Near the closure of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, when Jia Baoyu has completed his earthly journey and is leaving the mundane world, he meets his father Jia Zheng for the last time on a cold and snowy day. Jia Zheng’s boat is moored in the canal and his servants are all ashore, leaving him alone on board:

There, up on deck... was the figure of a man with shaven head and bare feet, wrapped in a large cape made of crimson felt. The figure knelt down and bowed to Jia Zheng, who did not recognize the features and hurried out on deck, intending to raise him up and ask him his name. The man bowed four times, and now stood upright, pressing his palms together in monkish greeting. Jia Zheng was about to reciprocate with a respectful bow of the head when he looked into the man’s eyes and with a sudden shock recognized him as Bao-yu. (*HLM* 4:1510; *SS* 5:359)

This is a moment full of pathos and symbolic meanings. Jia Baoyu’s life has been of course marred by a long-standing feud with Jia Zheng. As a staunch exponent of one’s political commitment to the state and obligation for the family, Jia Zheng is a typical literatus who belongs to the world that Baoyu is now leaving behind. Yet the departing son finds himself unable to cleanly sever his emotional ties to his once tyrannical father.

**Coda**

*Out of the Imperial Shadow*
While Baoyu is moving forward into the future, he actually shows, by his deep and silent bows to his father, a lingering attachment to the past.

In a sense, this sentimental moment bridging the past with the future catches much of the essence of late imperial Chinese vernacular fiction. As it came into existence on the eve of the expiration of the ancient social covenant between the daotong and the zhengtong, vernacular fiction questions the soon-to-be-outdated daotong teaching on the literati’s political duty of government service, but not without some ambivalence and nostalgia for the past glory of the daotong-zhengtong collaboration. Different from some of the more radical and audacious thinkers of their time, vernacular fiction writers rarely had head-on confrontations with the imperial state. Instead of complaining about the political system itself, they presented a challenge, unmistakable even though often subtle and nuanced, to the ideological system that was sustained by the political power. So, with one foot still planted on the soil of the past, Chinese vernacular fiction was steadily stretching its other foot into the future. Again, in this regard Jia Baoyu’s finale in *Dream of the Red Chamber* becomes almost allegorical. Before the father and son can have a conversation, the two immortals accompanying Baoyu remind him sternly: “Come, your earthly karma is complete. Tarry no longer.” With that, the three of them “strode off into the snow,” and Baoyu never looks back (*HLM* 4:1510; *SS* 5:359).

In a way, the works of Chinese vernacular fiction discussed in this book punctuate a lingering yet eventually resolute departure of Chinese intellectuals from the age of government service. *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, as we have seen, loudly protests against the imperial state’s suffocating control over the literati, but it still wishes for a new type of political sovereignty and improved ruler-subject relationship. Zhuge Liang, the sagacious and astute statesman and strategist in the novel, mercilessly ridicules the pedantry of the “textually bound” scholars, a thinly veiled innuendo about the examination system in late imperial times. However, the novel does not completely lose hope in the imperial power, as we can tell from the idealistic portrayal of Liu Bei as a ruler with sincerity and humility in treating men of talent. In some of the seventeenth-century fictional works, the experience of the erotic scholar-lover can be read as a parody or travesty of the civil service examinations. In particular, by adopting the examination as a master trope for sexual act, these erotic narratives desanctify the institution of official selection that was valorized
and perpetuated by the political power. At the same time, however, the bitter satire in these works is often tempered with good-natured humor and playfulness. In *The Scholars*, Wu Jingzi exposes much of the malaise in the literati mores and calls for emancipation of the literati from the textual capsule that the imperial state had entrapped them in. Here one finds a much deeper concern about the crisis in the *shi* (士)–*shi* (势) relationship and a much more serious contemplation of the literati’s historical mission, conglomerated in the wish that is repeatedly expressed by the literati figures in the novel to “attend to [their] own affairs.” Finally, Cao Xueqing’s *Dream of the Red Chamber* presents an adolescent Jia Baoyu and his relentless resistance against the call from his family and society to prepare for a bureaucratic career, as well as his persistent pursuit of his individual interests and a profession of his own choice. Indeed, in Baoyu’s departure from his father at the end of his mundane karma one can almost read a growing awareness among the literati of late imperial times that their “karma” for government service was approaching its completion.

Obviously, these works are selected to be illustrative rather than exhaustive. While divergent in their storylines and ways of characterization, collectively they document the final stage of the convoluted evolution of the bond between Chinese intellectual elite and the imperial state. Indeed, what happened between the *daotong* and the *zhengtong* was perhaps the biggest paradox in the history of imperial China. It was under the blessing of the state power that Confucianism had become the official ideology of the Chinese empire, but the close alliance of Confucianism with the imperial power in turn facilitated the state’s appropriation of the *daotong* and accelerated the latter’s decline. More specifically, the Confucian teaching on the political obligation of intellectuals to go into government service had been the cohesive agent that bound the fate of the *shi* (literati) to that of the *shi* (political state), but as the state took over that doctrine from the *daotong* and privileged government service in its official discourse, the literati contingent, ironically, became a force preponderantly outside civil officialdom.

The ultimate Confucian goal in collaborating with the state, as Qian Mu saw it, was not to promote and fortify but to curb and restrain the imperial power. Yet, while the Confucian intellectuals’ dream of *dejun xingdao*—getting the rulers to practice the *dao*—became ruthlessly shattered during the late dynasties, the imperial power seized what had origi-
nally been Confucian ideas, especially the ones on government service, and privileged them as the cornerstone of the value system of the culture, or the symbolic order. In the meantime, by using the examinations as a vehicle for its influence and control, the state successfully made itself the center of the nation’s intellectual life. Rewarding examination success with fame and prestige, the state placed itself in a position where it could manipulate the symbolic order, align it with its own interest, and impose it upon the entire society as legitimization of the institutional structure. Thus, buttressed by the state power, both the symbolic system and political institutions of the empire were largely in a relationship of reciprocation, reinforcing and perpetuating each other.

The imperial state’s appropriation of the *daotong* and shaping and molding of cultural values in late imperial China can perhaps be best summarized by the phrase that O-erh-tai used in his eulogy of Emperor Qianlong quoted earlier in this book: “unifying the minds of all people under heaven.” This endeavor on the part of the political authority to unify people’s thinking was akin to what Pierre Bourdieu has termed “symbolic violence,” by which he refers to the “capacity to impose the means for comprehending and adapting to the social world by representing economic and political power in disguised, taken-for-granted forms.” Different from the traditional Marxist emphasis on the economic structure of society, the concept of symbolic violence helps uncover the operation of the symbolic dimension of power relations. In late imperial China, the imperial power, equipped with state apparatus, could recruit men of talent into government service by sheer coercion, as we have seen with Zhu Yuanzhang’s penal code against “the literati who refuse to be employed by the sovereign.” More often, however, it did so by resorting to a symbolic order through the complicity of the populace, who would tend to forget that the society’s ideological system was largely the result of the adroit manipulation by the state’s unseen hand as illustrated by a Song emperor’s doggerel of “Exhortation to Studies” quoted earlier in chapter 1. Omnipresent and permeating not only in government propaganda but also in proverbs, sayings, moral maxims, and many other forms of “popular wisdom,” the symbolic system fulfilled a political function by trying to lull the public into a docile acquiescence in the social order and the domination of the state power.

Under this symbolic order carefully maintained by state power, it
became almost a public consensus that a well-educated man could seek his fullest personal fulfillment only by winning an official appointment with an examination success. In this view, educational capital could be convertible in most favorable terms to social and symbolic capital only in the field of government service. Thus Du Shaoqing in The Scholars, who rebuffs invitations to the examinations, is seen as an eccentric; and in Dream of the Red Chamber, Jia Baoyu’s obstinate rejection of a bureaucratic career earns him the “jeers of many and angry looks of many more” \((HLM \ 1:64; \ SS \ 1:146)\). As government service was placed at the very top of the hierarchy of symbolic values, those who were barred from it were not only degraded politically but also marginalized culturally, with their social and symbolic capital severely diminished.

The imperial state’s appropriation of the Confucian doctrine, of which government service was a key component, prompted the gradual decline of the daotong in late imperial times. In the meantime, bolstered by both the government apparatus and the usurped moral primacy from the daotong, the state ideology became the dominant and authoritative discourse, sustaining the symbolic order of the society and potentially suffocating all other discourses. However, like the Western novel, Chinese vernacular fiction is a realistic representation of human experience, and it requires that each character bring his or her unique and individual discourse into the fictional world. A hegemonic and forcefully unifying discourse, endorsed by a spiritual or a secular authority, tends to be prohibitive of other discourses. It is therefore resistant to being dialogized or double-voiced, and does not belong to the world of the novel where different discourses intersect and interlock each other. 

In a sense, the world in Chinese vernacular fiction is characterized by a “centrifugal” force, which tends to displace an authoritative and homogenous voice with individual and heterogeneous ones.

This notion that fictional literature rises and grows while contesting and counteracting a dominant and hegemonic discourse was not actually foreign to traditional Chinese scholars and critics. In his preface to Stories Old and New \((Gujin \ xiaoshuo)\), Feng Menglong makes this famous statement: “Xiaoshuo began to rise when the tradition of historiography started to decline” \((Shitong \ san \ er \ xiaoshuo \ xing)\). 

Apparently, Feng uses the term xiaoshuo here to refer to a literary genre that had started with some of the pre-Qin works in prose narrative, works that can be called
fiction only in a broad sense. Yet, to our purpose here, the definition of the term *xiaoshuo* as Feng Menglong uses it is not as pertinent as Feng’s view on what happened between the early *xiaoshuo* and the tradition of historiography. As history writing was a political institution under the direct control of the state in ancient China, historiography had been the dominant and authoritative narrative genre for a long time. Consequently, *xiaoshuo*, as an unofficial and unorthodox narrative form, could only negotiate with historiography for a certain amount of legitimacy.

The situation for vernacular fiction in late imperial times was in a way comparable to that for the earliest works of *xiaoshuo* as Feng Menglong saw it. The emergence of vernacular fiction as a major narrative genre was conditioned by the literati’s continued haggling with the authoritative discourse of government service. There was, however, a major difference. What happened between vernacular fiction and the discourse on government service was not a collision or conciliation between two different narrative genres, one old and one new, as had been the case between historiography and the early *xiaoshuo* as Feng Menglong described. Instead, the discourse on government service had an influence that went far beyond narrative literature. Indeed, it permeated all aspects of social life and fed into the symbolic order at large. In the meantime, however, the discrepancy between what was taught in the discourse on government service and the social reality was becoming increasingly obvious. “In the most densely populated and prosperous regions,” as Susan Naquin and Evelyn Rawski have observed, “a sharpening of examination competition turned many intellectuals away from orthodox careers to activities in the cultural realm.” There was thus an exodus of literate and intellectual forces that was unprecedented in Chinese history in scale. Since the literati’s educational capital did not convert to symbolic capital in the field of civil bureaucracy, they reinvested it elsewhere, mostly in cultural fields. As the seventeenth-century scholar Gui Zhuang (1613–73) put it, once a literatus was “unfortunately rejected in the examinations,” he had, “for the rest of his life, to repose on poetry and wine and the use of other artistry” (*jiyu shijiu, tuoyu jiyi*). The literati culture that flourished in late imperial times was largely created by those who were outside government service. Their personal misfortunes in office seeking, paradoxically, became a blessing for the growth of many cultural fields. In that sense, the examination system functioned as a great “culture-booster”: intended
to serve as the main avenue for recruiting talent for the imperial state, it in fact constantly redirected educational and intellectual capital away from government service and pumped it instead into various cultural sectors.

This broadening gap between the symbolic order and social reality was a major reason for much of the frustration and bewilderment of the literati in different cultural fields, including vernacular fiction writing. Li Yu grumbled in a private letter that he was ill-fated with his “hundred skills” in writing, which only made him “hundred times poorer.” Cheng Jinfang (1718–84), writing a poem in mourning of Wu Jingzi, had good reason to express the regret that his late friend, with all his outstanding talent, “should have been remembered merely for his fiction” (jing yi baizhuan chuan). In the meantime, critics and commentators such as Li Zhi, Jin Shengtan, Mao Zonggang, and many others were nearly obsessed with the word “genius” (caizi) in their references to writers of vernacular literature. Yet, they were so emphatic in using that word, precisely because they knew that those writers were not generally recognized as geniuses. Much of the anxiety and bitterness of the fiction writers, expressed so frequently in the motif of unjustly neglected talent, should therefore be considered a reaction to the growing incongruity between the symbolic order of the society and the prevalent trend of massive transfer of literacy and intelligence away from government service into cultural realms. Vernacular fiction writers spearheaded that flow of educational capital; by exposing the bigotry in the symbolic order sustained by the state ideology, they also attempted to remove a major impediment to that flow.

The rise of vernacular fiction in late imperial China was a complicated cultural phenomenon that is not to be explained by any single reason. Among all the factors in the social setting, including the changed relationship between the educated gentry and the imperial state, none was solely responsible for the advent of vernacular fiction. While the literati’s disenchantment with the examinations and government service did not inevitably lead to fiction writing by itself, it was organically interwoven with other factors in the general social and cultural climate that proved conducive to the new narrative genre. The commercial market, for instance, played an enormous role in shaping the tastes and habits of the public and in the production and consumption of fictional works. Yet the growth of the commercial market was inextricably related to the
accelerated flow of educational capital. Since more and more intellectual elites no longer considered government service their ultimate professional destination, many of them became merchants. As the status distinction between literati and merchants tended to be blurred, it became possible for them to develop common interests.\textsuperscript{11} Typically, merchants who were actively involved with the production and consumption of vernacular fiction were those who emulated the scholarly style and way of life, since scholars had now become much more approachable.\textsuperscript{12} Thus the coalescence of commerce and culture, which was an indispensible premise for the full flourish of vernacular fiction, did not take place in isolation but was enhanced by the reshuffle of cultural and intellectual forces in the wake of the examinations.

The massive relocation of literate and intellectual forces also facilitated the preparation of writers of vernacular fiction. By turning away from the examinations and government service, these former examination candidates no longer had to bury themselves in volumes of the classics and exegetic commentaries and came to be in closer contact with commoners, not only their fellow scholars but also merchants, craftsmen, and peasants. Indeed, what Ian Watt has remarked of the Western novel to a large extent goes for Chinese vernacular fiction as well: “the novel is a full and authentic report of human experience, and is therefore under an obligation to satisfy its reader with such details of the story as the individualities of the actors concerned, the particulars of the times and places of their actions.”\textsuperscript{13} Living in the midst of ordinary people, fiction writers now could have a circumstantial view of human life. The result is what Robert Hegel has aptly termed “quotidian realism” that characterizes so many works of Chinese vernacular fiction.\textsuperscript{14}

This redistribution of men of letters was also a prerequisite for the rise of the written vernacular as a new literary language for fictional literature. In contrast to classical poetry, where writing and reading typically took place within the largely homogeneous circles of the literati themselves, vernacular fiction had audiences covering all social strata, from scholar-officials to shop assistants and from learned schoolmasters to functionally literate housewives.\textsuperscript{15} Particularly enhancing its appeal to readers from all walks of life was the use of either a mixture of vernacular with simplified classical Chinese, as in \textit{Romance of the Three Kingdoms}, or full-fledged written vernacular, as in \textit{Water Margin} and many other works. As the men
of letters now found themselves in proximity to the plebeians, they were in a position to familiarize themselves with different social dialects. The written vernacular, by emulating the whole spectrum of social dialects, proved a much more capable vehicle for “linguistic mimesis,” presenting a fictional simulacrum of the polyphonic social life.16

Yet the impact of the advent of the written vernacular went well beyond fiction itself. Language is always a form of power. Different people and different cultural institutions, to promote their respective interests, always privilege and elevate certain speech forms while demoting and disparaging others. As classical Chinese was the written language for classical studies and the examinations, it was a language valorized by the imperial state and, as such, bestowed with lofty symbolic values. In this context, the adoption of the written vernacular as the literary language in fiction carried considerable political ramifications, as it claimed a marked linguistic distinction outside the established symbolic order. Pu Songling, despite the fact that his Strange Tales from Liaozhai (Liaozhai zhiyi) was written in classical Chinese, was clearly aware of the power of language forms. In one of his stories, Wang Zi’an, a frustrated scholar, pledges bitterly that, if anyone dares to present him with written phrases such as qiefu and changwei, typical wenyan formulations frequently used in the examination essays, “I will definitely chase him out with a spear in hand” (ding-dang caoge zhu zhi).17 In the meantime, language forms, like other cultural symbols, embody and advance the interests of certain social groups. As reflected in Feng Menglong’s famous maxim that “there are few refined minds but many crude ears under heaven,” language forms are informed by, even though not reducible to, social structural forms.18 By embracing the language of the masses, vernacular fiction writers carved a large linguistic market for themselves and formed a broad alliance in combating the established symbolic order. Thus, like other linguistic and literary conventions, the predominant use of the written vernacular in late imperial Chinese fiction “can be appreciated only as a product of, and a means for reproducing, specific historical and political relations.”19

Late imperial China witnessed a quiet and gradual process of the intellectual elite’s refocusing of their interest and expectations from political power to common people and from the ruler (tianzi) to society and civilization (tianxia), a process that can be traced back to Wang Yangming, if not earlier.20 Admittedly, on an individual level a literatus’s exit from the
examinations was often involuntary, but the massive transfer of educational and intellectual capital from political domains into cultural realms was consistent with the sustained endeavor of the literati to redefine their relationships with the state and society, respectively. Thus, the rise and boom of vernacular fiction, perhaps more so than many other branches of the literati culture in late imperial China, was closely related to the exodus of legions of highly educated men away from government service, an institution so strictly controlled by and so closely associated with the state power that one may wish to call it an “imperial shadow.” Vernacular fiction was one of the products of that exodus from the imperial shadow, as the redistribution of intellectual forces helped make the new narrative genre possible culturally and linguistically. Yet vernacular fiction is also an *image* of that exodus itself, as we can see in works such as *The Scholars* and *Dream of the Red Chamber*, where literati figures turn away from government service and start to “attend to their own affairs.”

In its contemplation of the literati’s historical destiny, late imperial Chinese vernacular fiction portends a future moment when Chinese intelligentsia finally parted ways with government service, at least in a formal sense. For that moment, history would have to wait till the abolishment of the civil service examinations in 1905, or even the May 4th Movement over a decade later. Yet it seems that our fiction writers discussed in this study already discerned a historical momentum toward that end, as the two-millennium-long partnership of Chinese intellectuals and imperial state became increasingly rugged in the late dynasties. Chinese *shi*, as mentioned earlier, emerged as a self-conscious social group during the Spring and Autumn period in a historic “breakthrough,” a moment when “rituals corrupted and music crumpled” (*lihuai yuebeng*). If ritual and music serve as a metaphor for the system of Confucian moral and intellectual convictions in general, the times our vernacular fiction writers lived in can perhaps be called another moment of *lihuai yuebeng*, a moment that witnessed the decline of the *daotong* and the fossilization of the *dao* learning in the hand of the imperial state. Once again, this became a moment for the intellectuals to start regrouping themselves and redefining their historical missions. As if history advances in a cyclical movement, this *déjà vu* eventually would result in another breakthrough, of which late imperial Chinese vernacular fiction may be considered a harbinger. If the earlier breakthrough catalyzed an age-long partnership between Chinese
intellectuals and the state power, this later breakthrough would see the intellectuals marching out of the obsolete symbolic system in anticipation of the advent of modernity. Indeed, it would be a future of many uncertainties for them, but, just like Jia Baoyu in his departure from the mundane world, they would never turn back.