printed recasts the very question of narrative structure. The third section of this chapter looks beyond the initial printings of works and the context of the late Qing, to ask how later editions of the red-light novels have edited out or refined the self-referentiality of the text that is such a marked feature of the works.

4.1 Narrative Structures and the Nineteenth-Century Novel

“A great hope for my work,” writes Chen Pingyuan in the preface to his study of narrative change, “is to link up internal literary studies with external studies, to combine purely formal narrative study with the social study of fiction which accounts for cultural background.”3 This chapter too has bifocal (though less New Historist) aspirations. Careful attention to narrative implies that nineteenth-century authors were both aware of, and interested in, how the narrative creates meaning. The first sections look at how authors structured what they wanted to say, how they understood narrative to create meaning, and how they saw the form of the text as involved in each. This is not a comprehensive survey of structural form (or how the text represents itself as text) across nineteenth-century novels, but draws out those features of narrative which sustain the argument of this book: that an essential aspect of red-light fiction is its own sense of fictionality.4

Structure is related as much to aspects of text—to patterns of words on pages, to spaces and blank sections around poetry and drama, and to the arrangements of different types of language within the texts—as to more traditional concerns of content in the gathering and dispersal of characters, or peaks of good and bad fortune. The patterning of the text is integral to the promotion of the fictional world of the story. A deliberate use of eclectic materials suggests a general concern

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3 Chen Pingyuan, Zhongguo xiaoshuo xushi moshi de zhuanbian 中國小說敘事模式的轉變 (1987), repr. in Chen Pingyuan xiaoshuo shi lunji (Shijiazhuang: Hebei Renmin, 1997), 250.

4 On aspects of narrative structure in Qing fiction such as plot, mode of narration or prologue, see Milena Doleželová-Velingerová, “Narrative Modes in Late Qing Novels” and “Typology of Plot Structures in Late Qing Novels” in Doleželová-Velingerová, ed., The Chinese Novel. Commentary is an important aspect of textual structure not considered here, since the relation between commentary editions and narrative would demand at least a chapter to itself. For a volume on the subject in earlier vernacular fiction, see David Rolston, Traditional Chinese Fiction and Fiction Commentary. On commentary and red-light novels, see also my article “Narrating the Passage of Text.”
among nineteenth-century novelists about how to represent the text to the reader. Similar structural formations recur across works in the use of poetry, dream and drama, and in the deployment of the weather or cyclical celebrations to delineate the chronology of events. None of these are original or unique to red-light novels, but their concentration affirms a heightened conception of textual transmission and its importance in the reception and creation of meaning. The concinnity of drama, drinking games and poetry highlights the textual nature of the novels by distressing the flow of narration and interrupting belief in the narrated world. Representations of the heavens serve a similar function, the ontological presence of the supernatural calling attention to the transience of the textual habitation. In all of these, how the texts are asking to be read reveals much about nineteenth-century thought on the literary function and purpose of writing.

Almost every generalising statement on narrative in red-light fiction can be negated by reference to a counter-example. The tightly constructed plots of most works described here meet their nemesis in the expanding blockbuster of *Jiu wei guǐ*; the extensive character lists of many red-light works are offset by the four protagonists of *Huayue hen*; the tragic outcomes of the more realist works contrast with the happy ending of *Jiu wei guǐ*; the grit of the turn-of-the-century is prefigured decades earlier in *Fengyue meng*; commentary-free works sit alongside the heavy dialogue of Zou Tao’s edition of *Qinglou meng*. If there is any unifying theme in this medley of dystopias, it lies in the fiction that the brothel world promotes, and not in any particular means of promotion.

Most of the structural features seen in the courtesan novels draw on a long tradition of use in vernacular novels. Features adopted directly from earlier works and commonly present in red-light novels include: the downfall or elimination of the central figure prior to the conclusion; two distinct textual hemispheres charting the rise and fall of the main protagonists; the manipulation of seasonal change; notions of retribution; the division of each *hui* into two sections following the parallel

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3 *Jiu wei guǐ* appeared in twelve volumes, 192 chapters, between 1906 and 1910. In a modern edition it runs to 900 pages. The author’s intention had apparently been to stop writing after a standard five volumes, but he was dissuaded by an eager readership. See Ma Liangchun 馬良春, Li Futian 李福田, General Editors, *Zhongguo Wenxue Da Cidian 中國文學大詞典* (Tianjin: Tianjin Renmin Chuban, 1991), Vol. 2, 140.