

## 2 Concubines in Song China\*

In a patrilineal and patrilocal Chinese household, women belonged to one of two categories: those born there – daughters – or those brought in from outside – wives, concubines, and maids. This essay concerns the latter category of women, especially concubines, during the Song dynasty (960–1279). The standard Chinese term here translated as concubine was *qie*, a term used since ancient times.<sup>1</sup> Concubines resembled wives (*qi*) in that they were recognized sexual partners of a male family member, expected to bear children by him. They resembled maids (*bi*) in the way they were acquired and the marginality of their kinship status. In traditional China it was illegal and socially disreputable for a man to have more than one wife at a time, but he could have as many concubines as he could afford.<sup>2</sup> In English the term *concubine* also is used for the secondary consorts of emperors, some of very high rank; in Chinese such consorts seldom were called *qie* and they did not share the attributes of *qie* to be discussed in this essay.<sup>3</sup>

The aim of this essay is to make one argument: concubines in Song China should not be thought of as wives, even *secondary wives*. Among the women brought in from outside, concubines fell more to the side of the maids than to that of wives. Observers have overestimated the status of concubines largely because their sons were equal to those of the wife in matters of inheritance. But in China the status of a son did not depend on that of his mother or on the classification of the tie between her and his father.

The view that I am arguing draws on the distinctions made by the anthropologist Jack Goody. In *Production and Reproduction* Goody distinguishes between co-wives, common in African polygynous societies, and concubines, found in many parts of Asia. These concubines were not wives or married with the same ceremonies as wives. He describes such concubinage as institutionalized polycoity to distinguish it from polygyny.<sup>4</sup> In societies with concubinage, wives were married with dowries but concubines were not. Concubines could even be slaves:

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A free man could acquire a slave girl for the purpose of sexual gratification, just as he could purchase a male or female slave to do all kinds of work inside the home. Such a slave girl retained her servile status but her master was not supposed to sell her, and especially not if she had borne him children. The children of a concubine had the same status as the children of full wives.<sup>5</sup>

Although the fit between Goody's model and the Chinese case is remarkably good, it does not seem to have been picked up (or explicitly rejected) by writers on the Chinese family who still speak of secondary wives and plural marriages.<sup>6</sup> I would therefore like to lend support to Goody's argument by examining concubinage during the Song dynasty.

Concubines, like servants, were more common the richer the family. They were a normal feature of well-to-do Song families, especially families of *shidafu* ("gentlemen and officials"), where perhaps a third had a concubine at some time.<sup>7</sup> The presence of these concubines helps to account for the appearance of large sets of siblings in *shidafu* families.<sup>8</sup> Admittedly *shidafu* constituted only a few percent of the total population in the Song, but almost all those of political or cultural importance at the time were *shidafu*, making their family organization a subject of considerable historical importance. In the literature that touches on Chinese concubines, little has been made of the institutionalized superiority of wives over concubines. Most of the traditional literature relating to concubinage could be classed as romantic, focusing on the love a man could feel toward an attractive young girl.<sup>9</sup> To some modern authorities, the function of concubinage in the Chinese family system was to provide an outlet for romantic impulses, often impossible in marriages arranged by parents.<sup>10</sup> Even the literature critical of concubinage most often concentrates on the plight of the wife who must somehow live with a young concubine her husband has brought home, suppressing any feelings of jealousy or distaste. Yet the jealousy a wife may have felt toward a concubine was never a jealousy for her status. As will be seen below, a concubine had little to fall back on without her master's affection, especially the significant portion who never bore sons, or whose sons were largely taken over by the wife. To be loved may be gratifying, but total dependence on another's affection has obvious drawbacks.

## RITUAL STATUS OF CONCUBINES

In the Confucian tradition there was a large literature on the rituals (*li*) of family and kinship. Ritual was taken to include ancestral rites, mourning obligations, patterns of deference and authority, daily courtesies, and life-cycle ceremonies (coming of age, marriage, and funerals). Rules for all of these ritual matters could be found in classical texts, especially the *Li ji* (Record of Ritual) and *Yi li* (Etiquette and Ritual). Both of these texts



Figure 2.1 Kou Zhun's concubine singing a song she composed to admonish him.  
Source: After SYXJ 8.26a.

reached final form by the first century BC, but their meaning was regularly reinterpreted in commentaries.

Concubinage was assumed in the classics; indeed, the number and ranks of secondary women a noble should have was prescribed in much the same way as carriages or clothing. For Song families, the major problem in using the ritual classics to decide on the correct way to treat concubines was that most of the relevant passages in the classics referred to the concubines of feudal lords and kings. Even passages referring to ordinary gentlemen (*shi*) were difficult to apply because they were phrased in terms of a long-abandoned system of birth-order distinctions among sons.

In the classics concubines were considered sufficiently married to their master so that surname exogamy applied, as it did for wives. From ancient times on, ritual texts repeated the rule that if one were uncertain of the surname of a purchased *qie*, a divination should be made to assure that it was not the same as the master's.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the classics describe no wedding ceremonies to mark the incorporation of a concubine into a home (except in the ancient royal form in which the wife brings the concubines with her, including when possible her own younger sisters or nieces). In line with this lack of a wedding ceremony is the injunction that concubines were not to call their mate "husband" (*fu*) but, rather "master" (*jun*), as would a servant. According to one commentary, this was to reinforce the distinction between concubines and wives.<sup>12</sup> The wives they called "mistress" (*nijun*). Given that Song manuals for family rites also provide almost no guidelines for ritualizing the introduction of a concubine, it is possible that concubines took up their duties with no more ceremonies than maids. In Sima Guang's (1019–1086) ritual manual, the *Shuyi*, references to concubines mainly concern subservience to their masters and mistresses, such as the rule that they obey their master's or mistress's orders promptly.<sup>13</sup>

Chinese theories of kinship were most elaborate with regard to ancestral rites and mourning obligations. Concubines are hardly mentioned in discussions of ancestral rites, and the references that do exist are conflicting. In one place the *Li ji* states that if a concubine had children, after her death her own sons would make offerings to her, but these offerings were not continued by her grandsons, who only made offerings to their grandfather's wife.<sup>14</sup> According to this passage, then, concubines could not become ancestresses. Yet another passage implies that tablets for concubines were retained, as they were to be put next to the tablet for the grandfather's concubine.<sup>15</sup> The Neo-Confucian philosopher Cheng Yi (1033–1107), who in general favored expanding the ancestral cult to include ancestors earlier prohibited,<sup>16</sup> nevertheless came out strongly against including concubines who were mothers in ancestral rites. He stated that tablets for concubine-mothers are never to be placed in ancestral shrines; such a woman's sons should make offerings to her in a private room.<sup>17</sup>

The Chinese classification of mourning obligations specifies a range of kin each person must mourn and also the circle of those who mourn him or her.

Women who became wives had reduced obligations to their natal kin but mourned nearly all the relatives their husbands did (such as his brothers, uncles, cousins, and their wives and children). These relatives all reciprocated and mourned the wife. The wife's shift in mourning obligations symbolized her transfer of loyalties from one family to another. By contrast, concubines retained their obligations to their natal kin,<sup>18</sup> though in practice they seldom could have fulfilled them all. Their obligations to their master's family were much more circumscribed than were a wife's: concubines mourned their master, their mistress, and the master's children. Only if the concubine bore children did the master and his children reciprocate and also mourn her (though not to the same degree). The mistress did not mourn her under any circumstances. In the case of the master, the difference in degree was extreme: the concubine mourned her master to the highest degree (grade Ia; that is, "three years," actually twenty-five months); he mourned her at the lowest (grade 5; i.e., three months).

A more complicated issue was the mourning a son of a concubine wore for her. In the classics, a father's wife is the "legal mother" and must be honored at a level higher than that of any other woman attached to the father or son, including concubine-mothers, mothers who had been divorced, wet nurses, and foster mothers/governesses. These other women were mourned at relatively low levels out of respect for the legal mother. This is not because a man could mourn only one woman as a mother: if his mother died and his father took another wife, who also died, the son mourned each of them as legal mothers.<sup>19</sup>

The *Yi li* had four passages that Song scholars could use in deciding on a son's mourning for a concubine-mother. One gives mourning for one's mother as grade 1 b if one's father was already dead. Another gives it as grade 2 if the father was still alive. A third says "a secondary son (*shuzi*) who is to be his father's successor (*hou*)" mourns the woman who bore him at the lowest (fifth) grade. The fourth gives mourning for a *shumu* (normally defined as a concubine of one's father who has had children) as grade 5.<sup>20</sup> Knowing which sons of concubines were their fathers' successors was complicated; the classics assumed only one son succeeded, but in Song times equal division of property was the rule. Were they all successors, or only the eldest? To handle the problem of sons of concubines who were their father's successors, one Song writer suggested that they follow fifth-grade mourning but also practice "mourning in the heart" (*xinsang*) for three years,<sup>21</sup> as an adopted son did for his natural parents.

A more serious problem was that the classics do not provide enough evidence to be certain whether the son of a concubine should look on her as a *shumu*, therefore wearing only three months of mourning for her, or whether that is a term only his stepbrothers would use. The commentator Zheng Xuan (127–200) took the latter view and offered a compromise grade for the son of a concubine for his own mother.<sup>22</sup> Song legal rulings allowed that if the father commanded a son of a concubine to treat a particular concubine

(not necessarily his own birth mother) as a mother, he would mourn her at the same level as a legal mother.<sup>23</sup> However, some Song writers continued to assume that one's mother, if a concubine, was a *shumu*, to be mourned at the lowest grade. For instance, the mourning tables in the late Song reference work *Shilin guangji* gloss *shumu* as follows: "A concubine of the father who has children. The children she bears call her *shumu*. They wear grade 5 duty (*yi*) mourning for her; she wears regular (*zheng*) mourning of grade 2 for them."<sup>24</sup> The eminent philosopher Zhu Xi (1130–1200) disagreed. He argued in a letter that the correspondent was mistaken in thinking his mother was a *shumu* just because she was his father's concubine; she was his mother and he should mourn her for three years.<sup>25</sup>

Part of the problem in these ambiguous cases is the term *mother* in prescriptive texts. Does it always imply "legal mother," or "birth mother," or both? Even though Zhu Xi thought that "birth mother" was implied, there was ample legal precedent for assuming only "legal mother." In cases of honorary titles that officials could petition to have granted to their wives, mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers, the law explicitly stated that these honors were not for concubines. Indeed, it was a punishable offense to ask for a title for a woman who was "not ritually married as a proper wife" (*fei li hun zheng shi*).<sup>26</sup> In 1017, however, it was granted that titles could be given to birth mothers when the father was dead and there was no living legal mother or legal stepmother.<sup>27</sup> In other words, once those a concubine served as master or mistress were dead, her status as mother could gain ritual priority over her status as a servitor.

Did the ritual marginality of concubines matter in actual social life? I have seen no evidence that men were troubled by the inability of their concubines to play a larger role in family rituals. Sons, however, did at times object to the limitations placed on the ways they could honor their concubine-mothers, and the Song trend seems to have been to allow them greater leeway in this regard. What concubines themselves thought is a matter solely for conjecture.

## LEGAL STATUS OF CONCUBINES

In the legal code of the Tang (618–906), much of which was copied verbatim into its Song successor, the *Song xingtong*, many of the ritual distinctions drawn in the classics were given force of law. As in the classics, rules of exogamy and incest were largely the same for wives and concubines.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, a concubine was considered sufficiently married to her master so that if anyone else had sexual relations with her, the crime was classed as adultery, not fornication.<sup>29</sup> In most other matters, however, wives and concubines were treated differently. Above all, it was a major offense to make a concubine into a wife, or vice versa.<sup>30</sup> This law, although probably not enforced, does seem to reflect social attitudes. In the Song it was treated as a serious breach of social ethics to promote a concubine to a wife.<sup>31</sup>

Part of the desire to keep a strict separation between wives and concubines probably derives from feelings of class and status hierarchy. Confusing wife and concubine was like confusing lord and servitor. In numerous anecdotes men are shocked to find a daughter or wife of an official reduced to the status of concubine. To rectify the situation they collect a dowry so that woman can be married in a more appropriate fashion. For instance, when one man discovered that the girl he had bought as a concubine to accompany his daughter on her marriage was the child of an official, he declared, “How can I bear to place her among the ranks of those who take orders,” and he arranged a marriage for her before his own daughter was married.<sup>32</sup>

In assessing penalties in criminal law, concubines stood between wives and maids. It was less serious for a family head to kill a maid than to kill a concubine; it was more serious for a concubine to injure a relative of her master than for a wife to do so, and so on.<sup>33</sup> In the Tang there had been a real gap in status between concubines and maids (*bi*). According to Tang code, if a maid bore a son by the master she could be “freed” (*fang*) and promoted to concubine.<sup>34</sup> In other words, Tang code still saw *bi* as female slaves who needed to be “freed” for their status to change.

This line between *qie* and *bi* was much blurred in practice during the Song, in part because *bi* were not really slaves, but bondservants whose parents might retain more rights over them than did the parents of “married” *qie*. As a consequence, writers often used *bigie* as a compound term meaning lower-status women in the home, and they might even use the terms *bi* and *qie* nearly interchangeably.<sup>35</sup> In theory, of course, *qie* were recognized sexual partners, expected to bear children, and *bi* were not. However, masters not infrequently had sexual relationships with maids without making them *qie*, so sexual intimacy did not provide a hard-and-fast dividing line.<sup>36</sup>

Socially, people recognized status differences among concubines that the law did not recognize. The highest level would be the “housekeeper” concubine taken after a wife had died. Men who treasured the memory of their wives and did not wish to violate it by remarrying normally took concubines to manage household affairs. Sometimes a relatively high-status concubine would be called a “side room” (*ceshi*) or “rear quarters” (*houfang*), stressing her role as a companion and sexual partner. The courts did not recognize these distinctions, however. This is brought out in a complex legal decision recorded by Liu Kezhuang (1187–1269). He mentioned that two women were not considered of equivalent status by family members, one managing household affairs even during her master’s lifetime, the other (belonging to her master’s son) looked down on by her as a concubine (*qieying*). However, since neither had been ritually married (*fei li hun*), neither could be considered a wife.<sup>37</sup>

From a concubine’s point of view, probably the most important difference in legal rights between her and a wife were her rights as a “widow.” On the death of the husband, a widowed wife had certain legal and ritual

safeguards. No other male in the family could claim her as a mate, or keep her from using the family property to support her children, or stop her from adopting an heir for her husband. Her natal family could and often did intervene in her affairs. After all, they had not sold her, but had married her with a dowry.<sup>38</sup> A concubine was different. After her master's death, stepsons might drive her away or pension her off.<sup>39</sup> According to the law, a concubine was not to be taken over by a close relative of her former master (a somewhat narrower circle than for a wife), but it seems to have shocked people less when this happened than when a wife met a similar fate.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, a wife could largely take over a concubine's children, giving the latter little stake in the family. And if no wife survived and there were no male heirs, a concubine does not seem to have had the right to appoint a posthumous heir.<sup>41</sup>

## MARKETS AND BROKERS

As striking as the ritual and legal distinctions between wives and concubines were, one could imagine that they meant little in practice. After all, the rituals and even the legal code refer to distinctions between wives' sons and concubines' sons that do not seem to have been important in social life on any regular basis. To make the case that these distinctions concerning concubines were important in social life, I will examine the differences in the ways wives and concubines entered families. The marriage ceremonies by which wives were incorporated into families involved intermediaries, formal documents, exchange of gifts, an engagement period, and feasting.<sup>42</sup> In most cases the families of the husband and wife were social equals. By contrast, concubines entered families through a market for female labor, one that seems to bear many similarities to the market in existence in China during the past century.<sup>43</sup> Reflecting the ambiguity of their social and familial position, the acquisition of concubines was referred to as "taking them in marriage" (*qu*), "taking them in" (*na*), and, most commonly, as "buying" them (*mai*). Usually these arrangements were for an indefinite term (lifetime), but sometimes only for specified periods of a few years.

Much of the evidence about the acquisition of concubines during Song times comes from literary anecdotes. There are dozens – probably hundreds – of references to concubines in anecdotes about literary men or about events that occurred in homes. If the focus of this essay were on men's erotic fantasies or their images of concubines as victims of wives, I would need to be acutely sensitive to the literary purposes of the anecdotes used as evidence. But since the incidental detail in anecdotes about brokers, contracts, and lines of authority almost certainly reflects current practice, I cite them here without much hesitation.<sup>44</sup>

In the Song, the most highly specialized market for concubines was in the capitals, especially in Hangzhou during the Southern Song (1127–1279).



The *Mengliang lu* (Dreams of Splendor), after discussing brokers who handled male laborers, managers, and shop assistants, discussed the female equivalent: “There are official and private female brokers (*yasao*) to assist officials or rich families who wish to buy a concubine (*chongqie*), a singer, a dancing girl, a female cook, a seamstress, or a coarse or fine maid. They bring in and line up the girls and women and one merely points to have one of them step down.”<sup>45</sup> Thus concubines are presented as the top stratum in a market that went down to coarse maids.

Writing in the late Song, Liao Yingzhong gave a similar picture:

Lower ranking households in the capital do not put a premium on having sons, but treasure each daughter born as though she were a jewel. As she grows up, they teach her an art in accordance with her natural talents, so that she will be ready to be chosen by some gentleman as a companion (*yushi*). A variety of names are used: attendant, helper, waitress, seamstress, front room person, entertainer, laundress, Qin player, chess player, and cook, all of which are kept separate. The cook is the lowest rank and yet only the very rich or high ranking are able to employ one.<sup>46</sup>

These descriptions of the availability of highly trained girls pertain to what would be called the luxury side of the market in concubines. There is adequate confirming evidence that gentlemen in the capital who sought accomplished girls could find them. Many concubines, like courtesans, could read, compose poetry, sing, and play musical instruments. In one anecdote, in late Song Hangzhou an official who sought a concubine both beautiful and accomplished in all the arts found no one to his satisfaction after days of searching. Finally he found a beautiful girl who, questioned on her accomplishments, reported her only talent as warming wine. His companions laughed, but he tested her and was so impressed with the consistency in the temperature of the wine that he took her on.<sup>47</sup>

This emphasis on refined accomplishments, however, should not lead one to imagine that concubines regularly came from educated families that had fallen on hard times; as mentioned above, men seem to have been able to recognize at first glance a girl from a *shidafu* family. Rather, as Liao Yingzhong mentioned in the passage above, girls from lower-class families were given special training to make them more marketable. Their training associated them with courtesans, and men do seem to have looked on talented concubines as private courtesans. They might even use them to entertain their guests. Yuan Cai, writing in 1178, warned that teaching maids and concubines to entertain guests could prove dangerous: if the women were of striking beauty or superior intelligence, “there is the danger that such a woman will arouse feelings of lust in some evil guest,” leading to disastrous consequences.<sup>48</sup>

The lower side – and undoubtedly much larger share – of the market in female labor supplied concubines and maids who were needed to do

household work and perhaps also produce heirs. Wives might well make the purchase, and the women acquired were generally under the supervision of the mistress of the house (unless they were acquired to take over the role of supervising the maids after the wife had died). This market was by no means concentrated in the capital or a few large cities. It is never described in glowing terms, probably because the practice of buying and selling people always had unappealing associations to Chinese writers. Thus, authors wrote mostly about its unsavory side, especially the practices of “enticement” and kidnapping. A twelfth-century gazetteer of Fuzhou, Fujian, records the attempt of the prefect in 1099 to suppress this practice. The prefect reported that people from neighboring prefectures often came in and with only a little capital set themselves up as “brokers in people” (*shengkou ya*). They would tell families that a girl was needed as a wife or an adopted child, enticing them to turn over a daughter or maid. The girl or woman then would be hid for a few days, after which she would be packed off to some distant place to be resold. Even if the family brought an accusation before the government when they discovered the trickery, a search would be unsuccessful, and they would never learn the whereabouts of the girl, or even whether or not she was alive.<sup>49</sup>

Outright kidnapping also is often mentioned.<sup>50</sup> It, of course, was completely illegal, as opposed to enticing, which may have involved the parents’ or master’s written agreement to something they did not fully understand. In one collection of didactic tales, a man who had made a living by kidnapping and enticing in the end suffered the retribution of a wasting disease.<sup>51</sup>

Brokers were not all kidnapers, and they served some important functions. Yuan Cai said their use was necessary in any purchase of a maid or concubine but argued none the less that the girl acquired should be closely questioned about her background. If it turned out that she had been kidnapped, the buyer should be ready to return her to her family and certainly not give her back to the broker.<sup>52</sup>

The existence of kidnapers and others who tried to trick people into giving up girls or women suggests a strong market demand for menial women, one that would have attracted “sellers” and had an effect on the availability of women for marriage or employment. An economically depressed area might respond to this market and “export” women, unless it became so depressed that female infanticide led to a severe shortage of women in the area.<sup>53</sup> If an oversupply of girls in an area kept the price low, brokers would be attracted to move girls to areas where prices were high. At the same time, in places where demand was strong and prices high, families would be drawn into the market voluntarily, as seems to have happened in Hangzhou. Forms of male servitude varied regionally during the Song in line with economic organization.<sup>54</sup> It is likely that the market for females of various statuses also varied regionally, although the data are not as clear.

The consequences of this complex market for female labor are likely to have been felt at many levels. Studies of more recent Chinese society have

shown how subtle changes in the preferences for disposing of daughters can affect the supply of women available for different forms of marriage or employment, and this is likely also to have happened in the Song.<sup>55</sup> Another consequence of the great demand for serving women was that girls and younger women never posed a welfare problem. If destitute, they, or their closest relatives, could find someone willing to buy them as maids or concubines.<sup>56</sup>

Why would a poor farmer or city-dweller be reluctant to sell his daughter as a concubine to a rich man who could provide her a life of physical comfort? There seem to be two main reasons: first, it was more respectable for him to marry her to someone of his own social status; and second, it was widely recognized that whatever comfort she might start with, a concubine had none of the security of a wife and could end up mistreated.<sup>57</sup>

Within a family, wives clearly came from a higher social stratum than did concubines. Did concubines come from higher social strata than maids? I have found no evidence to imply that they did, since there seems to have been a single market for both. Rather, whether a girl would be bought as a maid or a concubine seems to have depended on her attractiveness and her mastery of the arts of entertainment.

## CONTRACTS AND LEGAL OBLIGATIONS

One of the services brokers performed was to prepare a contract specifying terms of agreement between buyer and seller and to witness the transaction. The importance of this intermediating function can be seen in the cases where an agreement was initially made between principals speaking to each other in person, yet they still called in a broker. For instance, a woman famine victim was asked if she would like to stay at an official's house as a concubine. When she agreed, saying she was too hungry to walk further, the official called in a female broker (*nü guai*) to write up a contract.<sup>58</sup>

Contracts specified the "body price" (*shenqian*) of a concubine. This price can be seen as a hybrid between advanced wages and a bride-price. The size of the body price depended on market factors, attractive and accomplished girls getting much more than others. Figures I have encountered range from 140 strings, to 300, 400, 900, and 1000.<sup>59</sup> The last one was for a 22-year-old girl good at music, calligraphy, and painting.

No complete contract for a maid or concubine dating from the Song has been found. The closest we have are two slightly different sample contracts in Yuan encyclopedias for popular reference for hiring out a daughter to work as a concubine. The shorter one is translated below:

### *Model Form for Pawning the Services of a Daughter*

X, of such-and-such a place, has a daughter of his own named Sister \_\_\_\_\_, aged \_\_\_\_\_ years, who has never been engaged to anyone. Now,