as seen from the vantage point of another. When what happens in official selection is presented as analogous to what happens in sexual selection, the former is clearly seen from the viewpoint of the lover. Similarly, when sexual adventures are portrayed as comparable to the pursuit of a civil service degree, sexual love is seen from the perspective of the examination scholar. Between the scholar part and the lover part of the protagonist is a mutual gaze, so to speak, with each seeing in the other some resemblance to the self and then letting its own resemblance to the other be seen. There is a similar dynamic between the two different sets of signifiers, the signifiers for official selection and for sexual selection. When one set of the signifiers is activated in the narrative, the other set is temporarily repressed, but never completely out of the scene. The activated or exhibited signifiers of the erotic scholar-lover’s sexual selection are constantly gauged, in terms of the metaphoric connection, by the latent voyeuristic eye of the signifiers for scholarly selection, which in turn become activated into the foreground, but only to be surveyed by the temporarily repressed signifiers for sexual selection again.

The operation of the scholar-lover’s desire is thus like a game of juggling: at each moment there is only one ball—sexual selection or scholarly selection—in the juggler’s hand, but at each moment the ball in the hand tends to be displaced by the one in the air. The game is therefore driven by the desire to catch the “other” ball, the one that is not in the hand. As in Cai Qizun’s poetic line quoted earlier in this chapter, a scholar was, at least theoretically, unable to “have it at both ends.” A failed examination candidate like Li Yu could have made the same lamentation as the zhuangyuan Cai Qizun, although from the opposite end. Just as in Cai’s poem, the scholar-lover’s desire always directs toward something that is lacking at
the moment. The open chain of signifiers in the metaphoric operation incessantly creates new gaps for desire to traverse and thus cuts desire from ultimate fulfillment. The result is an almost interminable production of substitutes, which constitute the narrative text. Very often, to end this chain of substitutions the narrative has to resort to a deus ex machina. Thus at the end of *Romance of the Embroidered Screen* the scholar-lover Zhao Yunke, following the advice of an itinerant Daoist master, retreats with his five wives to an islet in the middle of a lake. In a similar vein, Wei Yuqing and his six wives all become immortals at the end of *Shadows of the Peach Blossoms*. The erotic narrative is able to end only when the scholar-lover is no more interested in further sexual adventures or new bureaucratic positions. In *The Carnal Prayer Mat* the narrative ends in a more drastic manner—namely, castration. After the repentant Vesperus joins the Buddhist order, he continues to find himself pestered by “the root of evil” and has to cut off the organ that was once augmented with dog’s flesh. Yet the penis does not merely represent the scholar-lover’s sexual desire in a biological sense, for it is a symbol of all desires, both in the narrative and of the narrative. With the castration, Vesperus’s desire ceases, and so does the desire of the narrative. The metaphoric interplay between the sexual experience and the examination experience now comes to an end, and for that reason the alternation and mutual substitution between these two sets of signifiers are terminated as well.

**The Subversive Power of the Examination Metaphor**

As demonstrated in the affinity between the selection of scholars for civil bureaucracy and the selection of women for the imperial harem, the metaphorical bond between the examination experience and the sexual experience in the works of fictional eroticism is rooted in a familiar analogy. This metaphor is remarkably productive, opening up new territories not only for fiction making but also for fiction interpretation. As the sexual act is consistently presented in the language of the examinations, fictional eroticism centered on a scholar’s selection of women becomes a powerful parody of the institution of official selection.

It may be no exaggeration to say that the examination system, as the primary channel for selection of officials, had been the lifeline of the imperial
The Scholar-Lover in Erotic Fiction

state ever since its inception. Precisely because of its crucial importance, it was always under the direct control and surveillance of the imperial court. During the late dynasties, the court not only determined the quota for all provincial examinations across the empire but also appointed their chief and associate examiners, many of whom were courtiers. The selection of jinshi, holders of the highest degree from the examination system, had regularly involved the emperor in person since the Tang period. Emperor Taizong, for instance, was the mastermind for the formal development of the jinshi examination in the early Tang from its fledgling precursor in the preceding Sui dynasty. The tradition of “testing the candidates in the palace” (dianqian shiren) started in 689, when Empress Wu Zetian tested metropolitan examination graduates on policy questions (cewen) for consecutive days. Yet the palace examination did not become fully institutionalized until the Song. In 973, a scholar named Xu Shilian, who had been eliminated from the metropolitan examination that year, accused the chief examiner Li Fang of being unfair in the selection. Emperor Taizu intervened by holding a reexamination in the palace, which he himself presided over as the chief examiner. Since then, palace examination had always functioned as the final and ultimate stage in the process of official selection. In 1397, Zhu Yuanzhang, suspecting a political conspiracy, annulled the results of the metropolitan examination. Afterwards he graded the papers from a reexamination himself and then selected the new jinshi from the ensuing palace examination. What he did set the tone for his successors, as the subsequent Ming rulers dutifully followed the practice of “the Son of Heaven in person testing on policy questions at court” (tianzi qin ce yu ting). The questions for the palace examination were usually drafted by Hanlin academicians but always finalized by the emperor himself. Qing rulers largely followed the Ming regulations on the palace examination. For some years in the early Qing, Emperor Kangxi even conducted a reexamination to verify the result of the regular metropolitan examination as a prelude to the palace examination.

Apparently, much of the prestige of the examination system, especially on its highest levels, was derived from its close association with the imperial court. In particular, the emperor’s personal involvement in the palace examination bestowed a luster of imperial majesty and augustness on the institution of official selection. With the emperor serving as the examiner, all graduates from the metropolitan and palace examinations
became automatically “disciples of the Son of Heaven” (tianzi mensheng). Thus, Senior Licentiate Yan in *The Scholars* (Rulin waishi), who is otherwise a brazen and incorrigible liar, is actually telling a stark truth when he brags: “Our examinations are a great affair of the imperial court” (chaoting dadian). Compounded with the pronounced Confucian commitment to government service, the proximity to the center of state power created a sense of grandeur and magnitude about the examinations in public perception.

In contrast, traditional Chinese culture consistently consigned sexual love to a low level in the hierarchy of values. One important reason was the androcentric prejudice against women, as suggested in this Confucian line: “Of all people, women and servants are the most difficult to behave to. If you are familiar with them, they lose their humility. If you maintain a reserve toward them, they are discontented.” While the Confucian sages never attempted to deny sexual desire as part of human nature, they considered sexual passion a potential menace to one’s moral and political obligations. Thus, feeling the malaise of his contemporary society, Confucius found good reason to complain: “I have not seen one who loves virtues as he loves beauty” (Wu weijian haode ru haose zhe ye). As the master saw it, love of virtue (haode) and love of female beauty (haose) were mutually exclusive and repulsive. Based on this conviction, a scholar’s erotic experience would compromise the moral worth and political correctness of his participation in the examinations, the “great affair of the imperial court.” That is precisely the message in many ledgers of merits and demerits and anecdotal narratives about sexual ethics discussed earlier in this chapter.

Thus, while selection of officials and selection of women were comparable in some ways that enable them to function respectively as the tenor and vehicle in the examination metaphor, they actually belonged to two vastly different levels in the moral and political scales of social life. The obscene and bawdy sexual selection as the subject matter in fictional eroticism is apparently incongruous with the elevated and stately “examination language” used to present it, and this incongruity is a major source of the comic effect of the erotic scholar-lover. As the selection of women parodies the selection of officials, the discourse of eroticism intertwines with the discourse of the examinations. As a result of the inter-illumination and inter-contamination between these two discourses, the examination system is relegated from a lofty height where it is constantly valorized by
state power to a low level where it becomes comparable to and compatible with the indecency and debauchery in sexual escapades.

Obviously, the fictional eroticism discussed here does not parody the different levels of examinations equally. Instead, it targets the palace examination in particular, where the imperial ruler determined the selection of top scholars in person. Given the parallel between the imperial selection of palace women and the civil service examinations, this focus on the examiner and selector on the highest level makes the subversive power of the examination metaphor in fictional eroticism all the more formidable. By using this metaphor, of course, the author could have been simply “playing with his ink and writing brush” (youxi bimo) in order to win a laugh from his reader. Yet, as M. M. Bakhtin puts it, it is precisely laughter that “in general destroys any hierarchical (distancing and valorized) distance.” Amused by the comic juxtaposition of official selection with sexual selection, the reader’s laughter mitigates the fear and awe for the imperial authority and diminishes the piety and reverence toward the examinations.

The metaphorical bond between selection of scholars and selection of women originated in late imperial Chinese society itself. In a sense, the multiple power relations in the sociopolitical structure were like a mutable host of metaphors and metonymies. The fictional erotic scholar-lover emerged precisely from that understanding. By metaphorizing the examinations, fictional eroticism places its scholar protagonist in the tension and interaction between competing perspectives. Yet the examination metaphor is more than a mere literary game. “Metaphorical meaning,” as Paul Ricoeur proposes, “is not the enigma itself, the semantic clash pure and simple, but the solution of the enigma, the inauguration of the new semantic pertinence.” Using the Confucian canon and commentaries as the yardstick for official selection, the examination system became in the late dynastic periods the most important mechanism for the state to appropriate the daotong and manipulate the value system of society. By eroticizing and vulgarizing the institution of official selection, the examination metaphor amounts to an almost prankish reaction to the scrutinizing gaze from the imperial state, the ultimate examiner and selector.