

“A Confucian Heartland of Women”

Huizhou, the land of prominent “mercantile” lineages, emerged as the center of female chastity cult in the late Ming. Wang Daokun focused on the values of male *jiexia* and female *jielie*, although he did not directly link the two. From our perspective now, however, it becomes clear that there was a connection in Huizhou between mercantile lineage and what contemporary observer Li Weizhen called, “the Confucian heartland of women.”¹ In this chapter I turn to the material reasons behind the causal links between the mercantile lineages and the female chastity cult in late Ming Huizhou.

As noted in the previous chapter, scholars have not reached a consensus regarding the reasons for the rise of the chastity cult in the Ming dynasty. Most recently, Siyen Fei has offered a provocative interpretation of the origins of the chastity cult in the Ming dynasty that argues against a simple causation between state indoctrination, socioeconomic change, and gender regimes. Instead, she places the beginning of the female chastity cult squarely with male literati activism. In recording chastity stories in the face of injustice in the state rewarding system and bureaucratic corruption, the literati, facing a collective identity crisis, found a space to assert themselves while at the same time acting on behalf of chaste women. As such, Fei argues, “contrary to what has been seen as a reflection of changed social attitude, the massive appearance of chastity biographies was in fact what triggered the social change”; the cult, she suggests, was hardly “a creation of Confucian patriarchal suppression.”²

Fei’s work represents a new interpretive approach suggesting that representations call into being social practice just as much as, if not more than, they reflect it, reminiscent of the enormously insightful perspective that Dorothy Ko developed in her widely acclaimed revisionist history of footbinding.³ Fei’s interpretation may make sense from the perspective of the empire-wide development of the chastity cult. However, it alone cannot be used to explain why certain regions were

particularly fervent in the practice and patronage of female chastity throughout late imperial times.⁴ Nor can it account for an apparent paradox: the rise of the female chastity cult around the mid-sixteenth century coincided with dramatic commercialization that actually loosened normative moral bonds and generated a seemingly contradictory “cult” of *qing* (passionate love).

This chapter, drawing on Huizhou’s rich sources, argues that the expanding money economy of the second half of the sixteenth century was intimately connected to the formation of the chastity cult. More specifically, it shows that commercialization altered the local social fabric and family life, which in turn shaped, or reshaped, gender relations and conditioned the rise and continuous popularity of the cult in certain regions. I do not just account for the cult, but also, more importantly, show how the social trend was an integral dimension of mercantile lineage culture, helping to define the emerging Huizhou identity.

It is worth reemphasizing that both the cult of female chastity and Huizhou mercantile lineage institutions emerged around the same time during the late sixteenth century and continued to develop in tandem thereafter. And yet, the links between the two still remain largely assumed, neither well documented nor explained. This chapter draws on demographic data from one particularly well-compiled Huizhou genealogy and many other genres of local sources to show that an important underlying factor in the formation of the cult of female marital fidelity in sixteenth-century Huizhou was the changing family-lineage structure, which was brought about by the high incidence of sojourning tradesmen in the region amid intensified commercialization. In this merchant hub of late imperial China, since the majority of young men left home for business, often leaving immediately after marriage and returning home only “once in three years,” the age at which couples had their first son tended to be high. This demographic trend combined with a moderate average life span to form a small nuclear family (consisting of a couple with or without children), not the ideal three-generation family, even as the natural increase in population augmented the size of the kinship settlement.⁵

Situated in single-couple nuclear households, wives of sojourning husbands tended to be relatively free from the monitoring of their sexuality. The only effective way to assure the fidelity of these abandoned women was to appeal to the larger lineage. This, in part, accounts for Wang Daokun’s profiling of so many righteous merchants and chaste women in the context of local patrilineal mercantile lineage culture, even if he himself did not explicitly mention or fully understand the underpinning factors for his dual emphasis. Furthermore, it helps explain why Huizhou merchants were so eager to consolidate home kinship institutions through the building of corporate estates (partially to take care of widows) and ancestral halls (including female shrines), alongside the construction of memorial archways (to honor chaste kinswomen).⁶ By the eighteenth century, a prosperous mercantile lineage in Huizhou could accommodate several thousand kinspeople, though a significant portion of kinspeople might be living in places beyond Huizhou for business concerns. All of these trends started in the sixteenth century.

THE CENSHAN CHENG GENEALOGY AND ITS DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

I have selected demographic data from *The Branch Genealogy of the Censhandu Chengs in Xin'an* for three reasons.⁷ First, it is one of the most detailed Huizhou genealogies. Second, the genealogy is focused on just one branch settlement covering a suitable chronology from its beginning during the Yuan-Ming transition up to 1741, which, in combination with sufficient numbers of kinspeople with demographic data, nicely shows historical trends. Third, the Censhan Chengs, though a relative latecomer among elite Huizhou kinship settlements, in many ways showcased the prominent and prosperous Huizhou mercantile lineages in late imperial times. The Censhan Chengs not only put into perfect use Wang Daokun's Huizhou social strategy of alternating between learning and commerce, but also highlighted the practice of female chastity (as recognized by *Prominent Lineages in Xin'an*, noted in chapter 2).

The Cheng lineage is listed first among the ninety elite surnames in *Prominent Lineages in Xin'an*, and the Censhan settlement originated from the prominent Cheng branch in nearby Huaitang village, the very first village-lineage settlement illustrated in *Prominent Lineages in Xin'an*. The first migrant ancestor of the Censhan Chengs, Cheng Cheng (fl. 1357), had five sons, and the branch began to take off demographically and socially after Cheng Cai of the sixth generation earned the metropolitan *jinshi* degree in 1496 (see fig. 2). After the turn of the sixteenth century and through the end of the Ming dynasty, the Censhan Chengs would produce five more *jinshi* and six *juren* degree holders, making it a new prominent kinship community in a region crowded with great families and renowned lineages.⁸

Amid their academic and political success in the mid-sixteenth century, the Censhan kinsmen began to take on commercial endeavors outside of Huizhou. Cheng Yingshe (1536–1591) of the eighth generation, probably along with his younger brother Yingbiao (1539–1603), apparently started his mercantile career at a young age, and the genealogy commends him as "sincere, honest, and considerate," and as having always "engaged in fair trade."⁹ Yingbiao's son, Dagong (1565–1648), was the first Censhan kinsman who established himself in the Lianghuai salt business, one of the most competitive and lucrative trades in the realm. The Huaitang comprehensive genealogy commends his righteous deeds in "refurbishing the home ancestral hall and harmonizing kinspeople, [and] building river embankments to prevent flood" after making a fortune "in the salt trade." Toward the end of the Ming he also contributed a large amount of silver to feed the imperial army. He and his cousins' descendants "oversaw the [Lianghuai] salt business for five generations."¹⁰

His cousin, Yingshe's son, Dadian (1575–1652), also engaged in the Lianghuai salt business, but settled in Yangzhou, about two hundred miles northeast of Huizhou where the Lianghuai salt administration was headquartered. The home genealogy characterizes him as a filial son and a loving brother who "enjoyed giving" (*leshi*), a generic term used in local lineage documents to mean donating a handsome sum

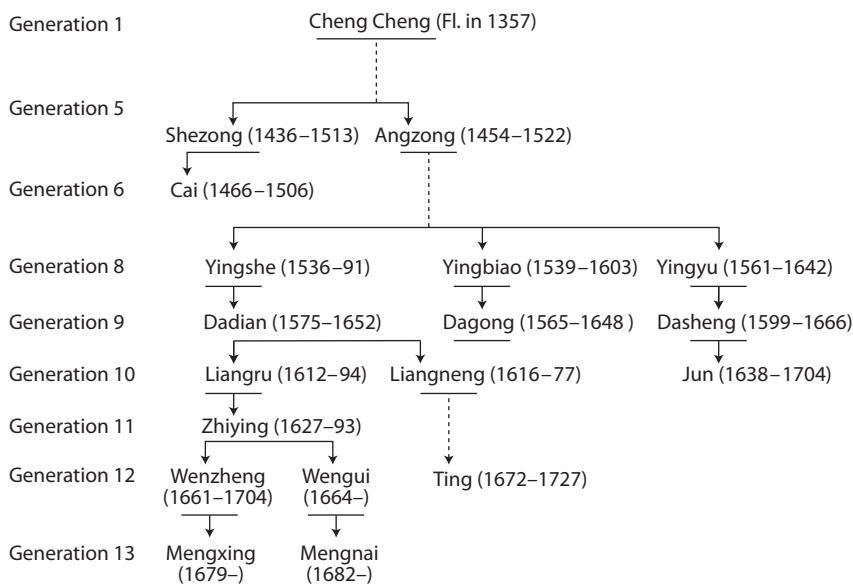


FIGURE 2. The key kinsmen of the Censhan Cheng lineage. *Xin'an Censhandu Chengshi zhipu* (1741).

of silver to building home kinship institutions and improving the surrounding infrastructure (such as repairing roads, canals, or local ritual establishments).¹¹ Most notable were the achievements of Dadian's five sons, especially his first and second, Liangru (1612-1694) and Liangneng (1616-1677), now permanently settled in Yangzhou. Liangru, and later his son Zhiying (1627-1693), became head merchant (*zongshang*) of the Lianghuai salt business after he successfully negotiated with the state to win back for the Lianghuai merchants the right to sell salt to three prefectures in southern Hunan, which had since Song times been controlled by the Guangdong salt administration. His grandson Wenzheng (1661-1704) and great grandson Mengxing (b. 1679) earned the metropolitan *jinshi* degree in 1691 and 1712, respectively, further boosting the prestige of the Censhan Chengs.¹² His younger brother, Liangneng, was noted for his contributions to building kinship institutions. He initiated the construction of the first ancestral hall for his kinspeople dwelling in Yangzhou, and for his ancestral lineage back home in Shexian he almost single-handedly financed the renewed compilation of the 1673 edition of the Huaitang Chengs' genealogy, which included the Censhan branch.¹³

Clearly, it was by no means accidental that in 1741 the Censhan Chengs produced one of the best Huizhou genealogies, given the branch's enormous success in both business and civil service. Compiled by Wenzheng's younger brother, Wengui (b. 1664), financed by Wengui's son, Mengnai (b. 1682), and prefaced by Mengxing, the seven-volume genealogy employs the state-of-the-art *tuzhuan* (ancestral tree plus biographic sketch for each kinsman) format to cover all kinsmen (not just prominent figures in the ancestry), a tradition first introduced by their famous

TABLE 2. Average age at birth of first son (ABFS) and average lifespans

Year Span	Age at Birth of First Son		Average Lifespan	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
1360–1380	23.5	22	—	—
	(2) ^a	(1)		
1381–1400	28.5	18	53	—
	(2)	(1)	(1)	
1401–1420	27.44	25.88	49.2	48.5
	(9)	(8)	(5)	(2)
1421–1440	27.75	25.72	55.6	42.83
	(12)	(11)	(5)	(6)
1441–1460	31.4	27.2	69	56
	(5)	(5)	(1)	(7)
1461–1480	28.09	25	—	—
	(11)	(7)		
1481–1500	28.92	26.44	—	—
	(14)	(9)		
1501–1520	25.78	24.64	54.9	34.75
	(23)	(17)	(10)	(4)
1521–1540	26.22	24.5	53.95	52.42
	(35)	(32)	(21)	(12)
1541–1560	25.74	23.55	60.13	58.21
	(47)	(38)	(30)	(33)
1561–1580	28.54	23.43	58.09	56.96
	(46)	(37)	(35)	(24)
1581–1600	31.15	25.19	56.04	61.27
	(46)	(36)	(23)	(15)
1601–1620	30.36	23.94	58.62	59.89
	(85)	(69)	(34)	(27)
1621–1640	28.81	23.48	51.8	47.9
	(108)	(92)	(60)	(49)
1641–1660	28.09	23.49	53.65	47.46
	(146)	(129)	(116)	(84)
1661–1680	29.61	23.83	49.80	44.37
	(205)	(188)	(96)	(122)
1681–1700	28.23	23.28	51.53	43.33
	(270)	(239)	(151)	(171)

(Contd.)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Year Span	Age at Birth of First Son		Average Lifespan	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
1701–1720	28.63 (356)	23.91 (334)	52.27 (286)	46.08 (274)
1721–1740	30.12 (524)	25.06 (486)	51.84 (447)	48.16 (531)
1741	27 (6)	22.83 (6)	62 (3)	70 (3)
Total Average	29.02	24.15	52.60	47.58
Total Cases	(1952)	(1745)	(1324)	(1364)

SOURCE: *Xin'an Censhandu Chengshi zhipu* (1741).

^a Numbers in parentheses indicate the total cases for which information is available.

^b Ages given here refer to the actual years lived, not the Chinese *sui*. Women tended to have a shorter average lifespan than men largely because a significant portion of women died in childbirth.

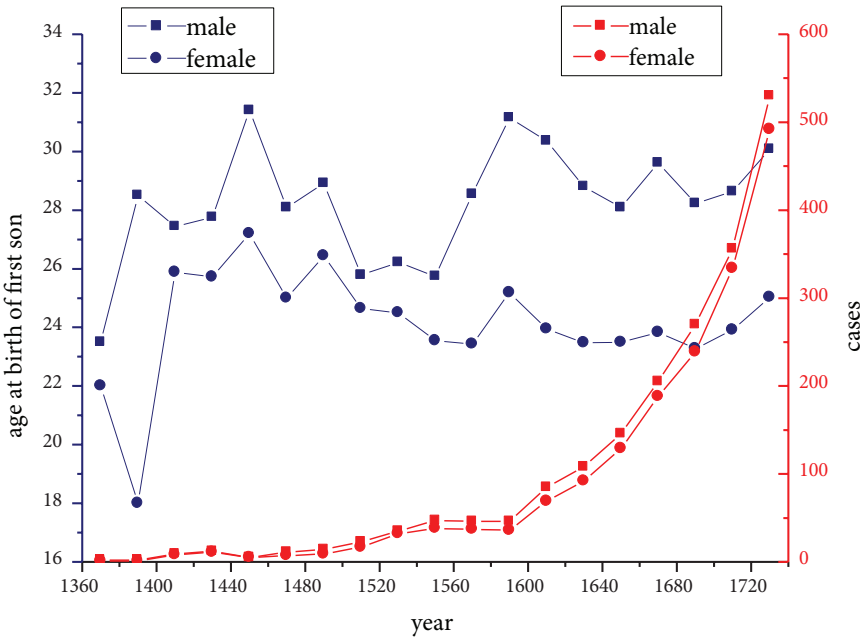


FIGURE 3. Average age at birth of first son among the Censhan Chengs. *Xin'an Censhandu Chengshi zhipu* (1741).

Ming dynasty kinsman from another branch, Cheng Minzheng.¹⁴ Most important for my purposes is the rich demographic data in this branch genealogy. In addition to its brief life and career sketches, the biography section records all the available

TABLE 3. Number of kinsmen in each generation

Generation	Age difference ^a	Number of kinsmen ^b
2nd–4th ^c	1333/1442 ^d	58
5th	1408/1480	50
6th	1437/1518	70
7th	1488/1567	115
8th	1513/1608	194
9th	1531/1637	295
10th	1535/1685	377
11th	1582/1721	627
12th	1614/1740	955
13th	1644/1741	1,141
14th	1666/1741 ^e	726
15th	1686/1741	244
Total (including first ancestor)		4,853

SOURCE: *Xin'an Censhandu Chengshi zhipu* (1741).

^a There were often considerable age differences between kinsmen of the same generation (except the first cohort covering three generations). The deeper the generation, the larger the gap. In this column, the designated years, separated by a slash, refer to the birth years of the oldest and youngest kinsmen within the same generation, respectively.

^b Kinswives are not listed in the family tree section of the Censhan Chengs' genealogy, therefore total numbers are virtually impossible to calculate. There were probably more kinswives than kinsmen, as wealthy kinsmen often had concubines or remarried after their first wives passed away, though some poor kinsmen probably never married and still others died before marriage.

^c As the first four generations did not have many kinsmen, they (minus the first migrant ancestor) are calculated in one cohort. From the fifth generation onward, each generation makes one calculating cohort.

^d The year 1333 is when Cheng Cheng's first son, Yue, was born, and thus the oldest among the second generation, while 1442 refers to the year when the youngest among the fourth generation was born.

^e As of 1741 (when the genealogy was compiled), many kinsmen of the fourteenth and fifteenth generations were still young and unmarried, or married without children, so the numbers of kinsmen in the last two generations declined.

or traceable birth and death dates of kinsmen and their wives and concubines from the first migrant ancestor Cheng Cheng down to 1741.¹⁵

The demographic data included in the branch genealogy yields table 2. The family tree sections in the Censhan Chengs' genealogy list 4,853 kinsmen in total (see table 3); from the biographical sketches we can glean and calculate the age at the birth of first son for 1,952 men and 1,745 women, and birth and death dates for 1,324 men and 1,364 women. Although not a perfect representation of the historical demographics of the Censhan Chengs, the pool of available cases is large enough to make sense of the demographic data presented in table 2, especially from the early sixteenth century onward.¹⁶ The average lifespan is about 52.6 for men and 47.6 for women, and the average age at birth of the first son (ABFS) is about twenty-nine for men and twenty-four for women.¹⁷ While meaningful in characterizing their impact upon local lineage-family structure (as will be dis-

cussed shortly), the average numbers of the demographics do not show a historical trend. Grouping the data by every two decades, however, we find that from around 1581 to 1620 the age at birth of the first son for men rose well above the average, to over thirty-one for the 1581–1600 cohort and over thirty for the 1601–1620 cohort. It shot up over thirty again for the 1721–1740 cohort. The data then shows the developing trajectory of historical variants (see fig. 3).¹⁸ I will now turn to an interpretation of this change in demographic data, along with the data from the other two-decade cohorts shown in table 2.

COMMERCIALIZATION AND THE SMALL-FAMILY/ LARGE-LINEAGE FABRIC

From table 2 we can conclude at least two points that must have had significant impacts upon local family life and family structure. First, we can link the demographic change in the period from 1581 to 1620 to contemporary commercialization, especially for the highly commercialized Censhan Chongs and Huizhou in general.¹⁹ The period falls into what Timothy Brook has termed the “late summer” and “early fall” of the Ming dynasty—the most rapidly accelerating period in terms of the development of the money economy.²⁰ In terms of local lineage developments, it corresponds to the coming-of-age of Cheng Dadian and Cheng Dagong, who ventured out of Huizhou to engage in the Lianghuai salt business, by which time their fathers (Yingshe and Yingbiao, who represent the first generation of serious merchants in Censhan) had probably retired from their commercial careers. For Shexian and Huizhou as a whole, this was about the time when “seven or eight out of ten households” engaged in trade, as reported by Wang Daokun.²¹

In this intense mercantile atmosphere, Huizhou men normally started their sojourning business career at a young age, and often found it difficult to visit home given the limits of transportation (further compounded by Huizhou’s mountainous landscape) as well as the vigorous demands of the competitive market. One popular source from the Qing dynasty notes “an established rule in Huizhou: men at sixteen must leave home to learn a trade.”²² Another age-old proverb from Yixian (which was not the most commercialized of the six Huizhou counties) went, “We didn’t build up merit a lifetime ago, so we were born in Huizhou; at thirteen or fourteen, it’s out we go.”²³ The late Ming scholar from Yixian, Huang Shiqi, wrote eight casual verses portraying local customs in his home county, one of which, “Merchants,” begins:

The men set their ambitions on the four directions;
they shirk not from traveling three thousand miles.
Xin’an is full of traveling youths,
who do nothing but pursue fly-head profits.

This spirit has gradually turned to custom;
 abacuses in hand, they spread throughout the realm.²⁴

These sojourning youths, according to the 1566 edition of the Huizhou prefectural gazetteer, "returned home only once every couple of years." This obviously had become a pattern, which was reconfirmed not only in later Huizhou gazetteers and other genres of documents but also reflected in additional Ming sources.²⁵ A late Ming literati account of two Huizhou brothers who were "deeply ashamed and depressed" after an unsuccessful business venture in the northeastern province of Liaoning noted "a Huizhou custom": "merchants all return home once every couple of years; their affines and kin all view them as worthy or worthless, and so either admire or despise them, based on what they have earned in trade."²⁶ Here we see a further cultural factor, in addition to the geographical impediments and economic reasons already mentioned, that hindered visits home for many sojourning youngsters. Wang Daokun, in one of the numerous biographies of Huizhou merchants he penned, noted that for every ten Huizhou households, seven engaged in trade but only "three out of ten succeeded."²⁷ Given this low success rate, we might wonder how many young traders never had the nerve to return home and might even have died outside of Huizhou. The demographic data of the Censhan Chengs presented in table 2, or rather the lack of it in many cases, especially the lack of kinsmen's death dates, may indirectly reflect the commercial hardship and cultural bias faced by sojourning youths.²⁸

The long-term absence of sojourning men exerted a significant impact upon family life at home. Xu Guo (1527–1596), a future grand secretariat from Shexian mentioned in the previous chapter, did not meet his sojourning father until he was six.²⁹ Xu Guo was indeed lucky to have been conceived before his father left home on a business trip. In a region full of sojourning youths, who often left home not long after their wedding, having a child was a rare event. Early marriage appears to have been well established in Huizhou (and was probably further accentuated amid intense commercialization during the late Ming), as was the custom of young men leaving home immediately after the wedding.³⁰ As Gu Yanwu (1613–1682) noted, Huizhou merchants left home "a few months after marrying, often for as long as ten years at a time, so that if father and son met they would not recognize one another."³¹

This custom is also reflected in popular fiction. In *Slapping the Table in Astonishment* (Pai'an jingqi), a late Ming collection of popular short tales, we find a story about a Huizhou merchant by the name of Pan Jia (a gloss, perhaps, on two homophonic characters, *panjia*, meaning "longing for home"). This scholar-turned-merchant has just married the "delicately pretty" Yao Dizhu. Just two months after the wedding, Pan Jia's father bitterly scolds him, saying, "Look at the two of you, so lovey-dovey. Husband and wife can't just while away a lifetime doting on each other. Why don't you put your mind to going out to do business?" Pan Jia has no

choice but to talk it over with Dizhu. The two of them weep and spend the whole night talking. The next morning, Father Pan forces his son to leave home. Yao Dizhu is left behind as if a “widow,” “dropping pearl-like tears,” echoing the literal meaning of her given name, every day. Later, the story goes, she runs away from home after being bitterly scolded by her parents-in-law and falls into the hands of a pimp and a procuress. She eventually loses her fidelity to another Huizhou merchant, leading to a two-year lawsuit and her eventual reunion with Pan Jia.³²

This pattern of youths leaving home on business not long after their weddings, multiyear separations between sojourning men and their wives, plus high expectations placed upon the careers of young sojourners within an overall atmosphere of intensifying commercial competition, worked in tandem to alter local demographics in late Ming Huizhou. It was these new trends that likely account for the significant rise around 1580 in the ABFS in the Censhan Chengs data. This corresponds to the generation of Dagong and Dadian, with Dagong’s ABFS being twenty-three and Dadian’s thirty-seven.³³ A rigorous travel regime could not only raise the ABFS, it could even leave some sojourning men childless. A case in point is the story of Cheng Dajie (b. 1559) of the Censhan Chengs. In his youth, this elder cousin of Dadian was afflicted with a terrible disease on a business journey and died three years later at home without a descendant (we are left with a detailed account of him in the branch genealogy because he had a remarkable wife, as will be discussed later).³⁴

What, then, does all of this have to do with family life and gender relations in Censhan? The second point we can draw from table 2 is that the rising ABFS, in combination with a moderate average lifespan, began to alter the fabric of family life in Censhan (and, by implication, in Huizhou at large). Taking into account margin of error and other factors, we can subtract two years from the male ABFS (twenty-nine) to arrive at the typical kinsman’s average age at birth of the first *child* as approximately twenty-seven.³⁵ Not incidentally, the average generational years for the Censhan Chengs come out to be approximately twenty-seven.³⁶ When subtracting this number from the average lifespan of the Censhan Cheng kinsmen (52.6) and their wives (47.6), we get 25.6 for kinsmen and 20.6 for their wives. The implication of this is that on average three-generation households in Huizhou were not the norm.³⁷

The combination of high age at the birth of the first son (or child) and a moderate lifespan made it almost impossible to maintain a three-generation family in Censhan (though in reality three-generation families certainly existed, as many kinsmen died young and others lived longer than the mean lifespan).³⁸ On average, the dominant family type for the Censhan Chengs was the nuclear family with or without children, and this trend became particularly notable in the late sixteenth century (and again in the early eighteenth century) when commercialization intensified. This appears to have also been reflected in the “virtuous women” section in the 1566 gazetteer of Huizhou prefecture. According to Katherine

Carlitz, the "virtuous women" section of the *Huizhou Gazetteer*, describing 290 exemplary women, mentions parents-in-law in the home in only 19 percent of Ming cases, while a quick survey of six late Ming gazetteers from Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Fujian shows parent(s)-in-law present in, on average, 48 percent of Ming cases. This regional divergence supports the small-family/large lineage thesis in Huizhou.³⁹

Other factors played into the shrinking family size in sixteenth-century Huizhou. Instead of living up to the Confucian ideal of sharing wealth under the same roof of a multigenerational house, brothers now tended to divide family property, some even when their parents were still alive. A large number of handwritten "drawing-lots" contracts (*jiushu*) of dividing property among brothers from Ming Huizhou are still extant. The following examples are revealing. One was prepared in 1543 by a widow, née Cheng, for her three sons upon the death of her husband. The latter had attempted several times to divide his estate while still alive, but his sons were unwilling to follow through with the division at the time.⁴⁰ Still another drawing-lots contract, signed in 1570 by two Su brothers, states that they were getting old so they decided to divide their property—including houses, land, ponds, mountainous slopes they had inherited and further expanded themselves—into two parts for their infant sons and had the division guaranteed by their relatives.⁴¹ From yet another drawing-lots contract signed in 1561 by the merchant Sun Shi and supervised and handwritten by his son-in-law Wu Xizhi, we learn that Sun's father was a trader who, orphaned at the age of one, had worked hard and eventually amassed some fortune. However, he did not have a son until "middle age." Now, in 1561, Sun Shi's own sons, three in total, were all married, and so he decided to divide all of his property, including land estates and commercial shops, evenly among them.⁴² In the brief introduction to the division contract, Sun Shi put forward his hope that all three sons would work diligently and live frugally so that the "enterprises" laid down by their ancestors would not fall apart. This statement appears to reflect a new Huizhou merchant tactic of dividing property for better management.⁴³ As the Sun Shi contract lists many plots of land and mountain slopes, along with tenants assigned to them, the story appears to confirm another pattern of investment by Huizhou merchants—they invested in property at home after getting rich while sojourning.⁴⁴

Beyond practicing division of land through drawing-lots, some Huizhou proprietors even pondered the philosophical meanings of property division. The boldest account endorsing the moral value of property division came from the drawing-lots contract signed in 1572 by two Fang brothers, which declared in its introduction that family property "undivided is a big disaster under heaven, whereas that divided is a big benefit under heaven." Brutally honest, the statement defies the conventional wisdom of shared property within a multi-generational family. Its boldness reflects the changing mood in Huizhou, signaling how deeply commercialization had altered the local value system and family fabric.⁴⁵

While property division was shrinking the family size, the property divided still remained within the same lineage so that the estate holdings of the larger kin community were not split up.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, as table 3 demonstrates, the size of the kinship settlement continued to expand as the population increased. Partially in response to the growth of kinspeople, and partially in response to the new challenges of the changing times, lineage institutions kept growing over the course of the sixteenth century (and afterward through the Qing dynasty), when we see an explosion of genealogy compilations, ancestral halls, corporate estates, perfection of lineage value systems (including the fashioning of new mercantile ethics and an emphasis on lineage identification), and the construction, or reorientation, of symbolic lineage resources such as ritual opera performance and religious beliefs. Led by gentry, and often financed by merchants, Huizhou kinship institutions matured during the sixteenth century, marked by the formation in the mid-century of mercantile lineages.⁴⁷ The small-family/large-lineage patterned the structural fabric of these Huizhou mercantile lineages.⁴⁸

ENGENDERING MERCANTILE LINEAGE CULTURE

The emerging Huizhou mercantile lineage culture was male centered. Chinese lineage, which follows patrilineal descent, stressed the Confucian norm of female chastity and marital fidelity. Some recent studies have complicated the issue by, for instance, looking into actual lawsuits over women’s “disgraceful matters” (adultery or suicides), which involved conflicts between patrilineal kin networks and affinal kin networks, to show that the promotion of female chastity was not always consistent with the promotion of patriarchal hierarchy.⁴⁹ But Huizhou was different, or differently complicated, as this kinship stronghold was marked throughout late imperial times by a long-established custom of intermarriage between local elite lineages so that patrilineal and affinal kin networks generally shared the same male “lineage” interests over female “gender” interests. We have seen how *Prominent Lineages in Xin’an* worked to enhance the Huizhou marriage pattern.

In this section I draw upon a handful of the many Huizhou writers who all admiringly commented on the custom of their homeland. Wang Xun (*jinshi* 1496) of Xiuning noted that his home canton was prominent for having four long-established *shijia* (prominent lineages)—the Fengcun Wangs, Shanhou Huangs, Zhangyuan Fangs, and Yupengyuan Wangs—who “intermarried for generations” (*shiwei hunyin*).⁵⁰ The rise of the Huizhou mercantile group in the mid-sixteenth century, instead of weakening this old custom, actually further enhanced it, as the ingredients of “elite lineage” now included not just ancestral pedigree (including exam degrees) but also commercial wealth. Given that wealthy merchants mostly came from prominent lineages and that kinship and affinal support was behind their success, there was no reason for Huizhou merchants to undo the elite intermarriage custom, whose continued popularity can be easily confirmed

by late Ming sources. Fang Chengxun, a scholarly merchant from a prominent Shexian mercantile lineage who was active during the Wanli reign (1573–1620), noted that the Luntan Fangs (his home lineage) and the Dafo Pans were “bound in intermarriage for generations” (*shidi hunmeng*), and his own great grandmother and great great grandmother, “worthy and virtuous,” were both from the Dafu Pans.⁵¹ Fang Chengxun’s contemporary Wu Ziyu, from the neighboring county of Xiuning, noted that in the county seat the Jins “intermarried for generations” with the Wang and Ye families.⁵² Another elder contemporary, the renowned Wang Daokun, admired the deep-rooted intermarriage pattern of Huizhou elite lineages on numerous occasions.⁵³

These general comments aside, a more concrete confirmation of the lineage intermarriage custom can be gleaned from the Censhan Chengs’ genealogy. Table 4 shows the intermarriage patterns between the Censhan Chengs and other Shexian prominent mercantile lineages. In this land of kin communities, daughters from lineage A (first column) married into lineage B (the Censhan Chengs), while daughters from lineage B married into lineage A. In such an interconnected network, lineage A probably would not lodge a complaint against lineage B if one of their daughters wound up being mistreated—at least not in principle (perhaps with the exception of very special cases in practice), as these linked lineages needed to work together to protect patrilineal interests and secure the sources of future daughters-in-law for their sons. Given this logic, the local intermarriage system clearly played a significant role in enhancing the patriarchal rule of kinship communities by unifying them in practical interests as well as social values on the gender front.⁵⁴

Given the intrakinship networks and patriarchal ideology, Huizhou genealogies, like their collective representation, *Prominent Lineages in Xin'an*, unanimously endorsed the value of female chastity, along with male loyalty, filial devotion, brotherly love, righteous generosity, and ancestral pedigree. Here, too, the mid-Ming represents a significant turning point when it comes to commenting on female chastity. Cheng Minzheng did not even touch upon gender matters in the kinship rules he formulated in the genealogy he compiled in the late fifteenth century for his ancestral lineage.⁵⁵ After the mid-sixteenth century, however, Huizhou genealogies began to formulate “lineage rules” (*zugui*) that included concerns over gender issues, in correlation with the boom in both genealogy compilation and officially endorsed biweekly “village-lectures” (*xiangyue*). A recent study by Chang Jianhua on Ming kinship examines several lineage rules from late Ming Xiuning genealogies, one of which is titled *Guimen dangsu* (The women’s quarter must be strictly disciplined). The earliest of these *zugui* is the *Guidelines for the Lineage Temple* (Tongzong cigui) of the Xiuning Fans, dated 1566. Chang Jianhua further suggests that these lineage rules, given the remarkable similarity of their titles and contents, must have come from an earlier common source, most likely first formulated around the mid-sixteenth century.⁵⁶ He cites another lineage rule contained in a 1572 Huizhou genealogy in great detail, which sounds particularly

TABLE 4. Lineage intermarriage patterns

Village-lineage	Daughters married into Censhan Cheng lineage	Daughters married out of Censhan Cheng lineage
<i>Primary wives</i>		
Caoshi Sun	13	13
Changgai Bi	12	2
Chengkan Luo	15	10
Fudai Hong	19	6
Hangbu Cao	11	8
Hangbutou Cao	22	19
Hongkeng Hong	70	51
Hongkeng Wang	10	8
Hongyuan Hong	20	14
Huangbei Zhang	18	10
Huanshan Fang	37	6
Jielin Fang	83	60
Jielin Wang	17	8
Jielin Xu	15	2
Jingxing Liu	10	4
Juncheng Bi	17	7
Luotian Fang	14	14
Pancun Pan	37	22
Qiankou Wang	10	3
Shaocun Zhang	45	44
Tandu Huang	19	17
Wangcun Wang	41	19
Wucun Zhu	13	30
Xi'nan Wu	57	46
Xiongcun Cao	93	70
Xiongcun Hong	27	12
Xucun Xu	13	6
Yanzhen Fang	14	8
Yegan Ye	11	2
Yicheng Yang	15	6
Yicheng Zhu	36	31
Yu'an Wang	10	2
Zhangqi Wang	38	13
Zhengcun Zheng	10	8

TABLE 4 (Continued)

Village-lineage	Daughters married into Censhan Cheng lineage	Daughters married out of Censhan Cheng lineage
<i>Second Wives (after remarriage)</i>		
Hongkeng Hong	10	—
Shaocun Zhang	12	—
Xiongkun Cao	15	—

NOTE: The first column lists the village-lineages that married ten or more daughters into the Censhan Chengs; their numbers are listed in the second column. The third column lists the number of the daughters from the Censhan Chengs who were married into those same village-lineages. Data are limited to the county of Shexian. Only those lineages whose village settlements are identified are included in the table. For instance, the Pans married seventeen daughters into the Censhan Chengs, while the Pancun Pans married thirty-seven daughters into the Censhan Chengs. But since I cannot be sure if these first Pans hailed from Pancun, the first seventeen cases are not included.

SOURCE: *Xin'an Censhandu Chengshi zhipu* (1741).

harsh to daughters-in-law. It urges couples to maintain harmonious relations with each other and with other family members by urging husbands to refrain from listening to any of their wives' words that might harm the "harmonious atmosphere" at home, further stating that "one family's harmonious atmosphere, or lack of it, all depends on whether women are virtuous or not."⁵⁷

To Chang Jianhua's list I add four more Huizhou genealogies that included a clause or two on gender or chastity issues. The recently uncovered genealogy compiled by Zheng Zhizhen (1518–1595) of Qimen County—who was best known for having authored the first (extant) Mulian opera that depicts the use of godly power to promote female chastity (and other Confucian values, including the new mercantile code of ethics)—states in its guidelines that "remarried women are not to be recorded" (*gaijia zhe bushu*).⁵⁸ This rule was more than just a practical matter of not entering the name of a remarried woman who now belonged to another lineage in the genealogy. It had the effect of serving as a warning—being excluded from the family genealogy (that is, being expelled from the lineage temple) was, like remarriage, a matter of shame.

Another lineage from Qimen County, the Wentang Chens, stood out in formulating an individually printed lineage code pamphlet that contained a number of rules concerning gender matters in 1572.⁵⁹ One rule concerning ancestral rites makes the penalty clear: "Whoever commits adultery, robbery, and deception that damages the family code will be exposed and openly expelled from the lineage temple; they will never be allowed to sneak into the ritual process to tarnish ancestral spirits." Another rule reads, "In cases of women who, arrogantly uncontrollable by nature, constantly threaten us with suicide by hanging or drowning that eventually lead to real death, they should be ignored; if their natal families make unreasonable demands, the head and deputy-head of the *xiangyue* community shall deal with and reject the demands."⁶⁰ Yet another urged the maintenance of a clear demarcation between men and women, as it was believed that youngsters

who refused to study, instead spending their time drinking with others and then entering the women's quarters, are the reason for a variety of shameful matters; it went on to announce that severe cases must be dealt with harshly and never tolerated. The next rule concerns positive aspects of kin life, promising awards to kinsmen and kinswomen marked by integrity and chastity, whom the *xiangyue* leaders would report to officials for the coveted imperial banners so as to glorify ancestors.⁶¹

The 1570 genealogy of the Shuaikou Chengs in Xiuning put the promotion of female chastity and devoted widowhood in more specific terms. One of its guidelines states, “Good women's quarters generate good customs automatically. For kinswives who are widowed young and devoted to their departed husbands or who sacrifice themselves to follow their departed husbands, regardless of whether they have been bestowed imperial awards or not, their deeds will all be recorded. Married kinsdaughters who are committed to widowhood will also be recorded in attachments. The names of those [kinsmen] who married servants, those [kinswives] who remarried, and those kinsdaughters who married into debased families will all be erased without being recorded [in the genealogy].”⁶² The Censhan and Huaitang Chengs, ancestrally related to the Shuaikou Cheng lineage, focused only on the reward side, without threatening punishment for unworthy women. One of their guidelines states, “According to the *Situ* genealogy, kinswives' life-long devotion to widowhood and chastity should be recorded with some praise [in the genealogy] so as to promote good customs. For those kinswives who meet the new requirements for the award of imperial banners, they should be recorded in a genealogical biography. Even those kinswives who do not meet the new requirement but are devoted to widowhood and chastity for many years should also be applauded [in the genealogy].”⁶³

The Censhan Chengs, by focusing on positive commendation without appealing to punitive wording for unworthy women, appeared to exude confidence in regard to the practices of their women. In any event, they are known for having created other means or institutions to promote womanly virtue, and chastity in particular. In the late Ming they built a shrine honoring chaste women, a trend that current scholarship has assumed to have emerged in the late High Qing. As evidence, we can return to the story of Cheng Dajie in the mid-sixteenth century. This elder cousin of Cheng Dagong and Cheng Dadian became critically ill while on a business journey and so had to return home. His wife, née Wu (b. 1567), from a local prominent lineage, carefully attended to him for three years before he died without a descendant. After preparing a perfect funeral for her husband according to Confucian ritual norms, Ms. Wu fasted for seven days before taking some food, and then again refused to take food for two more days before dying (the genealogy does not indicate in what year). In the early Wanli period (1573–1620), the genealogy proudly noted, the imperial state awarded Ms. Wu with a “chastity martyr” plaque to build an archway in her honor, and she was accordingly glorified in the

lineage shrine of female chastity (*jielie ci*), enjoying the spring and fall sacrifices. The Huizhou high-ranking official Luo Wanhua personally wrote the calligraphy for the commemorative arch, which read, "Choosing righteous death with grace" (Congrong jiuyi).⁶⁴

Other mercantile lineages also built shrines to honor devoted women in the late Ming. Wang Daokun, at the request of his close friend Pan Zhiheng (1556–1621), who came from a wealthy merchant family known for having great taste in operatic performance, wrote a stele inscription for the ancestral hall of Zhiheng's clan, a prominent Shexian mercantile lineage. The construction of the Lineage Temple of the Pans started in 1587 and was completed in 1591. The magnificent central hall had two side wings: the west honored devoted kinswomen and chastity martyrs (*xici jielie*) and the east housed the Earth God (*dongci houtu*).⁶⁵

Indeed, the construction of the lineage female shrine was a concrete embodiment of the intensified gendered demands of mercantile lineage culture in late Ming Huizhou, a material symbol of the rise of the female chastity cult. Also notable for the two *jielie* shrines was the involvement of merchants, one showcasing the value of a martyred wife of a sojourning man and the other showcasing the financial contribution by wealthy merchants to the construction of home lineage institutions. Pan Kui, who Wang Daokun referred to as a *chushi* (scholar-turned-merchant), began planning the Lineage Temple of the Pans in the mid-century. Kui had three sons, the eldest serving as a county magistrate, the second noted for his longevity, and the third noted for his wealth. At the request of the elder brother to fulfill their father's will to build the lineage temple, the youngest brother immediately contributed two thousand taels of silver. Pan Zhiheng, another son of a merchant, was also directly involved in the construction of the lineage temple.⁶⁶

The most remarkable contribution to a lineage institution was from a couple from another Shexian prominent mercantile lineage, again reported by Wang Daokun. Wu Pei from the Xi'an Wu's fourth branch, again referred to as a *chushi*, harbored great scholarly ambition but established his household as a merchant. Whenever he was at home, this sojourning man constantly said to his wife (née Wang, from another Shexian mercantile lineage in Qianchuan and related to Wang Daokun's ancestral clan), "My two younger brothers are devoted to mastering classics, and in the future they will surely glorify my ancestors. But as I am working in a lowly occupation, how can I promote my lineage? I certainly hope that I have special skills in making money, and [can] build an ancestral hall for my branch. I will not be fulfilled if I fail to make this happen." Ms. Wang always respectfully nodded in agreement. Before long, Wu Pei died in Kaifeng while on business; he had no sons. After the funeral, Ms. Wang wept saying, "My husband died; it's not that hard for [me as] one not-yet-dead [*weiwangren*] to follow him [by committing suicide]. But my husband had a will that has not yet been fulfilled." So she entrusted the wealth left by her husband to capable merchants to make money.

Within several years, after having accumulated one hundred taels of silver, she began to talk about, and soon initiated, the building of the ancestral hall. It took a couple of years to complete the construction. In the process, she first sold all of her dowry, and then took out loans, and then resumed and sold needlework to accumulate the additional funding needed to complete the project.⁶⁷ The story of Ms. Wang highlights the gendering of mercantile lineage culture in many ways. A young devoted widow of a sojourning merchant, she embodied the cult of female chastity while also making a direct contribution to augmenting the “home” lineage institution on behalf of her late husband.⁶⁸

Huizhou merchants were eager to join lineage elders (often led by gentry) to play a significant role in enhancing kinship institutions for several reasons. In addition to the influence they received from home mercantile lineage culture, Huizhou merchants, often unsuccessful scholars turned *chushi*, wanted to seize any opportunity to assert themselves and demonstrate their worthiness in front of home kin—especially those who had failed in the exams but now succeeded in commerce. This was even more the case when a merchant, such as Wu Pei, had brothers focusing on exam studies with highly promising careers. This assertion made sense in both social and psychological terms in a place where merchants were still viewed as inferior to scholars despite their rising significance. General concerns aside, there were specific gendered reasons for Huizhou merchants to shore up home lineage institutions, especially when commercialization worked to change the local family structure and the negative public image of the sexual license of merchants in the sixteenth century.

Sojourning merchants were, quite naturally, concerned with their family members back home, especially their young wives. The aforementioned Fang Chengxun, a scholar-turned-merchant involved in the money lending business, for instance, complained about the length of his sojourning career in one of the many poems he wrote conveying his homesickness and longing for his wife back home: “I have been a stranger traveling long distances for ten years; how long it has been!”⁶⁹ Another poem titled, “Attempting a Reply to My Wife,” began: “High in an alcove, my wife pines away; from dawn to dusk she heaves such heavy sighs. For whom does she sigh so heavily? Her heart is troubled by the man she holds so dear.”⁷⁰

Fang Chengxun also authored a number of merchant biographies. One was about a Shexian man named Huang Yu, calling him *fengjun* (literally meaning “gentleman with an officially bestowed title”), a more prestigious term than *chushi* to refer to a merchant. The biographer emphasized three things that *fengjun* Huang did after making a fortune from the Lianghuai salt trade: he helped out kinspeople, urged offspring to pursue scholarly careers by studying the classics, and “used the Confucian code of propriety to strictly discipline the women’s quarter” (*yili yansu guimen*).⁷¹ Indeed, all three became related ingredients of Huizhou mercantile lineage culture, showcasing the typical concerns of Huizhou merchants

as a group, given the sojourning nature of their career, their ambiguous position in local society (rising significance versus deeply rooted—and newly emphasized—bias against the merchant vocation), and their social metamorphosis strategy (using wealth from commerce to support siblings or offspring who were pursuing a career in officialdom).

Huizhou merchants' strict disciplining of the women's quarters, often inflected by these sojourning men's longing for home, should be linked to their generous support of home lineage institutions, and indeed the former should be seen as an ingredient of the latter—that is, as part of what I have called the “engendering” of mercantile lineage culture. This became especially acute when intensified commercialization was placing downward population pressure on individual families within expanding lineages in the late Ming. Huizhou merchants formed a united front with lineage gentry out of concern over the loyalty of their wives. Situated in shrinking nuclear families, the young wives of sojourning men were vulnerable to sexual enticement or threat, both because they were lonely and because there were few family members watching over them.⁷² Huizhou sojourning men were fully aware of this threat, as it often came from their fellow Huizhou merchants with deep pockets. An example of this can be seen in the aforementioned *Slapping the Table in Astonishment* story about the newlywed Pan Jia, whose young wife was later seduced by another Huizhou merchant. Little wonder, then, that in the popular “Hanged Woman” episode of the late Ming opera *Mulian*, the sojourning vendor is so sensitive about the sexual fidelity of his young wife that he beats her upon returning home after overhearing that she has given her earrings to two monks, which he mistakes as a token of love. After being beaten, she hangs herself, but is ultimately saved by a divinity as she turns out to be a genuinely devoted wife.⁷³

More widely publicized in various genres over the course of the sixteenth century was the real tragedy of Tang Guimei, a young widow who chose to hang herself after the lover of her widowed mother-in-law sexually harassed her. As reported in a typical literati jotting by Yang Shen (1488–1559), the man implicated in the notorious scandal was none other than a merchant from Huizhou.⁷⁴ An illustration of Tang Guimei was also included in the famous *Records of Model Women* (Nüfanzhuan). This book was compiled by Huang Shangwen, a late Ming calligrapher from Shexian who specialized in woodblock cuts and printing.⁷⁵ Beautifully illustrated, *Records of Model Women* falls into the late Ming genre of moral handbooks such as *Biographies of Exemplary Women*, whose female exemplars became, as Katherine Carlitz insightfully notes, “simultaneously icons of virtue and objects of sensuous connoisseurship.”⁷⁶

The same twofold characterization can be said of Wang Daokun's illustrated edition of *Biographies of Exemplary Women*, which may also contain a clue to explaining the coexistence of the two seemingly contradictory cults of female chastity and romantic love. As shown in the previous chapter, Wang Daokun's support for and—in at least one instance—adamant encouragement of chastity martyrdom

seems to fly in the face of his notable penchant for the cult of *qing*. And yet, the two trends combined perfectly in the persona of Wang Daokun. He had three formal wives in succession and loved all three women, in particular the last one, née Jiang. He took no concubines nor did he engage in any sexual liaisons outside of his marriages, except toward the end of his life when he was briefly attracted to a famous Nanjing courtesan named Xu Pianpian.⁷⁷ He penned “Biographies of the Seven Chastity Martyrs” in 1570 when he was forty-four years old, about ten years after he authored the four romance plays in 1560. His romances—though criticized as “nothing but florid prose” at the time—foreshadowed what was to become the cult of *qing*. This was most famously embodied in the plays of Tang Xianzu (1550–1616), whose writing style Wang Daokun admired for being “deeply erudite and astonishingly exquisite.”⁷⁸ Wang’s two seemingly different types of writing—biographies of female martyrs and romance plays—along with his personal history, reflect the emergence of two concurrent and seemingly opposing cults of female chastity and romantic passion.

That these two seemingly contradictory trends were combined in Wang Daokun can be partially explained through the complex intellectual influences of both Wang Yangmingism and the Cheng-Zhu School of Principle. Wang Daokun was an enthusiastic follower of Wang Yangming; at the same time, he also was immersed in a local mercantile lineage culture that mixed the philosophical stances of both the Cheng-Zhu school and Wang Yangming. The *xin* of Wang Yangming’s school points to both the rational mind and affective heart, an intellectual and emotional harbinger for the cult of love.⁷⁹ Yet, as shown in his pieces on the female martyrdom, Wang Daokun could be cold-blooded in his treatment of widows and utterly demanding of kinswomen to maintain their chastity. The cults of female chastity and romantic passion were two facets of the same coin of engendered Huizhou mercantile lineage culture; it is thus no coincidence that the two trends were embodied in Wang Daokun.

Wang Daokun aside, the explanation of the coexistence of the two opposing cults of female chastity and romantic passion amid the commercialization of the late Ming may be found in a more mundane realm, which entailed, more or less, a gendered double standard: for men the emphasis was on “romance” (that is, fulfilling sexual desire); for women, it was on chastity (including, even in the case of high-class courtesans, “chaste romance”). Indeed, beneath the two opposing trajectories of the “beautiful images” of virtuous women embodied in Huang Shangwen’s prints, we may discern another seemingly paradoxical dual projection of the gender politics of Huizhou mercantile lineage culture. Huizhou sojourning men held a notorious double standard in terms of their own sexual practices versus the expectations they demanded of their wives. As vividly represented in a popular late Ming collection of short stories, Huizhou merchants, extraordinarily parsimonious in normal times, were willing to spend whatever it would take to obtain their two most coveted “commodities”: “red embroidered shoes” (beautiful women)

and "a black chiffon cap" (official-gentry standing).⁸⁰ Huizhou merchants were infamous womanizers. One of the most notorious examples was Wu Tianxing, a fabulously wealthy businessman from a prominent Shexian mercantile lineage who, around the mid-sixteenth century, built gardens for over one hundred women and thereby earned the nickname, the "master of one hundred concubines" (*baiqie zhuren*).⁸¹

The subtlest representation of this double standard can be discerned in the symbolic transformation of one local variety of the popular God of Wealth. Huizhou was the original home of Wutong, a demonic mountain goblin who was, during Song-Ming times, transformed into a popular God of Wealth signaling warnings of both ill-gotten money and illicit sex.⁸² Midway through the Ming dynasty, however, Wutong was replaced in Huizhou by another beastlike Five Fury (Wuchang) pentad spirit, partially as a result of the construction of the local pantheon headed by the famous historical hero, Wang Hua, who was widely honored as the apical ancestor of one of the most powerful and populous lineages in Huizhou (fully explored in the next chapter).

Located at the bottom of the hierarchical local pantheon, it was believed that Wuchang could convey riches to merchants who worshipped him—especially as he was commanded by the deified symbol of kinship authority, Wang Hua, and thus willingly participated in the religious hierarchy of the gentry-dominated lineage. At the same time, as played out in the popular ritual performance of the *Mulian* opera, the Wuchang pentad spirit was charged with catching the soul of Madame Liu, a disobedient widow. The conflation of the two popular deities of money (or, more accurately, the replacement of Wutong by Wuchang) also entailed a shift in their secondary role as guardians of local sexual politics, with a sexually insatiable goblin that symbolized men's ungovernable desires shading over into a beastlike fiend that was responsible for policing women's behavior. Indeed, what appealed to Huizhou merchants and lineage elders was a God of Wealth who policed the wives left behind at home (and also assisted the fertility deities, as well be illustrated in the following chapter)—not a God of Wealth who cautioned against male lust. Here we seem to see an undeclared symbolic pact reached between sojourning merchants and home-lineage elders in the *Mulian*-Wuchang performance: sojourning young men entrusted lineage elders back home to watch over their young wives; in return, they willingly channeled part of their profits back home to enhance the kinship institution.⁸³

In other words, in Huizhou mercantile lineage culture, male desire was left unchecked while the female body was closely supervised. The changing family-lineage structure, spurred on by commercialization, underpinned the promotion of female chastity, and indeed helped it to grow to cultic proportions in late Ming Huizhou. But by tightening the Confucian yoke on their kinswomen, in the end Huizhou merchants constrained themselves as well, for this oppression reproduced not just the patriarchal order but also the entire hierarchical kinship

regime. The gentrified mercantile lineage at home subordinated merchants to gentry leadership and values, even as their wealth in local society gave them substantial power and local gentry helped to uplift their social status.

CONCLUSION

In the spring of 1718, amid a new wave of commercialization during the High Qing, the grandson of Cheng Liangneng, named Ting, now a Yangzhou “native” noted for his poetry, took a long journey to visit his ancestral village of Censhan. On the day he was about to enter Shexian, he noted in his travel diary certain social characteristics of Huizhou:

It is the custom in Huizhou that scholar-officials and prominent households settle in the countryside. Each village is occupied by a certain lineage whose members live together, with no men of other surnames dwelling there. In each village a temple is built for the Earth God and an ancestral hall for the descent line. Genealogies are written for lineage branches so that their origins and lineal order are not confused. . . . Men uphold integrity and righteousness, and women cherish uprightness and chastity. Even in straitened circumstances, they never abandon their [husbands'] villages. There are maidens whose husbands travel far [to do business] immediately after the wedding, and, in some cases, never return. But still they judiciously care for their parents-in-law, uphold high aspirations, and behave flawlessly. Throughout their lives they make no complaints.⁸⁴

Many men—insiders and outsiders—made similar observations about this land of prominent mercantile lineages. But Cheng Ting specifically juxtaposed Huizhou women’s (and men’s) virtue with strong institutions of local prominent lineages and, more interestingly, used the cases of sojourning merchants’ wives to illustrate his observation. Cheng Ting, in other words, paired devoted womanhood with the mercantile lineage. This pairing certainly was not new. The more famous Wang Daokun focused his Huizhou-related writings on these paired concerns when compiling his own family genealogy, providing prefaces to other lineages’ genealogies, and writing biographies of righteous merchants and devoted widows. Many of the latter hanged themselves and served in the biographer’s mind as the best exemplars of the female chastity cult. But neither Wang Daokun nor Cheng Ting had ever looked into the possible impact of commercialization upon the local lineage-family structure, understanding it as the link that paired the cult of female chastity with mercantile lineage culture.

Bernard Bailyn, in his presidential address to the 1981 AHA Conference, called for the integration of “manifest” and “latent” events in historical inquiry. Bailyn defines manifest history as “the story of events that contemporaries were clearly aware of, that were matters of conscious concern, were consciously struggled over, were, so to speak, headline events in their own time even if their causes and underlying determinants were buried below the level of contemporaries’ understanding.”

Whereas latent history, often discernible through the extraction of quantitative data, includes “events that contemporaries were not fully or clearly aware of, at times were not aware of at all, events that they did not consciously struggle over, however much they might have been forced unwittingly to grapple with their consequences, and events that were not recorded as events in the documentation of the time.”⁸⁵

Though four decades have passed, Bailyn’s call is still highly relevant. Applying his approach to the study at hand, we may be able to make manifest the rise of the female chastity cult together with latent changes in the Huizhou family-lineage structure. The extraction of quantitative information from the *Branch Genealogy of the Censhan Chengs*, which was never compiled with the intent to provide such data, makes it possible to detect events in the population and kinship history of the late Ming years that profoundly affected local family life, gender relations, and mercantile lineage rules. Indeed, when seen in connection with the landscape of shrinking nuclear families within a growing lineage, the emphasis on female devotion becomes more meaningful than before.

The argument presented in this chapter, founded on work in one prefecture, and for its “latent” part, mostly on the quantitative analysis of one genealogy, must be taken as tentative, as a hypothesis for testing and elaboration elsewhere.⁸⁶ I cannot claim that my data have established a sole causal link between the rise of the chastity cult and commercialization’s impacts on local demography and family-lineage life in late Ming Huizhou. And yet, we see that the two were connected. Indeed, we further see their connection to other concurrent socioeconomic and cultural changes. Commercialization, sojourning merchants, shrinking households, merchant contributions to the enhancement of home lineage institutions, including their “disciplining of women’s quarters,” various genres of publication ranging from literati reports, genealogies, and local gazetteers that paired biographies of virtuous merchants with that of chaste widows, cultural brokers who compiled the moral or liturgical handbooks illustrating female exemplars or the local pantheon, a popular God of Wealth also serving as a divine guardian of women’s behavior, and a remolded *Mulian* ritual opera exhorting both mercantile ethics and conventional Confucian values including female chastity—none of these phenomena were isolated events. Indeed, these simultaneous developments were deeply connected, and they interacted to shape the unwieldy yet coherent entity of Huizhou mercantile lineage culture. The mercantile lineage set the conditions for the rising cult of female chastity, which in turn engendered the identity of Huizhou as a “Confucian heartland of women.”