

POLYGYNY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

A Key to Understanding Traditional Chinese Society

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AS EARLY AS THE BRONZE AGE, A PATTERN THAT WOULD GO ON TO characterize Chinese society for millennia had already taken hold: polygyny at the top of the social pyramid; and competition for women, frequently leading to violence, at the bottom.¹ Many aspects of traditional Chinese society become comprehensible if one bears this fact in mind. Pure arithmetic makes it impossible for *all* men in a society to engage in polygyny, so one can use the number of women sexually available to a man as a rough but telling index of his social standing. For the overwhelming majority of males, this number would have been zero or one, but even those with one wife might have considered themselves fortunate. One of the most important milestones in a man's life would have been attaining the requisite wealth and stability to support a wife; the thousands, if not millions, of men who could never afford a family became a permanent source of social unrest. It stands to reason that almost all healthy females were partnered at least once during their lifetimes, typically at an early age—either as wives (*qi*), if their families were relatively prosperous, or as concubines (*qie*), if their families needed the cash that would be offered for them.

With few exceptions (to be discussed below), men were permitted to marry just one wife at a time—polygamy in this sense was normally forbidden—but they could acquire any number of concubines.² In the family hierarchy, the principal wife (*diqu*) ranked second only to her husband, whereas a concubine was always inferior to the wife, even if her relations with the husband were more intimate. This inferiority was reinforced in part by the

wife's particular privileges, and in part by the divergent manner in which wives and concubines entered the household.

One reason why polygyny was accepted throughout premodern Chinese history is that marriage was not construed according to the Judeo-Christian understanding of a union of two souls before God. But that can be only part of the explanation, because the same reasoning would permit polyandry as well, yet polyandry was never institutionalized.³ Even Chinese literati who were attracted to Christian teachings were reluctant to give up their concubines. Because it contravened Christian doctrine, polygyny was regarded by missionaries as a prime impediment to Christianizing the Chinese people.⁴ Michele Ruggieri (known also as Luo Mingjian), a Jesuit priest who traveled to China in 1583, wrote: "If one woman cannot have two men, how can one man own two women?"⁵ In his reckoning, polygyny was at odds with the Sixth Commandment (or Seventh, according to the Septuagint and the Talmud): "Thou shalt not commit adultery." Xu Guangqi (1562–1633), a famous literatus, claimed: "Nothing about observing the Ten Commandments is difficult—except for not taking concubines."⁶ Polygyny was an elemental component of traditional Chinese culture, and it was enshrined in Chinese myth as well: the sage king Yao, we are told, gave not one, but *both* of his daughters to his fellow sage king Shun in marriage.⁷

Chinese Catholic converts such as Xu Guangqi restated a position with ancient roots: Polygyny was justified as a means of increasing fertility. By taking concubines, a male of sufficient means could ensure the continuity of his patriline—a demonstration of his filial piety (*xiao*). At the same time, however, these men risked discord at home, because resentment could grow between wives and concubines in the domestic realm. For the sake of maintaining family harmony, many Chinese wives accepted it as their duty to manage the household and bear many descendants. However, not every woman shared these ideals or realized them in the same fashion. Some resorted to outbursts of jealousy in order to defend their marriage, status, and legacy.

Conflicts between a son of the principal wife (*dizi*) and a son of a concubine (*shuzi*) show that, in polygynous households, descendants identified themselves with both their fathers and their birth mothers. Most fathers seem to have regarded their sons equally, whether their mothers were wives or concubines, because they were all his descendants by blood. (This accounts for the traditional Chinese practice of equally distributing a father's property among his sons.) But the same did not necessarily hold for mothers, who were not always related to their husband's children. There could be considerable strife within a polygynous household.

A man might take concubines for yet another reason: they could serve as tokens of his wealth and status. This tendency exacerbated the complementary predicaments of lower-class men and women. The commodification of the female body drove many women into polygynous households, and also made it harder for poor men to establish monogamous households of their own. Men who had no opportunities for marriage were called "rootless rascals"⁸ (*guanggun*) in the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). They were excluded from the regular family order because of the skewed sex ratio in the general population and the disproportionate number of women claimed by rich households. The skewed sex ratio was an enduring problem in China caused by a combination of factors: female infanticide,⁹ to be sure, but also shorter female lifespans attributable to unequal access to resources and, above all, the considerable dangers of childbirth.¹⁰ Polygyny in elite households further reduced the supply of marriageable women—a process already recognized in antiquity¹¹—resulting in a socially destabilizing surplus of males. Since the family structure formed the basis of traditional Chinese society, men without such ties were viewed as sexual predators and threats to the social order. Polygyny is thus not only a tale of patriarchy, but also a key to understanding profound social tensions in traditional China.

THE PRIVILEGED STATUS OF THE WIFE

In traditional China, a woman's social status was defined by the role that she played in her family.¹² A wife was her husband's mate and the hostess in the household.¹³ She shared her husband's class, whether he was a peasant, merchant, or official; accordingly, the clothes she could wear and the etiquette she was expected to display depended on her husband's background and achievements. The primary wife's stature was cemented by the wedding ceremony and the funeral rites that would be held for her, as well as her legal rights. Only a bride formally taken as a wife could address the patriline's ancestors as her husband's partner. Not only was the bride herself accepted into the patriline, but her relatives were also integrated into her husband's network as affines. A wife who ritually mourned her husband's parents could never be divorced.¹⁴ When a wife died, all of her husband's recognized children, whether borne by her or not, assumed full mourning obligations for her, but her dowry was distributed only to her own sons and daughters.¹⁵ Despite the vicissitudes of rituals and laws over the centuries, the superiority of the wife over any concubine was ensured by such institutions.

The wedding ceremony consisted of six basic procedures: making a proposal of marriage (*nacai*), requesting the bride's name and date of birth

(*wenming*), sending news of divination results and betrothal gifts (*naji*), sending wedding presents to the bride's house (*nazheng*), requesting the date of the wedding (*qingqi*), and fetching in the bride in person (*qinying*). The details of each ritual could vary.¹⁶ A woman was recognized as a man's wife only after the completion of all these procedures. Their importance is illustrated in the preface to a memorial poem about a faithful maiden, composed by Mao Qiling (1623–1713). Wang Ziyao, the eighteen-year-old heroine, was betrothed to a man from the Su family who died while still her fiancé. After observing the mourning period, she insisted on being married to her dead spouse in order to serve his parents. The Su family accordingly held a wedding ceremony for her. Maiden Wang was ritually ushered into her new home by her sister-in-law; she bowed with her fiancé's portrait in the Su lineage hall, and was formally introduced to her parents-in-law.¹⁷ The rituals on her wedding day served to confirm her status as Mr. Su's wife.¹⁸

Some scholars have observed that a wife's identity was constructed when she offered sacrifices in her husband's ancestral shrine (*miaojian*).¹⁹ The couple thereby embodied the idea that "the husband and wife are one body" (*fuqi tongti* or *fuqi yiti*)—which is to say that a husband and wife shared social status and family responsibilities.²⁰ For example, during the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220 CE), when an official's wife was granted an audience with the empress on the occasion of the New Year, her dress, adornments, and carriage all had to conform to her husband's official rank.²¹

In the same vein, joint burial of a husband and wife was customary. The grave was regarded as a re-creation of the house that the couple had dominated when they were alive.²² This aspect of the practice was particularly prominent in Han tombs, where the rear room was furnished with a portrait of the deceased couple as a representation of the ideal afterlife—an extension of life in which concubines were absent.²³ Joint burial also conveyed the intimacy and complementarity of a married couple by juxtaposing their physical remains, expressing the idea that each spouse was not only half of a larger body (*banti*), but also an equivalent counterpart (*qiti*).²⁴

Once a wife's legitimacy was established, her unique position was protected by law. According to the legal code of the Tang dynasty (618–907), a bigamist husband would be punished by at least a year of penal servitude, and the second marriage would be annulled.²⁵ Yet although marrying more than one wife at a time was generally illegal, it was occasionally allowed as a wartime exception or through the intervention of imperial power. For example, in 257 CE, Wu Gang, a married senior secretary of the Wei kingdom (220–265), was sent to the Wu kingdom (229–280) as a wartime hostage. There, he remarried, then returned to the north with his second family

after the fall of Wu in 280. Instead of criticizing him, the government endorsed both marriages on account of the physical separation caused by the wars, though only the eldest son of the first principal wife was recognized as the heir to his lineage.²⁶

The principal wife also enjoyed certain special rights of inheritance. During the Western Han dynasty (202 BCE–8 CE), both widows and daughters were eligible to inherit a man's noble rank and property, as well as to become the head of the household that he left behind.²⁷ Although widows were later denied the right to inherit their husbands' rank, from the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) to the Song dynasty (960–1279), they still could inherit their husbands' property.²⁸ However, from the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) onward, a widow acted solely as the custodian of her husband's property because she was no longer eligible to inherit it herself. This denial of widows' inheritance emerged from the increasing urge to keep property within the patriline. As compensation for lost rights of inheritance, more and more officials supported a widow's right to choose an heir instead of simply naming the closest relative of the dead husband. Allowing the widow to select her husband's heir reflected an effort to protect her from being completely dispossessed.²⁹

The most reliable way for a bride's natal family to secure her status and well-being was to provide her with a dowry. According to Song dynasty sources, the list of dowry items would be specified before the wedding day. When the bride's parents prepared a dowry for their daughter, they would let her bring betrothal gifts back from her new family. The value of the betrothal gifts was usually smaller than that of the dowry. From the Song dynasty onward, the dowry would consist of landed and movable property, and its size depended on the wealth of the bride's family and the importance that they attached to the marriage.³⁰ However, before the Song, dowries containing land were rare; a bride's trousseau would have consisted mainly of chattel, such as jewelry, movables, and even bondservants. The conventional term for this trousseau, "cosmetics case" (*zhuanglian*), bespoke the personal nature of the assets.³¹

A proper dowry dignified a bride when she entered a new family. Her possessions were enumerated in detailed lists and were distinguished from the patrimony of her husband's family.³² Her ownership of the dowry was protected by law; even the patriarch of her husband's family could not expropriate it,³³ and only her own children could inherit it after her death.³⁴ Her quasi-autonomous control of her own property buttressed her status within her husband's household. The dowry would contribute to the new couple's economic base, which they could manage without intervention

from either family. In addition, the dowry sustained affinal connections. A husband could look forward to worldly favors, such as opportunities for advanced education and official posts, from his affines.³⁵ In return, the wife's natal family would expect financial support for the wife's parents, care for widowed and orphaned affinal kin, assistance with funeral arrangements, and so on.³⁶

Wives' autonomy declined dramatically during the Yuan dynasty (1260–1368). Yuan lawmakers prohibited a widow from taking her dowry if she planned to leave her late husband's family. Consequently, unless she remained with her in-laws, she could hardly sustain herself without some kind of financial support from either her natal family or a new husband. This weakened economic condition forced the wife to submit further to patriarchal authority, as her obligations to her husband's patriline now persisted even after his death.³⁷

THE FLUID STATUS OF THE CONCUBINE

The concubine's inferiority was fixed by the manner in which she joined the household: She was not married to a husband but was "collected" or purchased by a master (*naqie*). In other words, although she would enter into a legal relationship with a husband, she was not regarded as his spouse.³⁸ This accounts for her lack of inheritance and custodianship rights. Masters who permitted their concubines to manage domestic affairs were criticized because taking a concubine as one's wife was socially unacceptable and indeed legally prohibited.³⁹

A concubine's position within a household was further defined by the services that she performed, such as bearing children, serving as a sexual outlet, or helping to establish sociopolitical networks. With such diverse functions, concubines could fall into different categories: high-ranking concubines (*yingqie*), "minor wives" (*xiaoqi*), "attendant-concubines" (*shiqie*), "courtesan-concubines" (*jiqie*), and so on.⁴⁰ However, a concubine's position was not fixed; it could change over time, at the whim of the master or with the help of her children. Thus some concubines could, over time, earn more dignity within their households. A concubine's position also depended on her relations with the rest of the household; some concubines navigated these hazards more skillfully than others.

In Zhou times (ca. 1027–ca. 256 BCE), *yingqie* were high-status concubines who were brought into an aristocratic family by the bride herself. The bride's relatives, usually her parents, would send bronze vessels, concubines, and servants on the occasion of the marriage. This ceremonial gift

was called *ying*.⁴¹ In practice, *ying* constituted a type of sororal polygyny, because the two *yingqie* would be a niece (*zhi*) and a younger sister of the bride (*di*). The blood relationship between the bride and the sororal concubines ensured the latter's high status vis-à-vis other concubines who might be added in the future, and also reassured the bride's natal family that the sororal concubines would support her in her new home. They would assist her in childbearing or childrearing, and in maintaining relations between the two lineages even if the bride was eventually divorced from the master.⁴²

Sororal polygyny served both to produce offspring and to further diplomatic ends. A bride who came with sororal concubines was usually a daughter of a ruling house who was betrothed to the sovereign of another state. In an age of multistate politics, her marriage was not a personal affair only, but part of her natal kingdom's geopolitical strategy.⁴³ If the bride or one of the sororal concubines gave birth to an heir, the relationship between the two states would grow even closer. In order to strengthen such alliances, states whose ruling families had the same surname as the bride's family would also send concubines on the occasion of the marriage, since states with rulers of the same surname were regarded as natural allies.⁴⁴

In contrast to sprawling aristocratic families, peasant households, at least in the Han period, were usually nuclear families comprising a couple and their children, as we know from both textual and archaeological evidence.⁴⁵ But this does not mean that peasants never took concubines: Other evidence suggests that even commoners could engage in polygynous marriage. The Western Han government categorized women as "wives" (*qi*), "side-wives" (*pianqi*), "lower wives" (*xiaqi*), or mere "cohabiting bondservants" (*yubi*).⁴⁶

A side-wife was a freewoman who was not enumerated together with her husband or children on a population register; she might have lived outside the husband's household, in her own residence or that of her natal family. A side-wife probably did not rely totally on her husband to support her, unlike a wife, lesser wife, or cohabiting bondservant.⁴⁷ A lower wife, like a side-wife, was a freewoman;⁴⁸ she cohabited with the husband, but was inferior to the wife. Children of side-wives and lower wives were eligible to inherit any noble rank possessed by the father if there was no principal son to serve as the main heir.⁴⁹ A cohabiting bondservant, in contrast to side-wives and lower wives, was unfree, though she would be liberated after her master's death if she had given birth to a child.⁵⁰ (Otherwise, she would probably be sold.) It is uncertain whether a free side-wife or lower wife had inheritance rights like those of the principal wife.⁵¹

The term "minor wife" (*xiaoqi*) also appears frequently in the textual tradition, as a respectful term of address. A minor wife would be listed alongside the "major wife" (*daqī*), or principal wife, in the population register of Changsha in the kingdom of Wu. (The prefixes "major" and "minor" indicate that the minor wife was inferior.⁵²) Though it is still hard to gauge the extent of this inferiority, the fact that the minor wives of the politically indicted Chunyu Zhang (d. 8 BCE) were able to avoid being impounded as government slaves upon his conviction (on the grounds that they had left him before his arrest) suggests that a minor wife was not permanently bound to her husband.⁵³

A concubine's identity was fluid because she was not necessarily a permanent member of the household. A concubine of low status, such as an attendant-concubine or a courtesan-concubine, could be bought and sold with impunity or exchanged between friends,⁵⁴ transferred from one household to another. Moreover, a concubine would probably be expelled from the household when her master was ready to marry a principal wife, even if she had borne him a child. She would typically go back to her natal family or enter another household as a wife and concubine.⁵⁵ However, bearing a child could have positive consequences. A bondservant could be reregistered as a concubine on account of her child;⁵⁶ similarly, a concubine could resist being cast out after her master-husband's death by claiming that she needed to take care of her children.⁵⁷

A concubine could earn more respect at home if she had a son who passed the civil service examinations and became an official. In order to deepen the candidate pool, sons of concubines from elite families were allowed to take the examinations. Candidates were expected to exhibit their knowledge of the classics and present it in a satisfactory literary style.⁵⁸ If they were lucky, they would be appointed to official posts shortly after passing the civil service examinations, commencing careers involving travel from their residences to their assigned offices (and occasionally to the imperial capital).⁵⁹

Concubines could benefit from the necessary domestic adjustments. Because a Tang gentleman would usually delay marriage until he passed the examinations, his household would probably be managed by a concubine. When a married official was assigned to a post far away from home, he might ask his wife to stay with his parents, and bring a concubine with him instead. Thus, a concubine who managed domestic affairs for a gentleman would become an indispensable member of his household, securing her own position as well as that of her children. Or if her son passed the civil service examinations, she could leave the household for the sake of

attending her son on official business. Her inferior legal status could even be overturned if her son, now powerful and respected, petitioned authorities to confer on her a title commensurate with his own official rank. Even the son's father could not request this.⁶⁰

The status of a concubine underwent two major transformations over the course of the Song and Yuan dynasties. First, in the Song dynasty, a concubine who was leased to a private individual (*dianqie*) probably no longer remained attached to his household when her contract expired.⁶¹ Second, concubines could be accepted as fuller family members if they bore children; motherhood even became a stereotypical role in Yuan funerary texts for concubines.⁶² These transformations could elevate a concubine above chattel status, and some elite men of the period may have gradually elided the distinction between wife and concubine.

The blurry line between a wife's and concubine's status can be seen in the figure of the "equal-status wife" (*liangtou da*, perhaps a southeastern regionalism) in late imperial China. An equal-status wife was acquired by a married man who spent considerable time without his wife's company while on business in other provinces. She was usually a woman of good family and was married, with due rituals, because the man was separated from his sexual partners or wished to forge new sociopolitical networks. The man usually granted the equal-status wife principal status in the new household, and treated any children borne by her as principal sons. However, even though "equal-status wives" were socially acceptable, bigamy was unquestionably illegal. Therefore, even though an "equal-status wife" may have acted like a wife, she was still considered a type of concubine.⁶³

Similar ambiguity between marriage and concubinage arose through "combined succession" (*jiantiao*), which permitted an only son to serve as heir to both his father and his father's brother(s) if there was no other suitable candidate in his family. The single heir would be allowed to have two wives; the principal wife produced offspring for the main branch, and the secondary wife produced offspring for the secondary branch. In this manner, the property from each branch would be inherited by different descendants, ensuring the continuity of the respective patriline.⁶⁴ Although combined succession was widely practiced, it was not legalized until 1775.⁶⁵ Moreover, Qing lawmakers still endeavored to protect the principal wife's unique position by considering the secondary wife as a concubine or regarding the second marriage as bigamous. This attitude toward the secondary wife was later confirmed by the Daliyuan, the highest court of appeals in Republican China.⁶⁶ However, the Nanjing government observed that, in the countryside, the secondary wife was always considered the principal wife of

the second branch, and her equal standing was ensured by both verbal and written agreements.⁶⁷ Combined succession highlighted conflicts between legal ideology and social reality.

ANTAGONISM IN THE HOME

A woman's maternal experience in a polygynous household was determined by the circumstances of childbirth and by the woman's status in the family.⁶⁸ Giving birth differentiated a birth mother (*shengmu*) from a "foster mother" (*houmu* or *yangmu*) or "loving mother" (*cimu*). The term "foster mother" denoted a principal wife who adopted a son from her husband's paternal relatives with the approval of the patriarch or a matriarch. A "loving mother" was a concubine appointed by her master to take care of another concubine's child. In both sets of cases, maternity was established by discharging the dictates of the master; the woman had no biological bond with the child. Both "foster motherhood" and "loving motherhood" can be regarded as forms of social, rather than biological, motherhood.

Social motherhood denotes maternity as defined by a woman's relationship with the head of a household,⁶⁹ and the terminology denoting varieties of motherhood in traditional China could be highly ramified. In a polygynous household, the principal wife was the legal mother (*dimu*) of all children recognized by her husband. A concubine could be regarded as a "concubine-mother" (*shumu*) to all the master's children, but she did not hold maternal authority at home because she was ranked below the wife. If a man married more than once, the children of his new wife would recognize the former wife as "former mother" (*qianmu*), and the children of his former wife would recognize the new wife as "stepmother" (*jimu*). If the former wife or a concubine-mother left the household in divorce, she would be called the "divorced mother" (*chumu*) of her children. If the former wife or an expelled concubine later remarried, she would be called "remarried mother" (*jiamu*) by her birth children, who would remain in the father's household. Within the fierce crucible of a polygynous household, social motherhood was a childless woman's guarantee of security, allowing her to sustain her position in the family by acquiring factitious offspring. Because the institution of polygyny established roles for women too, some of which could be powerful, wives did not always oppose it; indeed, many worked to advance it.⁷⁰

However, not every woman felt that she had found the right niche. For example, Lady Liu, the primary wife of the Jin dynasty statesman Xie An (320-385), is said to have rejected her husband's request for female

entertainers and concubines. Later, Xie's nephews on both sides of the family discussed the canonical *Book of Odes* with her, implying that she should learn the virtue of suppressing jealousy from such poems as "Guanju" ("The chanting ospreys") and "Zhong si" ("The locusts"). Detecting sarcasm in their voice, she asked, "And who wrote those songs?" They replied, without hesitation, "The Duke of Zhou." Lady Liu then made a witty retort: "The Duke of Zhou was a man and wrote them for himself, that's all. Now if it had been the Duchess of Zhou, the tradition wouldn't have contained these words!"⁷¹

Occasionally, men objected to polygyny as well. Writing sometime around the year 300, the philosopher Bao Jingyan criticized it as a harmful byproduct of the political system: while the elite accumulated women in their harems, many ordinary men remained unmarried. After reporting this opinion, the author Ge Hong (283–343) defended the tradition by declaring that the appropriate number of concubines for the king was set by the sages in accordance with Heaven's wishes. The purpose of royal concubines, he said, was to foster the sovereign's erotic love, help the queen manage the palace, and assist at ancestral sacrifices. He went on to add that, according to the ancient ritual text *Zhouli* (Rites of Zhou) and the geographical treatise of the *History of the Han*, there are more women than men in the world anyway.⁷² (We now know that, for most periods of Chinese history, this latter statement was simply untrue.)

A principal wife might also have regarded concubines and maids as an existential threat; they might usurp her husband's favors, her wifely authority, and her son's share of the patrimony.⁷³ During the Six Dynasties period (222–589), elite wives were sometimes taught to deploy exhibitions of jealousy in order to secure their positions and prevent their husbands from taking concubines. Calculated jealousy of this type was usually directed at concubines and maids, rather than the husband.⁷⁴ Because concubines and maids lived with the wife in the inner chambers, where the husband could not intrude at will, he could not always protect them from his wife's verbal and physical abuse.⁷⁵

Conflict between a wife and concubines undermined the patriline, and was also considered a sign of a husband's inability to handle affairs. In order to maintain familial harmony, men of the Six Dynasties period urged their wives to comply with the ethics of female submission through reprimands and various threats and punishments, such as divorce, flogging, and even the death penalty. Outbursts of jealousy were regarded as vicious conduct on the part of women, to be corrected through discipline at the hands of men.

By the seventh century (at the latest), jealousy was taken as an inherent and innate disposition of women, thought to cause female illnesses that

were curable through therapeutic rituals or prescriptions.⁷⁶ In late imperial China, therapy for women's jealousy was incorporated into complex medical theories: "Congested anger" (*yunu*), a gendered symptom present only in women, resulted from hatred of polygynous marriage, and would make a woman suffer from "liver fire" (*ganhuo*). *Yunu* was remediable by formulas designed to clear *ganhuo*.⁷⁷ A jealous woman was construed as disruptive to familial order, and treatments for jealousy were efforts to return the family to normalcy—that is, harmonious polygyny.

Childbirth was not the only task that a primary wife was expected to assume, especially in well-to-do families.⁷⁸ As a partner of the head of the household, she took responsibility for household management, productivity, and networking. In comparison to the aforementioned tasks, which required education and ingenuity, it was easy to find a surrogate for childbirth—a concubine or a maid, for whom fertility was the only requirement.⁷⁹ Thus, maternal identity encompassed more than just biological motherhood; it also reflected the wife's upbringing and character.⁸⁰ Both childbirth and childrearing forged emotional ties with the children in the family, and need not have been undertaken by the same mother.

The mother-son bond could produce several layers of emotional commitment. First, it was manifested financially in the distribution of the mother's dowry, as only her natural children could inherit such property. Second, it was manifested sociopolitically in the status and prestige of the mother and her descendants. A son's status was usually contingent on whether his mother was a wife, a concubine, or simply a maid;⁸¹ but a concubine-mother's status could be elevated at her filial son's request.⁸² Third, the emotional bond between a mother and her natural son would often be enhanced because they faced the same rivalries and crises.⁸³

For an extreme case, consider Yan Tingzhi (d. 748), a Tang-era official who behaved indecorously toward his wife, Lady Pei; he preferred his concubine, Xuanying. Yan Tingzhi's eight-year-old principal son, Yan Wu (726–765), asked his mother, Lady Pei, about his father's patent antagonism. Lady Pei wept and said that Yan Tingzhi was cold to her because she was ugly. Yan Wu flew into a rage and vented his fury upon the concubine, smashing her head to pieces. The facts were concealed by attendants, who reported the death to Yan Tingzhi as an accident. However, Yan Wu admitted that he intentionally killed Xuanying because of his father's discrimination against his mother, asking, "How is it possible for a man of ministerial rank to favor his concubine but treat his legal wife frigidly?"⁸⁴

Unlike his mother, Yan Wu was loved and respected by his father. Yan Wu hated the concubine not because *he* was mistreated by Yan Tingzhi, but

because *his mother* felt mistreated by him. Lady Pei's emotional connection with her son led Yan Wu to transform his father's coldness toward his mother into an intolerable offense.

WOMEN'S BODIES IN PERIL

The vulnerability of the concubine's body was a consequence of a stratified society. Yan Wu was punished neither by his father nor by any judge for murdering Xuanying because she was regarded as a mere possession, not a free human being with commensurate legal protections. The practice of *zheng* in early China also reveals the tenuousness of a concubine's position. *Zheng* referred to the act of copulating with a deceased father's concubine—a predictable byproduct of polygyny. The very existence of this term suggests that the behavior was not exceptional, but a well-developed social practice during the Spring and Autumn period (771–476 BCE), and possibly a general Eurasian cultural feature.⁸⁵ In that era, a concubine's body was understood as a heritable possession; even a noblewoman or princess might be unable to stop a young heir intent on enjoying his new property. For example, the concubine Jiang of Yi was silent when her master's son, Lord Xuan of Wei (r. 718–700 BCE), committed *zheng* with her. Her antipathy could be inferred only after she committed suicide.⁸⁶

The female body was also regarded as a limited resource that could not be allowed to go to waste. Empress Guo of Wei (184–235), for example, prohibited her relatives from collecting concubines because she wanted to ensure that soldiers could find wives during a national shortage of women.⁸⁷ Centuries later, the Mongol invasion introduced practices resembling the levirate; in most such cases, men would inherit their older brothers' widows, but sometimes a son would inherit his father's wives (other than his birth mother), or a nephew his uncle's widow, and so on. By this mechanism, a household could forgo the costs of betrothal gifts for younger brothers, maximally exploit the widow's productive and reproductive capacity, and retain the late husband's assets in the same patriline.⁸⁸ (Many of the complexities of Chinese polygyny derived from the need to clarify and protect rights of inheritance.) In pursuit of such efficiencies, more and more households, particularly poorer ones, proposed levirate marriages for their younger sons.⁸⁹ Widows could not easily reject levirate marriages because, as we have seen, they could scarcely survive on their own. Among their few other options were to rely on their natal families' wealth or to resort to the chastity cult—that is, forcing their in-laws to support them as “chaste widows” (*zhenfu*) by renouncing any future husband.

Naturally, polygyny also reduced lower-status men's chances of entering into wedlock. The profusion of poor males with scant hope of marriage came to be regarded as a serious social issue in the Qing dynasty. In Qing legal documents, such men were conceived as vagrants disposed to seducing, raping, or abducting chaste women. In addition, they posed an existential threat to the dynasty, because their very existence, divorced from traditional family bonds, contravened the conscious efforts of the Qing government to organize society household by household.⁹⁰ Some Qing women responded to sexual molestation by committing suicide in order to force abusers to pay for their transgressions; judges were not pleased when women of good character killed themselves under such circumstances, and usually found responsible parties to punish. The female body could be converted into a ferocious incarnate denouncement, but only at the ultimate cost.⁹¹

THE OUTLOOK TODAY

Polygyny was abolished in China by the New Marriage Law of 1950, at a time when the Communist Party was eager to eradicate concubinage and other forms of sexual servitude.⁹² Sociologists have begun to report, however, what any astute visitor to China has surely already observed: informal concubinage has rapidly reemerged among the wealthy.⁹³ In the absence of sanctioned institutions and precedents, the judicial system is struggling to decide how "second wives" (*ernai*) should be treated.⁹⁴ China is repeating the pattern of the past in other respects too: according to the 2015 census, males now outnumber females by some thirty-three million, and the sex ratio is one of the worst in the world.⁹⁵ If history is any guide, there will be discontent.

NOTES

- 1 Polygyny can frequently be inferred from the practice (called *xunzang*) of interring a deceased lord's concubines and servitors with him. See, generally, Ebner von Eschenbach, "In den Tod mitgehen." Gideon Shelach-Lavi (private communication) observes that polygyny is scarcely attested in Neolithic contexts, and therefore seems to be associated with the rise of Bronze Age states. Yu et al., "Shifting Diets and the Rise of Male-Biased Inequality on the Central Plains of China during Eastern Zhou," confirms that males and females appear to have had equal status in Neolithic farming communities.
- 2 See, for example, Liu, *Zhongguo gudai xing wenhua*, 143–50; and more generally, Zhang, *Duoqi zhidu*. (Note that, strictly speaking, the commonplace

- Chinese term *duoqi zhidu*—literally, “system of multiple wives”—is inaccurate, because in a normal household there could be just one principal wife.)
- 3 For a recent study of informal polyandry, especially among the poor, see Sommer, *Polyandry and Wife-Selling in Qing Dynasty China*. Polyandrous domestic arrangements were never legal, and those who entered into them were always in danger of punishment, which could be severe. More generally, see Chen, *Zhongguo hunyin shi*, 44–46.
 - 4 Brockey, *Journey to the East*, 300–301.
 - 5 Luo, *Tianzhu shengjiao shilu*, 833–34.
 - 6 Li, *Lixiu yijian*, 465–66.
 - 7 See, for example, Birrell, *Chinese Mythology*, 74–76.
 - 8 This translation comes from Sommer (*Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China*, 14), who describes *guanggun* as “the superfluous rogue male who threatens the household order from outside.” For another recent treatment, see Jiang and Sánchez-Barricarte, “Bare Branches and Social Stability.”
 - 9 For an early, casual reference to female infanticide, see Chen, *Han Feizi xin jiaozhu*, 1,006.
 - 10 See Waltner, “Infanticide and Dowry in Ming and Early Qing China,” 196–204.
 - 11 See Chin, *Savage Exchange*, 200f.
 - 12 Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters*, 44ff.
 - 13 Bray, *Technology and Gender*, 5, 55; and Liu, “Zheng wei yu nei?” 58–59.
 - 14 See Tai, “Divorce in Traditional Chinese Law,” 90.
 - 15 Bray, *Technology and Gender*, 351.
 - 16 See Chen, *Zhongguo hunyin shi*, 99–102; and Dull, “Marriage and Divorce in Han China,” 42ff. For practices in the Song dynasty, see Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters*, 82–98; for the late imperial period, see Bray, *Technology and Gender*, 339.
 - 17 Mao, *Xihe ji*, 186.2a–186.4b.
 - 18 See Lu, *True to Her Word*, 168–72.
 - 19 Ch’ü, *Law and Society in Traditional China*, 102.
 - 20 Taniguchi, “Kandai no kōgō ken,” 1,588–89.
 - 21 Hoshina, “Kandai no josei chitsujo”; and Ch’ü, *Law and Society in Traditional China*, 140–41.
 - 22 Lewis, *The Construction of Space in Early China*, 8, 57–59.
 - 23 Barnhart et al., *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, 34.
 - 24 Chen, *Zhongguo hunyin shi*, 286–88.
 - 25 Ch’ü, *Law and Society in Traditional China*, 123–24.
 - 26 Chen, *Sanguo zhi*, 770, 1,154; and Du, *Tongdian*, 1,894–95.
 - 27 Liu, *You Zhangjiashan Hanjian Ernian lüling lun Hanchu de jicheng zhidu*, 120–21, 149–162. The primary wife’s unique rights of inheritance are ignored by Vankeerberghen (“A Sexual Order in the Making,” 127), who argues for “the lack of sharp lines of division between the various women in a [Han dynasty] household.”

- 28 Li, "Han Tang zhi jian nüxing caichanquan shitan"; and Bernhardt, *Women and Property in China*, 53–59.
- 29 Bernhardt, *Women and Property in China*, 47–72.
- 30 Ebrey, *Women and the Family in Chinese History*, 68–87; and Birge, *Women, Property, and Confucian Reaction in Sung and Yüan China*, 31.
- 31 Birge, *Women, Property, and Confucian Reaction in Sung and Yüan China*, 61; and Li, "Han Tang zhi jian nüxing caichanquan shitan."
- 32 Birge, *Women, Property, and Confucian Reaction in Sung and Yüan China*, 37, 140.
- 33 Ebrey, *Women and the Family in Chinese History*, 83; Birge, *Women, Property, and Confucian Reaction in Sung and Yüan China*, 61, 140; and Bray, *Technology and Gender*, 265.
- 34 Birge, *Women, Property, and Confucian Reaction in Sung and Yüan China*, 63. Bray (*Technology and Gender*, 139, 171) stresses that a woman of late imperial China would be willing to contribute economically to her nuclear family—i.e., her husband and children—rather than her husband's patriline.
- 35 Bossler, *Powerful Relations*, 137–42; Birge, *Women, Property, and Confucian Reaction in Sung and Yüan China*, 65.
- 36 Ebrey, *Women and the Family in Chinese History*, 84ff. For the Tang dynasty, see Chen, *Tangdai de funü wenhua yu jiating shenghuo*, 23–196.
- 37 Birge, *Women, Property, and Confucian Reaction in Sung and Yüan China*, 198, 279–80.
- 38 Ebrey, *Women and the Family in Chinese History*, 42.
- 39 Chen, *Tangdai de funü wenhua yu jiating shenghuo*, 305–18; MacCormack, "A Reassessment of the 'Confucianization of the Law' from the Han to the Tang"; and Liao Yifang, *Tangdai de muzi guanxi*, 165–66.
- 40 Bossler, *Courtesans, Concubines, and the Cult of Female Fidelity*, 65.
- 41 Chen, "Liang-Zhou hunyin guanxi zhong de 'ying' yu 'yingqi,'" 197.
- 42 Thatcher ("Marriages of the Ruling Elite in the Spring and Autumn Period," 31, 44) regards *yingqie* as secondary wives instead of high-status concubines.
- 43 Thatcher, "Marriages of the Ruling Elite in the Spring and Autumn Period," 46–48.
- 44 Chen, "Liang-Zhou hunyin guanxi zhong de 'ying' yu 'yingqi,'" 213–22.
- 45 Lewis, *The Construction of Space in Early China*, 7, 79, 87. The register of soldiers guarding the frontier town Juyan also indicates that frontier households mainly consisted of the husband, the wife, and their descendants; sometimes, but not always, they lived with their parents and siblings. See also Du, *Gudai shehui yu guojia*, 790–92.
- 46 Sasaki, "Handai hunyin xingtai xiaokao"; also Wang, *Gushi xingbie yanjiu congkao*, 219–31.
- 47 See Sasaki, "Handai hunyin xingtai xiaokao"; and Barbieri-Low and Yates, *Law, State, and Society in Early Imperial China*, 448, 601. Another indication that side-wives enjoyed relatively high rank within the family is that the law

- explicitly forbade beating the parents of one's father's side-wives (Barbieri-Low and Yates, 405).
- 48 Despite Barbieri-Low and Yates, *Law, State, and Society in Early Imperial China*, which states that "[*xiaqi*] were unofficial wives, basically sex slaves who were bought from human traffickers and resided with the other wives and concubines" (865).
- 49 See Liu, *You Zhangjiashan Hanjian Ernian lüling lun Hanchu de jicheng zhidu*, 30, 42, 71, 95; and Vankeerberghen, "A Sexual Order in the Making," 125.
- 50 Zhang, "Shi Zhangjiashan Hanjian zhong de 'yubi'"; Barbieri-Low and Yates, *Law, State, and Society in Early Imperial China*, 861.
- 51 Liu, *You Zhangjiashan Hanjian Ernian lüling lun Hanchu de jicheng zhidu*, 120-21, 149-62.
- 52 See Hinsch, *Women in Early Imperial China*, 41.
- 53 Wang, *Gushi xingbie yanjiu congkao*, 254-65.
- 54 Bossler, *Courtesans, Concubines, and the Cult of Female Fidelity*, 79-84, 227-28.
- 55 In this respect, the concubine's natal family served as her shelter (Liao Yifang, 161-64).
- 56 Liu, "Wei Jin Nanbeichao shidai de qie," 9, 16-17; and Bossler, *Courtesans, Concubines, and the Cult of Female Fidelity*, 57.
- 57 Liao, *Tangdai de muzi guanxi*, 173.
- 58 See, for example, De Weerd, *Competition over Content*, 2ff.
- 59 Hu, "Qianli huanyou cheng dishi, meinian fengjing shi taxiang."
- 60 Liao, *Tangdai de muzi guanxi*, 167-77.
- 61 Ebrey, *Women and the Family in Chinese History*, 46-52.
- 62 Bossler, *Courtesans, Concubines, and the Cult of Female Fidelity*, 334-35, 345-57.
- 63 Hsieh, *Concubinage and Servitude in Late Imperial China*, 44.
- 64 Ibid.; Ch'ü, *Law and Society in Traditional China*, 124; and Lu, *Qingmo Minchu jiachen zhidu de yanbian*, 145.
- 65 Bernhardt, *Women and Property in China*, 44-45.
- 66 Ibid., 76.
- 67 Wang, "Lishishang de 'pingqi' xianxiang jiqi falü wenti chutan," 48-50.
- 68 For discussion of the varieties of motherhood in the early imperial China, see Zheng, *Qinggan yu zhidu*, 21-59, 140-48.
- 69 See Bray, *Technology and Gender*, 103, 281, 351.
- 70 Ibid., 281, 351, 356, 364.
- 71 Liu, *Shih-shuo hsin-yü*, tr. Mather, 378.
- 72 Yang, *Baopuzi waipian jiaojian*, 560. Balazs did not discuss this aspect of Bao's critique in his famous study *Chinese Civilization and Bureaucracy* (242-46).
- 73 Bray, *Technology and Gender*, 355.

- 74 Lee, "Querelle des femmes?" 68-97.
- 75 Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters*, 167, 230; and Bray, *Technology and Gender*, 147, 355.
- 76 Lee, "Querelle des femmes?" 77-85.
- 77 Kuriyama, "Angry Women and the Evolution of Chinese Medicine," 184-85.
- 78 Bray, *Technology and Gender*, 281.
- 79 Bray (*Technology and Gender*, 350, 365) argues that class distinctions were also incorporated into medical theories of reproduction.
- 80 *Ibid.*, 281, 348, 364.
- 81 Zheng, *Qinggan yu zhidu*, 115-50. During the Western Han period, a son's inheritance was determined by his mother's status. However, from the Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279) onward, the mother's status was irrelevant; only paternal recognition mattered. See Liu, *You Zhangjiashan Hanjian Ernian lüling lun Hanchu de jicheng zhidu*, 95, 162; and Bossler, *Courtesans, Concubines, and the Cult of Female Fidelity*, 246-48.
- 82 Zheng, *Qinggan yu zhidu*, 61-114.
- 83 Liao, *Tangdai de muzi guanxi*, 161-66.
- 84 Wang, *Tang yulin jiaozheng*, 329; Ouyang Xiu et al., *Xin Tangshu*, 129.4484.
- 85 See Goldin, "Copulating with One's Stepmother—Or Birth Mother?"; and Dong, *Zhongguo gudai hunyin shi yanjiu*, 22-28.
- 86 Yang, *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhu*, 146.
- 87 Chen, *Sanguo zhi*, 165. In times of war, the sex ratio is usually skewed in the opposite direction (because so many able-bodied men have been killed); Empress Guo's concern may indicate that the overall ratio was already seriously imbalanced.
- 88 See Birge, *Women, Property, and Confucian Reaction in Sung and Yuan China*, 204-206; and Dong, *Zhongguo gudai hunyin shi yanjiu*, 73ff.
- 89 Ch'ü, *Law and Society in Traditional China*, 96-99.
- 90 Sommer, *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China*, 96-101.
- 91 Theiss, *Disgraceful Matters*, 192-209.
- 92 See, for example, Tran, *Concubines in Court*, 175-97; and Huang, "Divorce Law Practices and the Origins, Myths, and Realities of Judicial 'Mediation' in China," 177.
- 93 See, for example, Yuen et al., *Marriage, Gender, and Sex in a Contemporary Chinese Village*.
- 94 Pan, "Transformations in the Primary Life Cycle," 32.
- 95 Yuen Yeuk-laam, "China Census Shows Continuing Gender Imbalance, Aging Population."