



Women and the Family in Chinese History
Patricia Buckley Ebrey

Critical Asian Scholarship

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Women and the Family in Chinese History

This is a collection of essays by one of the leading scholars of Chinese history, Patricia Buckley Ebrey. In the essays she has selected for this fascinating volume, Professor Ebrey explores the Chinese family, gender, and kinship systems as practices and ideas intimately connected to history and therefore subject to change over time. The essays cover topics ranging from dowries and the sale of women as concubines to the huge size of the imperial harem, misunderstandings of foot binding, surnames as ethnic markers, and changes in ways of dealing with the dead.

Patricia Ebrey places these studies of kinship and gender practices in historical context; her work shows the impact of historical change on the ways people lived. Her work ranges over the late imperial period, with a specific focus on the Song period (920–1276), a time of marked social and cultural change that is widely viewed as the beginning of the modern period in Chinese history.

With its wide-ranging examination of issues relating to women and the family, this book will be essential reading for scholars of Chinese history and gender studies

Patricia Buckley Ebrey is Professor of History and Chinese Studies at the University of Washington. She has published widely on Chinese history, including *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China* (Cambridge University Press: 1999) and *Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period* (University of California Press: 1993).

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Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	vi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	viii
Introduction	1
1 Women, money, and class: Sima Guang and Song Neo-Confucian views on women	10
2 Concubines in Song China	39
3 Shifts in marriage finance from the sixth to the thirteenth century	62
4 The women in Liu Kezhuang's family	89
5 The early stages in the development of descent group organization	107
6 Cremation in Song China	144
7 Surnames and Han Chinese identity	165
8 Rethinking the imperial harem: Why were there so many palace women?	177
9 Gender and sinology: shifting Western interpretations of footbinding, 1300–1890	194
<i>Notes</i>	220
<i>References</i>	255
<i>Index</i>	279

List of illustrations

FIGURES

1.1	Zhu Shouchang finally finding his concubine mother, left behind by his father	20
1.2	Exemplary widowed concubine who remains deferential to the wife even though she is the mother of the only son	34
2.1	Gou Zhun's concubine singing a song she composed to admonish him	41
3.1	Dai Liang succeeds in marrying out five daughters by making the dowries frugal	63
3.2	Sample of three documents the bride's family should send to the groom's	73
4.1	Genealogy of Liu Kezhuang's immediate family	94
5.1	Zhao Jiming's diagram of descent group burial	117
5.2	The Chen communal family, whose 700 members ate together, sitting according to age	121
5.3	Fan Zhongyan creating a charitable estate to supply his relatives	131
6.1	Urns holding cremated remains unearthed from Song-period tombs in Foshan City, Guangdong province	150
6.2	Diagram of a tomb dated 1266, with an urn with cremated remains buried in a small pit below an above-ground structure	150
7.1	Page from a late Song reference work listing surnames with their associated place names	169
8.1	Illustration from the seventeenth-century novel about Sui Yangdi (<i>Sui Yangdi yanshi</i>)	179
8.2	Song statues of serving women attending the Jade Emperor, at the Shrine of the Jade Emperor, Jincheng, Shanxi province	183
8.3	Illustration from chapter 21 of the novel <i>Jin Ping Mei</i> , showing the protagonist with several of his concubines and their maids	191

9.1	Illustration captioned “The small foot of a Chinese lady”	199
9.2	Illustration titled “Appearance of a small shoe on the foot”	205
9.3	Two illustrations captioned “Feet of Chinese ladies” and “Shape of a lady’s shoe”	206
9.4	Illustration captioned “Ladies being carried by their slaves”	207
9.5	Illustration captioned “Appearance of the bones of a foot when compressed”	210
9.6	Illustration captioned “Bandaging the feet”	213
9.7	Illustration of a girl with bound feet, based on a photograph taken by John Thomson	217
9.8	Illustration captioned “Chinese Lady’s Foot and Slipper”	218

TABLES

3.1	Matrilateral and affinal relatives to be avoided by officials	85
4.1	Epitaphs Liu Kezhuang wrote for relatives with whom he lived	91
4.2	Epitaphs Liu Kezhuang wrote for kinsmen	92
8.1	Northern Song emperors, their consorts and children	181
8.2	Children born to Renzong by two-year period and consort	186
8.3	Children born to Shenzong by two-year period and consort	187
8.4	Children born to Huizong by two-year period and consort	188

Acknowledgments

When Mark Selden approached me about putting together a collection of my articles for this series, I had some trepidation. Which of my articles did I want people to read today? Which ones would work best together? I was forced to take a hard look at the various directions my research has taken over the past quarter century, to look for links among articles written for disparate purposes and decide which ones held up the best. Mark and I went back and forth by email numerous times discussing various possibilities, given Routledge's page limits. Mark naturally wanted a book that would have a wide appeal and tended to favor the broadest essays; I usually found the ones based on the most thorough research the most suitable for republishing. At least three possible foci suggested themselves: Chinese social history, which would have allowed me to include a couple of my articles on the Han to Tang period; the social and cultural history of the Song period, which would have allowed me to include some of my more recent work on Chinese visual culture; and family-gender-kinship in Chinese history, which had been the major thrust of at least half my work. In the end we settled on this last alternative, as it allowed a balance between short and long articles, ones that cover a long time span and ones focused on the Song period, ones that dealt with women and gender as well as ones that ranged further into questions of kinship organization, rituals central to family life, and even the connection between kinship and ethnic identity. It also represents a more-or-less complete body of research, as my research interests have turned in other directions over the last few years.

From my perspective, there were a couple of other incentives to putting together this volume. I was happy to get the chance to convert the romanization style of older articles from Wade-Giles to pinyin, as fewer and fewer undergraduates today are comfortable with Wade-Giles. I also appreciated the possibility of adding illustrations. The only article that had any illustrations in its original publication is the last one on "Gender and Sinology," and even in that case several additional illustrations have been added. Six of the other illustrations come from a single source, an illustrated elaboration of the Kangxi emperor's Sacred Edict, first published in 1681 and reprinted in 1903. This work had illustrations not only of general

phenomena discussed in my articles, but also sometimes the same stories, such as the story of Zhu Shouchang giving up his office to go in search of his mother, a concubine whom his father had left behind many years earlier. Generally, in my text I use these stories to make rather different points than the author and illustrator of this book intended. Still, I think the illustrations add more than simple visual pleasure to the issues and arguments presented in this book, and I hope readers will pause to consider what the Chinese illustrators chose to convey in their pictures.

Because the work presented here was done over a period of nearly twenty years, it would be impossible to identify all the people or organizations who aided it in some way. I would like to acknowledge, however, how much my work owes to those who provided opportunities for me to collaborate with other scholars through conferences and symposia. Not only have I benefited from the response of other scholars when I presented papers at these meetings, but these occasions helped create communities of scholars whose ongoing conversations I wished to join. Almost all of the papers in this volume have some connection to collaborative work of this sort, though in some cases they were inspired by participation in a conference rather than written to present at a conference. In my view, the flowering of American scholarship on China over the last several decades owes a great deal to the willingness of funders such as the American Council of Learned Societies, the Social Science Research Council, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation, as well as university East Asia centers and China programs to provide opportunities for scholars to engage each other face-to-face. The hardest work, of course, continues to be done alone in the study, but it gains meaning from knowing there is an audience of students and scholars who find the issues intellectually significant.

Finally, let me thank the two graduate students at the University of Washington, Barbara Grub and Elif Akçetin, who helped me scan the older articles, convert romanization to pinyin, prepare the unified bibliography, and standardize citations. I have not tried to edit or improve the articles as originally published, but have corrected typos and other errors, imposed some uniformity of style, and changed the editions of some of the primary sources when the original articles had cited more than one edition.

Introduction

Westerners have long been fascinated by the Chinese family and Chinese women, though the approaches they have brought to these topics have naturally changed over time. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, missionaries emphasized the features of the Chinese family that stood in contrast to Western practices, such as ancestor worship, legally recognized concubinage, and large multigenerational families with several married brothers living together. Many were reformers at heart and took up the cause of the subjection of women. They wrote with feeling of the plight of girls who might be killed at birth by parents who did not need another daughter, who could be sold at 5 or 6 as indentured servants, whose feet were bound so small that they could hardly walk, who were denied education, who had to marry whomever their fathers chose, who had few legal rights to property, who could be divorced easily and denied custody of their children, and who might be pressured not to remarry after their husbands' deaths.

By the mid-twentieth century social scientists occupied a similar position of authority in writing about Chinese women and the family for Western audiences. They not surprisingly framed their work in very different ways, trying to avoid both ethnocentrism and condescension. They placed China in a comparative framework that classified family systems according to their method of reckoning descent, their forms of marriage, their ways of transmitting property, and the like, leading to our common understandings of the Chinese family as patrilineal, patrilocal, and patriarchal. Long-term change was not a part of this analysis, and historians impressed by the anthropological model usually discussed the Chinese family as part of the background to Chinese history, much like its geography or language, rather than treating its development as integral to their main historical narrative. Anthropologists themselves commonly treated the household as relatively well understood and devoted much of their fieldwork to analyses of kinship organization beyond the household. One reason for this was that the Chinese lineage corresponded in interesting ways to the segmentary lineages found in Africa, and by studying Chinese lineages they could contribute to anthropological debates on lineage structure. Women were rarely key players in

2 *Women and the family in Chinese history*

lineages, and thus a view of Chinese kinship that makes lineages central shifted emphasis away from women.

After 1980, historians of premodern China began taking more and more of an interest in the subject of women and the family. One stimulus was certainly the growth within the larger historical profession first of family history and then of women's history. Another was the outpouring of books re-evaluating China's modern gender system, made possible by the opening of China to Western researchers. These books decried the failures of the Chinese revolution to meet its oft-stated goal of liberating Chinese women from positions of inferiority. But the authors generally prefaced their discussion of the original goals of the revolution by repeating stereotypes of women's lot in traditional times as exceptionally bleak. To historians of earlier periods, myself among them, it was time to re-examine these undifferentiated pictures of women's situations in earlier times. There was no reason why the Chinese family should be seen as somehow outside history, unaffected by developments in the state, economy, religion, or culture.

The nine essays collected in this volume represent some of my efforts to historicize the Chinese family, gender, and kinship systems. They analyze features of these systems as historical phenomena, as practices and ideas intimately connected to other historical phenomena and thus subject to change over time. Some cover long periods, but over half focus on the Song period (960–1276), a time of marked social and cultural change, often considered the beginnings of the modern period in Chinese history, and without doubt better documented than any earlier period because of the introduction of printing. The essays were written for different audiences, but share some common concerns. Implicit in most of them are basic comparative questions: How would one compare earlier periods of Chinese history to what we know of more recent times? How would we compare forms of social organization in China of the past to forms found in other societies, past or present? Many of them also tackle the difficult question of identifying the stages of change and the processes and agents that brought it about.

The essays collected here can be read in any order, but there is a rationale for the order I have adopted. "Women, money, and class: Sima Guang and Song Neo-Confucian views on women" was placed first because it brings together several of the central strands in my work: the interconnections between social and intellectual phenomena, the competing logics of property and the descent line, and the articulation of gender distinctions. For anyone with time to read only one of my essays, I would recommend this one. Its starting-point is the commonly heard charge that the revival of Confucianism in the Song period led to a decline in the status of women. I shift attention from Cheng Yi (1033–1107), famous for his remarks on widow remarriage, to Sima Guang (1019–1086), a much more prolific writer on women whose texts strongly influenced Zhu Xi (1130–1200), in the long run the most influential thinker of the age. Evaluating the charge against Neo-Confucianism requires me to unpack the variety of ways that the ideas

of leading thinkers could influence social practices as well as the ways their ideas were shaped by their circumstances and experiences. I argue that to understand Sima Guang's writings we must consider how his contemporaries talked about the interconnections between women and money, money and sexuality, and money and social standing. Because of the dangers he saw in the nexus of women and money, Sima Guang worked hard to bolster the stable, hierarchical, side of the family. In particular, he disapproved of wives having any control over their dowries or families taking dowries into account in selecting brides, both of which he saw as undermining family hierarchy. Zhu Xi adopted most of Sima Guang's ideas, but during the Song these ideas had not yet had much noticeable effect on the behavior of the educated class, where daughters were still commonly given large dowries and young widows frequently remarried. The story I tell, thus, is neither a simple one of orthodox ideas directly limiting women nor one in which ideas are of little import. Rather it is a complex one in which economic change, such as the increased use of money, and social change, such as the expansion of the educated class, encouraged re-assertion of certain old ideas, but these ideas did not have much impact on behavior for centuries to come, when other social and political conditions fostered new attitudes.

Those who come to this volume because of comparative interests may prefer to start with Chapter 2, "Concubines in Song China," since this essay was originally written for a comparative audience and makes no assumptions about knowledge of Chinese history or culture. Its starting-point is the distinction between concubines and co-wives as analyzed by the anthropologist Jack Goody. In true polygamous societies co-wives have largely the same rights, with only minor differentiation by seniority. Co-wives are generally found in relatively egalitarian societies, as class inequalities are maintained and reproduced best by monogamous marriage systems, whether or not concubinage is also practiced. In this essay I show how well these insights fit the Chinese case and argue that the women called *qie* in premodern China should not be classed as secondary wives, as they commonly have been, but as concubines. Looking specifically at Song evidence, I show that the differences in law, ritual, and ordinary social life between wives and concubines were substantial. Wives were acquired through a betrothal process that entailed exchange of gifts and ceremonies; concubines were purchased through a market in female labor much as maids were. A wife's relatives became kin of her husband and his family; a concubine's did not. A man could take as many concubines as he could afford; he could marry only one wife. The sons of a concubine had the same rights of inheritance as the sons of a wife, but they had to treat their father's wife as their legal mother, honoring their "birth mother" to a lesser degree. A concubine had to treat the wife as her mistress, and she might well be used by the wife as a personal maid. The wife could rear the concubine's children herself if she chose to and would be their legal guardian if the father died. Adult stepsons would inherit in full and could turn her out of the house. Class inequalities were

4 *Women and the family in Chinese history*

reproduced by this system because poverty was the main reason a woman would become a concubine rather than a wife.

Both Chapters 1 and 2 highlight the significance of buying and selling women. Chapter 3, “Shifts in marriage finance from the sixth to the thirteenth century,” deals with another side of the connection between wealth and women’s standing: the dowries that wives brought with them into marriage. Much of the essay is devoted to marshalling the evidence to show that China’s system of marriage finance changed substantially from the Tang to the Song in line with changes in the elite from an aristocracy of super-elite families that largely married exclusively within its own circle to an expanding elite that incorporated new members through the civil service examination system. The principal change in marriage finance was an escalation in the value of dowries, a phenomenon that has happened in other places as well during periods of social and economic change, such as Renaissance Italy. In China’s case, because daughters did not normally inherit family property, large dowries also marked a shift toward the transmission of property through both daughters and sons rather than exclusively through sons. When the families of brides devoted substantial resources, including land, to supplementing whatever they got from the groom’s family by way of betrothal gifts, they were transferring property permanently to another patriline because the woman’s dowry would eventually pass to her children, members of her husband’s patriline. At the same time a generous dowry enhanced the status of a bride entering a new family and enlarged the range of actions she could take.

The first three essays cite many examples of particular women who lived during the Song period, but not many women or families are examined in depth. To make up for this deficiency, these essays are followed by Chapter 4, “The women in Liu Kezhuang’s family.” Although Chinese historical records are poor in the diaries, letters, and memoirs that European historians have used to reconstruct the emotional texture of family life, in this essay I show that there is much that can be done with the thousands of epitaphs that have been preserved in educated men’s collected works. Liu Kezhuang (1187–1269), a late-Song official and poet, wrote forty-three epitaphs for close relatives who died before him, many of them women. Among the women he sketches are his mother, who presided over the home of her sons and grandchildren for more than thirty years after her husband’s death; his sister, who often left her husband’s family to come back to keep her mother company; his wife, who traveled with him and died young; his concubine, who took over the duties of this wife; and his sister-in-law, who poured her efforts into her husband’s sons by other women. The vital data included in the epitaphs Liu Kezhuang wrote allow us to see the high proportion of children born to concubines and maids rather than wives in this family and also the impact of early deaths on family life. Most of these women’s lives were shaped in profound ways by the chance mortality of those around them, especially their parents, husbands, and sons.

The next three chapters shift the focus from women to other features of the family and kinship systems. Chapter 5, "The early stages in the development of descent group organization," is similar to Chapter 3 in that it attempts to identify and explain change, in this case the appearance of a repertoire of practices that characterize the modern Chinese lineage. The practices examined run the gamut from labeling people as kinsmen, to extending aid to them on an ad hoc basis, to forming giant households with them, to assembling at graves of common patrilineal ancestors for joint worship, to setting aside property to pay for such rituals, to building halls so that rites could also be performed in town, to compiling genealogies in order to encourage kinsmen to identify with each other, and so on. In examining the appearance of these practices, I pay particular attention to the question of elite leadership. I show that some of these practices, such as worshipping ancestors at their graves, began as commoners' local practices, while others, such as the modern-style genealogy and the charitable estate, were innovations purposely instituted by educated men. By reinterpreting classical injunctions Neo-Confucian writers played a part as well, making it easier for educated men to take leadership roles in their local descent groups.

In my analysis of the origins of descent groups, I see participation in rituals, most notably rites to early ancestors, as fostering group formation, a view that places me at odds with much of the anthropological literature, which sees groups forming for political or economic reasons, then adopting rituals to enhance solidarity. In Chapter 6, "Cremation in Song China," I extend this interest in the rituals of family life through a detailed study of two major changes in Chinese ritual behavior, first the spread of cremation and later its decline. The spread of cremation marked a fundamental change in the treatment of the dead because until then the dominant Chinese preference had been to dispose of the dead in ways that would delay decay, such as burial in thick heavily lacquered coffins placed within vaults of stone or brick. Although Buddhism certainly played a part in the spread of cremation, and often ran the crematory used by city residents, in this essay I try to show that the history of cremation is much more complex than a simple story of the rise and decline of Buddhism. Neo-Confucian scholars wrote against the practice and the government issued laws against it, but they cannot be given full credit for suppressing the practice either. Archaeological and literary evidence shows that other mortuary customs were changing as well, such as a decline in the use of grave goods and an increase in attention to geomancy, and in this essay I try to show that part of the context of the history of cremation is folk beliefs about bodies, ghosts, and graves. In popular belief, the dead suffered more from their bones being left to rest in the wrong place than from the method through which they were reduced to bones.

Although I have taken considerable pains to demonstrate that the Chinese family, kinship, and gender systems were not unchanging, I do not deny that there are some remarkable continuities in Chinese social practices.

Chapters 7 and 8, in rather different ways, deal with practices that had very long histories in China. Chapter 7, "Surnames and Han Chinese identity," goes beyond kinship *per se* to look at the power of habits of thinking about patrilineal kinship to a realm outside kinship, ethnic identity. In it I argue that Confucian relativism notwithstanding, there was a genuinely ethnic dimension to Chinese identity rooted in the habit of imagining the Hua, Xia, or Han, metaphorically at least, as a giant patrilineal descent group made up of intermarrying surname groups. Especially in south China adopting a Chinese surname may have been nothing more than an expedient act, facilitating communication with Han Chinese, but over time those with Chinese surnames tended to acquire Han Chinese genealogies as well, forgetting or dismissing earlier identities. Even if becoming Han Chinese through assimilation was approved in Confucian theory, people in south China preferred to see themselves as descendants of migrants from the north, not descendants of indigenous peoples who had assimilated. Imagining the linkage among Chinese as a matter of patrilineal kinship differs in interesting ways from other ways of imagining group identities, such as associating the group with biological substance, with a language community, or with a state. In particular, it does not lend itself as well to racialist thinking, as surname inheritance does not map to genetic inheritance. That is, a person inherits genes from all his or her sixteen great-great grandparents, but the surname from only one. In cases of intermarriage, when a Han Chinese man married a local woman, the children of course got genes from both sides and probably even learned ideas and cultural practices from both sides, but identity was tied up in the name.

The last two chapters in this volume take me away from the study of the family system of ordinary Chinese, though they grow from my earlier work on those subjects and my interest in the workings of the Chinese gender system. Chapter 8, "Rethinking the imperial harem: Why were there so many palace women?" is the only essay not to have been published before. Reflecting its origins as a talk rather than an article, it concentrates on a single question: why did so many emperors surround themselves with thousands of palace ladies? I refer to these women as the emperor's harem because they formed a pool of potential consorts. Most of the essay is devoted to eliminating the functional explanation of their numbers in terms of the need for successors. By taking the case of the Northern Song, I show that neither the emperors who had difficulty begetting heirs nor the emperors who had dozens of sons had any need for more than a few dozen women in their harem, as they were usually producing children by no more than half a dozen women at a time. I go on to suggest several alternative explanations for the persistent tendency for the palace establishment to grow huge, ranging from the interests of the widowed consorts of previous emperors, who stood to see their world enlarged as more women entered the palace, to the notion that women were needed to furnish palaces in elegant style, to conceptions of imperial majesty that drew from the myth of the Yellow

Emperor as the ultimate male, his potency reinforced by his access to unlimited supplies of young virgins.

The last chapter, "Gender and sinology: shifting Western interpretations of footbinding, 1300–1890" approaches the historiography of Chinese women's history from a different direction. Even working on the Song period, a period before writings by Western visitors provide much evidence, I have undoubtedly been influenced in subtle ways by the habits of generations of Western scholars and writers who before the end of the nineteenth century had already made footbinding, concubinage, infanticide, and arranged marriages topics that had to be discussed in any treatment of Chinese women. To place these ways of framing the topic of Chinese women in historical context, I take the case of Western writing on the highly charged subject of footbinding. I show both the difficulties Western observers had in describing and making sense of the practice and how their approaches changed over time as their views on Chinese culture more generally changed. I stress the ways gender proprieties complicated inquiry because most of the Western authors were men who turned to other men, Western or Chinese, to learn about Chinese women. Although over time Western comprehension of footbinding certainly improved, this was not due to advances of sinology in the sense of mastery of Chinese texts. The greatest sinologists were rarely insightful on the topic of footbinding, probably because books were not central to how the practice was reproduced and the Chinese scholars they studied with did not consider footbinding a topic worth talking about.

These chapters are all separate studies, each with its own set of questions, even if overlapping concerns run through them. There are also questions that emerge from placing these essays side by side that none of them alone addresses. Let me conclude by taking up one of them here: How separate are the histories of family, women, gender, and kinship in China?

Certainly the history of women is related to the history of the family, and my studies here of concubines and marriage finance were conceived as much as contributions to women's history as family history. The relationship between women's history and the history of the family is double-edged. How women lived their lives was shaped by elements of family and marriage practice, such as the age at which they married, how their spouses were selected, where they lived after marriage, their access to property, the choices open to them if widowed, and the like. But one can also highlight women's participation in creating and maintaining the family and marriage systems, not only as mothers and mothers-in-law, but also as wives, concubines, maids, and daughters. Even when men were the primary actors, as, for instance, they were in writing about both women's virtues and family ethics, they were responding to situations in which women were important actors.

On the other hand, the more I have studied China's gender system, the more convinced I am that there are elements in it that are deeper than the family system, that reflect very basic ways of thinking about natural phenomena. The essay here that brings that out most clearly is Chapter 9 on the

imperial harem. Notions such as decorating the palace with elegantly dressed palace ladies and the association of large numbers of palace ladies with the Yellow Emperor and immortality do not seem to derive from the family system, even the imperial family system. They would seem to be sustained and reproduced more through popular culture and popular religion than the logic of either family property or the ancestral cult.

A good case can also be made for the autonomy of the history of kinship organization in China, though perhaps not to the same degree as gender. Although I show some links in these essays – in Chapter 1 I speculate that the interest shown by leading Song Neo-Confucian thinkers in reviving the *zong* system played a role in undermining women's property rights and in Chapter 5 suggest that the same phenomena aided the legitimation of the descent group – on the whole the history of descent groups and the history of the household do not seem either to be closely linked or to follow the same trajectory. Although Chapters 3, 5, and 6 cover pretty much the same period, mid-Tang through Yuan, changes in forms of marriage finance, descent group organization, and disposal of the dead show no signs of being closely tied to each other. It is not the case that one central change – the famed “Tang–Song transition” – brought about changes in all these realms.

True, the agents and processes of change were often similar in these different realms, in the sense that economic development and social dislocation affected them all, and in many cases we can also see some role for the state, elite leadership, and popular ideas. Yet when one looks more closely, differences in the ways these common elements were implicated are at least as interesting as similarities.

To give just one possible example, the role of Buddhism was much more marked in some domains than others. At the level of the household, Buddhism did not have anywhere near the sort of impact on China that Christianity had in the West. In Europe, Christianity led to the end of the Roman ancestral cult; in China Buddhism co-existed with the ancestral cult. In Europe, concubinage became illegal with Christianity; in China, marriage law was unaffected by Buddhism. In Europe, Christianity elevated celibacy, even for those who did not become clerics; in China Buddhism did not make it easier for women to reject marriage unless they became nuns.

On the other hand, Buddhism had a major impact on the performance of family rituals, especially those related to the dead. Families often let Buddhist temples perform ancestral rites for them, which was one of the reasons Neo-Confucian scholars like Cheng Yi and Zhang Zai wanted to revive ancient forms of ancestral rites. Buddhist clergy also, as discussed in Chapter 6, offered a range of support for those faced with a death in the family, from prayer services, to storage of coffins, to crematoriums where bodies could be burnt and ponds where ashes could be disposed. Although I see no reason to think that these services changed in any major way household, kinship, or gender relations, they certainly did draw protest from the Confucian elite, who thought they threatened traditional family ethics

and the central value of filial piety. Thus any impact they had on the family was probably mediated through their impact on leading Confucian thinkers, who in reaction to their success made new efforts to define the core of Confucian family rituals.

The impact of Buddhism on kinship organization was of a different sort. As discussed in Chapter 5, setting aside land to be used for charitable purposes indefinitely to support kinsmen seems to be based on the earlier success of Buddhist endowments. Similarly, entrusting care of graves to Buddhist temples seems to have come before setting aside land in the name of a descent group for the same purpose. Elsewhere I have also proposed that use of portraits in ancestral rites may have been inspired by the huge role images played in Buddhist devotions. None of these changes were advocated or in any other way encouraged by Buddhist clergy; they were indirect effects of the way Buddhism enlarged China's repertoire of forms of social organization and practice.

If we considered the case of increased circulation of money, migration to the south, the expansion of the examination system, changes in state activism, the Neo-Confucian movement, or the like, we would see similar variability in how these more general historical changes were connected to changes in the family, gender, and kinship systems. There are processes we discern only when we look at these domains together; but there are others we see only when we take each case separately.

1 Women, money, and class

Sima Guang and Song

Neo-Confucian views on women*

Most historians of China have heard the charge that the revival of Confucianism in the Song period initiated a decline in the status of women. The principal accusations are that Neo-Confucianism fostered the seclusion of women, footbinding, and the cult of widow chastity. It is widely recognized that these constraints on women had become more oppressive by the Qing dynasty, but their roots are traced back to the Song period.¹ Cheng Yi's (1033–1107) statement that “To starve to death is a small matter, but to lose one's chastity is a great matter” is commonly blamed for much of the misery of women in late imperial China.

The evidence offered to support these charges is of several sorts. In his *Zhongguo funü shenghuo shi* (History of Chinese Women's Lives), written in 1928, Chen Dongyuan argued that women's lives started to deteriorate after Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi (1130–1200) promoted “the idea that women must value chastity.” Thus “the Song really was the turning point in women's lives.”² More recently, Zhu Ruixi, after examining a wide range of evidence concerning views on women and marriage in the Song, concluded that these attitudes gradually hardened during the Song, bringing in divorce as well as remarriage.

Especially from the time of Song Lizong [r.1225–1264], because of the honor granted Neo-Confucianism in the intellectual sphere, the right of women to seek divorces was almost completely eliminated, and their right to remarry after the death of their husbands decreased every day.³

Popularizers and polemicists have been quicker to assert the influence of Neo-Confucianism on female seclusion, footbinding, and even female infanticide. Lin Yutang in *My Country and My People* and Howard Levy in *Chinese Footbinding* report that Zhu Xi, while prefect of Zhangzhou in southern Fujian, promoted footbinding as a way to foster the separation of

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men and women and encourage chastity by making it difficult for women to move about.⁴ Feminists have picked up these charges. Elisabeth Croll writes that “the Neo-Confucian philosophers of the Song dynasty (960–1267) further elaborated the code of feminine ethics by re-emphasizing the practices of segregation and seclusion, and introducing the practice of bound feet.”⁵ Esther Yao states that “Infanticide was extremely prevalent in the Song Dynasty – being greatly influenced by the philosophy of Neo-Confucianism which denied women basic human rights, including the right to live.”⁶ Authors of textbooks have also incorporated these charges against Neo-Confucianism. Dun J. Li, in his textbook for American students, *The Ageless Chinese: A History*, argues that stricter sexual segregation from Song on was a result of the acceptance of Neo-Confucianism.

Zhu Xi, for instance, not only advocated strict sexual segregation but glorified widowhood as well; he thought he did society a great service by encouraging widows to join their dead husbands at the earliest possible moment. As his philosophy dominated the intellectual and ethical scene for the next seven hundred years, his bleak, puritanical ideas began to be accepted as the lofty goal which every gentry family strove to achieve. With the popularity of his ideas, the status of women declined.⁷

For an historian, these charges against Neo-Confucianism are problematic on several grounds.⁸ From the historically well-grounded evidence that Zhu Xi agreed with Cheng Yi that remarriage was morally wrong for widows, the bolder of these authors go on to charge them with attempts to constrain and control women in other ways, without providing any evidence from Song sources. The logic seems to be that anyone so misogynist as to oppose the remarriage of young widows must take misogynist stands on all other issues. Second, these charges attribute enormous power to ideas articulated by male philosophers. Did the structure of the society and economy have nothing to do with the position of women in society? Are general mentalities shaped solely by philosophers? Did women themselves have nothing to do with the creation of the social and cultural system in which they participated? Third, it is anachronistic to look to the Song to explain Ming and Qing situations. Surely no one today believes that Ming and Qing Confucianism was simply the automatic working out of the ideas proposed in the Song. There must have been something about the social and cultural situation in the Ming and Qing that led people to give emphasis to these particular points among the very large body of statements made by Song Confucians.

At the same time, at a much more general level, these charges against Neo-Confucianism may capture a certain truth. Confucianism, including classical and Han Confucianism, provided a view of the cosmos and social order that legitimated the Chinese patrilineal, patrilocal, and patriarchal family system. Confucian emphasis on obligations to patrilineal ancestors

and Confucian exaltation of filial piety contributed to a moral order in which families were central to human identity and to a family system organized hierarchically so that men and older generations had considerable power over women and younger generations. Neither Buddhism nor Taoism made the family so central, though in practice their clergy did not challenge Confucian family ethics. At this rather general level, then, the revival of Confucianism in the Song, and the particular form this revival took, could plausibly have strengthened patrilineal and patriarchal ideology, and in the process buttressed a family system in which women were disadvantaged.⁹

In this essay I do not have the space to demonstrate the more obvious flaws in the most extreme of the charges against Neo-Confucianism. I will not give the evidence that Song Neo-Confucian scholars treated widow chastity as an ideal that those of great virtue should strive to achieve, not a standard by which everyone should be judged, or that they did not advocate either female infanticide or footbinding.¹⁰ Rather I will focus on the more plausible hypothesis that the Song revival of Confucianism subtly altered old understandings of women in the family system in ways that imposed greater constraints on women.

My overall argument is as follows. The attention given Cheng Yi has been misplaced. The “orthodox” Cheng-Zhu view of the family and women articulated by Zhu Xi in such widely circulated works such as his *Elementary Learning* (*Xiaoxue*) and *Family Rituals* (*Jiali*) owed at least as much to the ideas of Sima Guang (1019–1086) as it did to ideas more particular to Cheng Yi. Moreover, Cheng Yi’s surviving writings say relatively little on women, and therefore the one famous passage has been viewed out of context, whereas the writings of Sima Guang include several lengthy works dealing with family management, family ethics, and family rituals which allow us to see particular ideas in context.¹¹ From this context, it seems that the focus on the sexual dimensions of widow remarriage has been overdone. Women’s sexuality was not the only thing about them that was troubling to men and their families. Other problems were the tenuous nature of their ties to their husband’s families; the potential threats created by their claims to property; the confusion of patterns of solidarity and authority created by concubines and multiple mothers; and the ways women’s insecurity reflected on the insecurity of the *shidafu* as a class.

I further will argue that in taking the stands that he did, Sima Guang was responding to social, political, and economic changes that brought to the fore the ambiguous and dangerous relationships between women and money, money and sexuality, money and interpersonal relationships, and money and social standing. There were, of course, courtesans and concubines, dowries and heiresses, in earlier dynasties. Yet the problem of the relationship of women to money was more acute in the mid-eleventh century than it had been earlier. Without doubt the amount of money needed for a respectable dowry had risen. Commercialization of the economy and changes in the nature of the political and social elite both seem to have contributed to the

increased transmission of family property through daughters' dowries. Men competed for desirable sons-in-law, attempting to attract them by the size of the dowries they would give their daughters. Affines could be of great value in political careers, and men with wealth were willing to use some of it to build up useful networks.¹² At the same time, the increase in the circulation of money, the growing prosperity of merchants, and the growth in the size of the *shidafu* stratum all seem to have led to an increase in the demand for luxury items, prominent among which were the sorts of women who could be bought (courtesans, concubines, maids). Whether these women entered *shidafu* homes or stayed in entertainment quarters, they impinged on the lives of *shidafu* men and their wives and daughters. The relationships between maids and concubines and the members of the families that they entered had an undeniable commercial cast, and were sometimes subject to renegotiation as financial conditions changed. The boundaries between the world of *shidafu* families and the world of courtesans were permeable, in no small part because some men brought ex-courtesans home as concubines and had them entertain their guests. The permeability of these boundaries contributed, I suspect, to the slow but steady spread of footbinding. It also fostered more rigid notions of modesty, for "respectable" women now had to conceal themselves in an increasing range of situations. Veiling their faces marked them off more clearly from the sorts of women who showed their faces to men to entertain them.

Women were not merely passive agents in this system; many played active roles in keeping the system going. Mothers trained their daughters to occupy certain statuses in this system, fostering in them the modesty expected of upper-class wives, the charm expected in courtesans, the obedience expected in maids. Women purchased most of the maids and many of the concubines. A wife whose husband took a concubine could to some degree limit or shape her husband's behavior by arousing fears of what she might do to the other woman if sufficiently provoked. And women were of course also actors as concubines, maids, and courtesans. Not only did some women choose an economically secure position as a concubine over a life of poverty as a poor man's wife, but even those who had been sold quite against their will were not entirely powerless. So long as there were chances to improve their situations, they could strive to gain the favor of their master or mistress, working within the system and thereby also helping to validate it and reproduce it.

I do not have space to substantiate all the links in my chain of arguments. I will say no more about the commercialization of the economy, the growth in the market in women, or women's role in confirming and creating this social system. Rather I will confine myself more narrowly to the antecedents of Zhu Xi's views on women. I will start by showing that the relationships of class, money, sexuality, and interpersonal relationships was troubling to men at the center of the mid-eleventh century scholarly world, then show that the conservative approach to these troublesome issues adopted by Sima

Guang involved an attempt to reconcile the need to protect both daughters and the patrilineal family, and finally argue that Zhu Xi accepted much of this approach while placing it in a slightly altered context.

THE INTRUSIONS OF THE MARKET IN WOMEN

To illustrate the mixed perceptions, feelings, and judgments that eleventh-century *shidafu* men had about the relationships between women, money, and class, I shall briefly recount a dozen incidents they talked about. I have selected ones that involved or came to the attention of men whom Sima Guang knew: these are his brother Sima Dan (1006–1087), Du Yan (978–1057), Chen Zhizhong (991–1059), Zhang Fangping (1007–1091) and his son Zhang Shu, Su Shi (1036–1101), his brother Su Zhe (1039–1112), two unrelated Sus, Su Shunqin (1008–1048) and Su Song (1020–1101), Wang Anshi (1021–1086), and his brother Wang Anguo (1028–1074).

These stories were recorded because *shidafu* of the Song thought that they revealed character or insight. A man who would use his personal funds to provide a dowry for the orphaned daughter of an official was a man of generosity. A man who used state funds for courtesans was lacking in probity or good sense. A man who could not control his concubines was a bad manager. A man who could successfully re-establish a filial relationship to a concubine mother ousted by his father was a heroic figure, much more admirable than one who preferred to pretend his mother did not exist. Neither Sima Guang nor other Song *shidafu* explicitly inferred from these anecdotes the point I think they also conveyed: the nexus of women, money, and class created many problems.

Wives and daughters of good families sold into concubinage

The first three incidents are known only in the sketchiest of terms. Sima Guang's elder brother Sima Dan once gave part of his monthly salary to a cashiered official left with no means of support. The former official, having no other way to repay Sima Dan, offered him his daughter as a concubine. Startled, Dan declined the offer, and instead quickly assembled enough goods from his wife's dowry to marry the girl out.¹³ Much the same thing is said to have once happened to Wang Anshi. His wife purchased a woman to be his concubine. When Wang Anshi questioned her, he discovered that she was the wife of a military officer whose family property had been confiscated to compensate for the loss of a boat loaded with tax rice. By selling her, the officer had raised 900,000 cash. Wang Anshi summoned the husband, returned his wife to him, and let him keep the money.¹⁴ The same motif recurs in Zhang Fangping's epitaph for Fu Qiu (1003–1073). Noticing that the girl he had bought as a concubine had unusual abilities and demeanor, Fu questioned her and learned that she was the daughter of an

official he had once known and had been married to a gentleman (*shi*). Fu Qiu made inquiries and learned that her mother had already remarried. He therefore took care of everything to arrange a suitable marriage for her rather than keep her as his concubine.¹⁵

One reason a man willing to buy a concubine would be uncomfortable with one from an official family was that the fate of the concubine was considered an extremely unfortunate one: it was pitiful to see someone fall from the greatest heights to the lowest depths. This side of the issue is brought out in a poem written by Wang Anguo and a tale written by Liu Fu (ca. 1040–1113+). Wang Qiongnu was the daughter of an official, used to a life of luxury and able to embroider and compose poetry. When she was 13, her father was posted as a judicial official in the Huainan area. In the late 1050s, her father was dismissed for being too harsh. On the road home, both he and his wife died. Qiongnu's elder brother and his wife then left with most of the property. Her fiancé no longer wished to marry her now that she was poor, and Qiongnu had little to live on. A neighboring woman offered to arrange a marriage for her, but Qiongnu declined any match with a merchant or craftsman. Finally, when she had reached 18 *sui* and had nothing to eat, the old wife of a servant suggested that she become the concubine of a rich official. "Although it is not marrying, it is still marrying." Qiongnu agreed, and the next day she was decked out in finery and brought to her new home. The official was immediately attracted to her, which made the other concubines jealous. They slandered her to the wife, who became angry, cursed her, and beat her. When the beatings continued, Qiongnu appealed to the official, who, however, was unwilling to do anything to protect her. Qiongnu, thus, had to put up with regular humiliation and beatings. Once while traveling with the official, she inscribed her story and her suicidal thoughts on the wall of an inn, which occasioned Wang Anguo's poem. The poem castigated all involved, but particularly the official. In his house the wife oppresses her husband. "If he knew that Qiongnu came from an official family, how could he bear to let her receive whippings for no reason?" Wang Anguo then, rhetorically, offered to redeem her.¹⁶

In these anecdotes, men who did not disapprove of concubinage in general were deeply disturbed by the thought that women of their own social class might fall into it. They realized that marrying a daughter properly into her own social class required a suitable dowry, and knew that it sometimes happened that the daughters or wives of officials were sold into concubinage when the family was financially ruined. They considered this not merely among the more unfortunate facts of life, to be lamented, but something so wrong that efforts should be made to remedy it, even at considerable personal expense. Undoubtedly, part of their anguish derived from their own insecurity. Many officials did not have the wherewithal to protect their families' social and economic standing if they were to die suddenly or lose their posts. They were too dependent on money, a fickle medium that could disturb and transmute all of the foundations of order.

Complications caused by women's property

Du Yan was one of the most eminent men of the generation senior to Sima Guang. In his epitaph for Du Yan, Ouyang Xiu (1007–1072) stressed the family's illustrious history back to eminent officials of the Tang dynasty. He reported that the Du family had been very rich, but when the property was divided, Du Yan had let his brothers take all of his share as they were poor.¹⁷ Zhang Fangping, in his epitaph for Du Yan's wife, mentioned that Du Yan's father died when he was a small child and that his mother returned home, leaving him with few relatives on whom to depend.¹⁸ In his *Sushui jiwen*, Sima Guang gave what appears to be the less varnished version of Du Yan's family background. In his account, Du Yan's experiences were complexly shaped by struggles over women's property. Du's father died before he was born and he was raised by his grandfather. Du Yan's two half brothers by his father's previous wife were disrespectful to his mother, so she left to marry into another family. When Du Yan was 15 or 16, his grandfather died. His two older half-brothers then demanded his mother's "private property" (*sicai*), meaning her dowry. When he refused to turn it over, they turned to force. One drew a sword and wounded Du Yan on the head. Bleeding profusely, he fled to his aunt, who hid him from his half-brothers, saving his life. With no paternal home to go to, he turned to his mother, but her new husband would not let him stay. He then traveled around, very poor, supporting himself by working as a scribe. (So much for the way Du Yan selflessly renounced his share of the family property!) On his travels, Du Yan encountered a rich man surnamed Xiangli. Impressed by Du Yan, Mr. Xiangli not only gave him his daughter to be his wife, but also provided enough for him to live rather comfortably. Du Yan was then able to take the examinations, coming in fourth in the *jinshi* examinations.¹⁹ Later, another source tells us, after he reached high rank, he repaid his debt to the Xiangli family by using his "protection" privilege to get his wife's brother an official post.²⁰

The implications of a story like this are several-fold. A man of good family without resources, like Du Yan, could become established by marrying the daughter of a wealthy family through the dowry provided for her. Yet such "women's property" could be the cause of enmity between brothers: it was because of his mother's property that Du Yan was stabbed by his half-brother, making it necessary to run away from home, breaking the ties of the patrilineal family. Moreover, this property had not even assured his mother a comfortable widowhood, as his half-brothers were able to harass her into leaving the family.

Political trouble incurred through relations with courtesans or concubines

It was not uncommon in Song times for prominent officials to suffer from accusations concerning their relationships with women.²¹ In 1043, factional

struggles at court led to the expulsion of Su Shunqin from the ranks of officialdom. Su was a target because he was a son-in-law of Du Yan and had been recommended by Fan Zhongyan (989–1052). The charge, however, concerned women. He was accused of using funds from the sale of government waste paper to hire two government courtesans for a party he had arranged for his colleagues. According to some reports, even after using government funds, Su still had to charge each of the guests ten strings of cash to pay for the party. After the guests had been drinking awhile, he dismissed the actors and summoned the two government courtesans. Someone angry that he had not been admitted to the party is said to have spread the story of Su Shunqin's misconduct. In the end all those who attended the party, even the courtesans, were punished.²² Money is very much at the center of this story: to entertain well, Su Shunqin needed money to hire expensive courtesans, but the way he acquired the money – like the way much money is acquired – cast his activities into even greater moral ambiguity.

At just about this time Zhang Fangping took up a post in Chengdu, where he met Su Shi and Su Zhe, then young men ready to go to the capital for the examinations. He also met and became enamored of a registered courtesan named Chen Fengyi. Perhaps because of the trouble Su Shunqin had gotten into, Zhang Fangping became worried. When a relative through marriage, Wang Su (1007–1073), went to Chengdu, Zhang wrote to him for help. Wang Su then called on Chen Fengyi to see if she had kept any of Zhang's letters. When she produced them, he stuffed them in a bag. He told her that Zhang had many enemies at court, and he would not let her use the letters to harm his reputation. He then burned the bag full of letters, earning Zhang Fangping's gratitude.²³

Some ten years later, in 1054, Chen Zhizhong lost his post as chief councilor because of something his favorite concubine did. When it was found that she had beat one of their female slaves to death, he was charged with failure to manage his household properly. In the end, after some clamor from officials, including Ouyang Xiu, he was relieved of his post.²⁴ His reputation had clearly suffered; when Han Wei (1017–1098) discussed his posthumous name he noted that “Within his inner quarters, the distinctions of ceremony were not clear. His wife was treated poorly; the concubine was cruel and ungovernable. His management of his family was unspeakable.”²⁵ As it turned out, some years later the murderous concubine was herself killed by the wife and maids of her son, with the son's complicity. Chen Zhizhong's son and these women were all executed, compounding the damage inflicted on his family directly and indirectly by his favorite concubine.²⁶ Running through this story and many ones like it going back centuries is the perception that lower-class women of the sort likely to be bought as concubines are particularly prone to malice and violence. And men, because they have selected such women on the basis of sexual attraction, cannot properly control them.

A little over ten years later, Li Ding (1028–1087) ran into a different sort of problem relating to concubinage. His father had had a concubine Qiu,

who bore his older brother and perhaps Ding as well. She, at any rate, had nursed him.²⁷ Later, according to one source, she left and married into the Gao family.²⁸ Li Ding himself was a protégé of Wang Anshi. When the woman Qiu died, Li Ding did not retire to mourn her, but he did ask to be relieved of his post to care for his father, then 89.²⁹ Later, when he returned to court, his failure to mourn Qiu as a mother was labeled a major breach of the rules of filial piety. Starting in 1070 officials wrote memorials asking for him to be dismissed. An official inquiry was ordered, and when it cleared Li Ding of intentional wrong-doing on the grounds that his father denied that Qiu was his mother, officials continued protesting. Wang Anshi came to Li Ding's defense, saying that he had mourned her in the fifth degree as the concubine mother of his brother and as his wet nurse, and should not be expected to quit his post to mourn her as a full parent now, especially since the facts of his parentage could not be definitively established.³⁰ Two officials were demoted to posts out of the capital when they submitted six or seven memorials asking for Li Ding's dismissal.³¹ Li Ding did manage to remain in office but he never freed himself of the taint of the label "unfilial."³²

Each of these cases shows a different facet of the political vulnerability of men linked in one way or another to women who were bought. The connections created by these links were ambiguous, carrying overtones of indecent pleasures, lower-class violence, and impermanence. They thus created ample potential for accusations motivated primarily by factional struggles. Su Shunqin gave his critics grounds for portraying him as frivolous and corrupt by hiring courtesans for a party. Chen Zhizhong lost his contemporaries' respect by failing to control the violence of his favorite concubine. Li Ding ran into a quandary when it was widely reputed that he was the son of a concubine whom his father had sent away and would not recognize. What runs through these cases is the danger of the ambiguous relationships created when women come and go like goods in the market.

Legal trouble brought on by concubines

Su Song and Su Zhe each recorded cases of educated men who ran foul of the law through their connections with concubines. Su Zhe reported that Zhou Gao, a wealthy, arrogant, and undisciplined official, once took several tens of courtesan-concubines (*jique*) with him on a trip to Hangzhou.³³ One, because of "the harm caused by jealousy," drowned herself. When her parents took the case to court, it happened that the magistrate had a maid who had once served in Zhou's house. She took a peek at those in the courtroom and recognized that one of Zhou Gao's concubines had been his father's concubine and had borne a son by him. Thus the magistrate was able to charge Zhou with the more serious offense of incest, and he was exiled.³⁴

The case reported by Su Song concerned a man and his father's maid/concubine. When the man passed the examinations and was assigned a post, he wished to take his widowed father with him, but his father declined. The

official then purchased a local woman to take care of his father, and gradually his father came to treat this maid “like a mate.” When the official returned, sensing his father’s feelings, he treated the woman politely and once used the term *niang*, “mom,” to refer to her in a letter to his father. Some time later, after the man had gone on to hold other posts, his father died. When the man returned he found the woman acting like a “genuine mother.” She cursed and beat his wife, and when he could stand it no longer, he beat her back. She then went to the magistrate, charging him with unfiliality. She brought the letter he had written to prove that she was his “mother.” The case dragged on until a clever official found a way out.³⁵

The ambiguity of the relationships created by purchasing women, thus, did not endanger only high officials subject to slander in factional disputes. Concubines as young or younger than sons created suspicions of incest; concubines of widowers might claim to be wives with all the authority of mothers over their master’s children.

Embarrassment and grief due to the impermanence of connections based on concubinage

Scholars may have clamored to condemn Li Ding’s neglect of his concubine/mother, but they recognized that he faced a real problem. Men, perhaps especially officials and merchants, might take a concubine to keep them company while they resided away from home, then abandon her when they left. The children of such concubines might lose all contact with their biological mothers. In the late 1060s, condemnation of Li Ding’s solution – ignoring his mother – was coupled with praise for Su Shi’s friend, Zhu Shouchang, who had responded in a different fashion. Zhu’s father took a concubine while serving as prefect of Jingzhao. She bore Shouchang, and when he was 2 *sui* she was sent away to be married into a commoner’s family.³⁶ Zhu Shouchang then saw nothing of his biological mother for fifty years. As he served in office around the country, he sought her out. Finally, in about 1068 or 1069, he gave up his office and left his family, declaring “I will not return until I see my mother.” He found her in Tongzhou, over 70 years of age, married into the Dang family and the mother of several sons. Zhu Shouchang took the whole family home with him. His story was first publicized by Qian Mingyi (1015–1071), “then the *shidafu*, from Wang Anshi, Su Song, and Su Shi on down, competed to praise his actions in poems.”³⁷ Su Shi’s poem praising Zhu Shouchang was taken by Li Ding as a criticism of him, and became part of the dossier Li Ding put together against Su Shi some years later.³⁸

It was not solely the children of concubines who could suffer from the fragility of the kinship ties of concubines. Their masters could also be embarrassed by it. It was reported, for instance, that Su Shi, while prefect of Huangzhou, got to know Xu Dezhi, the son-in-law of Han Jiang (1012–1088). Xu kept several concubines and Su Shi often saw them when music



Figure 1.1 Zhu Shouchang finally finding his concubine mother, left behind by his father.
Source: After SYXJ 1.26a.