

The History of Concubines in Qing China

Women in elite households called the childbearing years of marriage the years of "rice and salt," and they generally constituted the busiest time in a woman's life. Duties connected with raising children, looking after sick or aging household members, and managing certain economic aspects of the household required much time and energy, even with the assistance of servants. Once she made it through these years and into her fifties, however, the burdens of household life began to ease. Having proven herself by bearing and raising children and assisting in household management, a woman in a wealthy household had earned a high place within its hierarchy. She had increasing time to devote to literary pursuits as well as religious devotion, usually some form of Buddhism.

It would be around this time, or slightly earlier, that a woman's husband might bring one or more concubines into the household. The intrusion, sexually and otherwise, of a younger woman was sometimes a source of stress, but owing to the beliefs about physical maturation discussed above plus the widespread social acceptance of concubinage and relatively greater male sexual promiscuity, a common reaction was for women to turn to private pursuits as a respite from the decades of hard work they had endured. Laws and social custom strictly forbade a concubine from taking a wife's place, so there was usually no threat to her social standing or status within the household.

The topic of relations between men and women and gender roles is inextricably interconnected with marriage practices and the family institution. If we regard concubines as secondary wives, then it is safe to say that Chinese society during any time period expected all adults to marry. Single life was abnormal, except in the case of "chaste" widows and Buddhist monks or nuns. Even slaves were expected to marry, and Qing dynasty law made it a crime for owners of slaves to be negligent in getting them married at the appropriate time. Most women married in their teenage years, and most men married in their late teens or early twenties.

Throughout much of China's history, there was a shortage of wives for at least two reasons. First, wealthy men often purchased concubines, many of whom originally came from impoverished families. Second, destitute families in some regions practiced female infanticide. The result of these two factors was a shortage of wives among the poorest groups in society, where the rate of men who never found a wife could be as high as ten percent in certain times and places.

Being a wife or concubine in an upper class household usually intersected with sex, motherhood and child rearing, the education of children, relations with the husband, relations with other women of the household, and certain forms of domestic work other than raising children. This section focuses rather narrowly on the relationship between husbands, wives, and concubines. From the Song dynasty onward, there was a sharp legal distinction between wives (also called "primary wives") and concubines (also called "secondary wives"), with the former having higher status.

In theory, a wife should defer to and obey her husband just like a child should defer to and obey his or her parents. A famous line from the popular morality text, *Classic of Filial Piety for Girls* states, "The husband is heaven. How could one not serve him?"

Wives ideally assisted their husbands by taking care of household matters (keeping financial records, supervising servants, etc.) so that the husband could concentrate on his tasks in the "outer" sphere--studying for the civil service exams, for example. Husbands and wives ideally adhered to a division of labor that left relatively little time for them to be with each other.

Marriages were usually arranged by parents and other family members. In elite households, marriages served to reinforce business and political alliances between families. Because husbands and wives were often strangers prior to marriage, one might wonder how common it was for couples to love each other. A loving

marriage was in fact the ideal situation, and diaries, poems and other forms of literature attest that such marriages, if not a majority, did sometimes exist. "Love," however, has a number of different aspects. The typical Chinese conception of a "loving couple" was that as they go through life's trials and tribulations together, they gradually appreciate each other more and more, acquiring a deep, mature affection in their later years akin to that of cherished friends.

Romantic or passionate love was not the ideal (except perhaps during the late Ming dynasty--see the next section), and husbands and wives often behaved quite formally in other's presence. A typical image of a loving couple might show the two standing together in a pavilion watching the scenery with serene looks on their faces. They would not be holding hands, much less embracing each other. The classic symbol of marital happiness is the mandarin duck, which lives in pairs and mates for life.

Ideally, husbands and wives tended to their respective functions with diligence, cultivated their moral virtue, and gradually became spiritually closer. Sometimes that happened; often it did not. Husbands could be violent, and wives could be bossy and vindictive. There was no shortage of ways husbands and wives could make each others lives miserable. It was generally acceptable for husbands to beat their wives as a form of "education." Beating a wife to death, however, would result in serious legal problems unless it could be shown that she had behaved extremely improperly and the husband had not actually intended to kill her. In one case, for example, a man who had beaten his wife to death explained his reasons to the local magistrate as follows: "My mother was yelling at my wife, and my wife was talking back. I couldn't take it, and in my anger I beat her. By accident I killed her." The official was sympathetic and assured the man that he would not face the death penalty because "beating an unfilial daughter-in-law is not the same as beating a wife."¹⁶ In other words, because the "offense" (talking back to the mother-in-law) involved considerations of filial piety, the extreme use of force became more acceptable in light of regarding the dead woman not as a "wife" but as a "daughter."¹⁷ Notice also the great importance of relative social position in the operation of the law, which was typical from the middle dynasties onward.

In terms of intra-household relations, the greatest degree of friction was often between the wife and her mother-in-law. Being the mother of her husband gave mothers-in-law great power over wives. New wives in particular often went through a sort of hazing experience, criticized at every turn by an overbearing mother-in-law.

Wives beaten by their husbands often reacted by beating the concubines or maids. Also, it seems to have been almost as common for a strong-willed wife to bully a timid husband as it was for a domineering husband to beat his wife. In very rare cases, wives actually beat their husbands physically. More typically, they employed verbal and other forms of harassment. Here is part of one man's description of his wife's sister: "My wife's father's fifth daughter, named Zongshu, was quick-witted from youth and knew how to read. When she came of age, she married the scholar Dong, twenty-eight, of Xiangyang. Dong was weak and timid, [Zhong]shu arrogant and overbearing. She bossed him around as though he were a servant." Dong soon died, and his bossy wife even had strong words for his spirit, which she uttered through a medium.

When her father proposed that he find her a second husband, she said, "I've already been troubled once in my life by a literary official and have no desire to repeat the experience. I'd be satisfied with a military officer."¹⁸

Wives from families with higher status than their husbands or the wives of husbands adopted into the wife's family had relatively greater power vis-à-vis their husbands. Morality books, therefore, warned against these kind of marriages on the grounds that the husband would have difficulty "controlling" his wife. Court records indicate that judges (local officials) sometimes admonished husbands not to let their wives to boss them around. In short, different personalities and circumstances could result in a number of possibilities for marital stresses and difficulties.

Relations between a single husband and a single wife could be complicated enough. Concubines made matters even more intricate. In wealthy households, most men in their forties or fifties had one or more concubines. A man at this age who could afford a concubine but did not have one would have been a social jockey. As you might imagine, these concubines were usually young and in the prime of their physical beauty. A man might tell his wife, for example, that he was acquiring a concubine so that she could have someone to help her out with household tasks now that "my dear wife" is getting older. Other husbands told their wives that having a concubine (or two) was necessary for status reasons. When the husband began spending most of his nights in the quarters of the new concubine, jealousy was certainly a possible result, especially if the husband and his primary wife had been having regular sexual relations prior to the concubine's arrival. The introduction of a concubine, particularly the first one, was nearly always tense for all parties. The young concubine would have made the wife aware of how much she had aged, and, although the wife might not dream of talking about them in direct terms, sexual issues complicated the emotional responses.

The wife's legal status in the household was secure. She would always outrank any concubines. After the initial shock, several courses of action became possible. During the daytime, men and women generally lived in separate places. Under such circumstances, husbands were often unable to protect concubines from the wrath of a jealous wife, who could make a concubine's life miserable in many ways. Some wives, on the other hand, became increasingly detached from household affairs and turned to religion (usually some variety of Buddhism) for solace. In other cases, wives and concubines got along fine, some becoming dear friends. When the age difference was great, as if often was, some concubines looked to the wife as a substitute mother figure. As with relations between husbands and wives, relations between wives and concubines were open to a rather wide range of possibilities.

Concubines often came from impoverished households. Typically, they would be sold to traveling concubine brokers (or their agents) while still small girls. The concubine broker would calculate the cost of raising and educating the girl and weigh it against how much she could command as a concubine at age sixteen or seventeen. The broker would pay the girl's parents a sum that, when added to the cost of raising the girl, was still less than her anticipated selling price. To most readers such cold calculation and trade in human beings may sound heartless and cruel. Before reaching that conclusion, however, we should keep several things in mind. First, personal freedom for nearly *anyone* in premodern China, male or female, was much less than what we have in today's United States. Second, had the girl not been sold, her life would probably have been one of constant toil just to keep one step ahead of starvation. Training to be a concubine, though rigorous, provided girls with education and a measure of material security. A concubine in a wealthy household might be able to enjoy a quality of life her mother back on the farm could not even imagine. Or she might be beaten to death by a jealous wife. Fate would have been hard to predict. Life in Song or Ming China was difficult for many people, as was also the case in Europe at the same time. Finally, we should keep in mind that behavior related to sex, courtship and marriage in contemporary America often contains much more calculation of economic gain and loss than many people might want to admit.

*Formal portrait of Ming dynasty official
with his wife and concubine.*

