INTRODUCTION

Patricia Buckley Ebrey

Inequalities of many sorts characterized Chinese society. During the imperial period, the emperor outranked all of his subjects. Members of the imperial family and clan possessed titles, rank, privileges, and stipends that distinguished them from the rest of society. Government officials were set above commoners by their access to wealth and power and enormous social prestige. Crosscutting these political inequalities were social, economic, and geographic ones. Merchants and large landowners could dominate their communities through their control of resources; educated families of established reputations could expect deference based on their culture, history, manners, and style; residents of cities in economically developed areas had social, economic, and even political advantages over rural residents in the hinterlands. And throughout society, from the imperial court to the peasant household, men outranked women. In the twentieth century traditional political inequalities lost their legal force, and after 1949 most of the old sources of economic inequality, especially the private ownership of land, were eliminated. In addition, the state promoted greater legal equality of men and women in matters of marriage and property ownership. Yet in the second half of the twentieth century new sources of inequality emerged, such as class labels, party membership, and city residence.

The authors of this book examine the relation between marriage and these social, political, and economic inequalities. Inequality has not been a neglected topic in Chinese studies. The imperial institution, the civil service recruitment system, the distribution of landholding, and the ideology of class and gender differentiation have all been studied in detail. Little research has been devoted, however, to the mechanisms or processes through which inequalities were reproduced or transformed over time. Marriage also is not a neglected topic. Anthropological and sociological studies of China generally
include some discussion of marriage, and several studies analyze marriage practices and affinity in detail (e.g., Kulp 1925, Lang 1946, Hsu 1948, Gallin 1960, M. Wolf 1972, Ahern 1974, Cohen 1976, Freedman 1979, A. Wolf and Huang 1980, Watson 1981, Croll 1981). Yet little attention has been given to the ways marriage mediated inequality or inequalities structured marriage. In this volume we investigate these processes and mechanisms by focusing on how marriage relates to three forms of inequality: the political power of rulers; the social and economic differences among families; and the inequalities between men and women and among women. Because our goal is to discover the broad outlines of these processes, we examine marriage in a wide range of social settings from very early to very recent times.

MARRIAGE AND INEQUALITY

Before introducing the chapters in this volume, we must place our discussion in a broad theoretical and comparative framework. Whenever a marriage takes place, the standing of every party is somewhat different from what it had been. Almost invariably at least one person, the husband or wife, changes residence. In many cases control over wealth changes hands. In China, where most of the family estate was transmitted to patrilineal descendants, it was fairly common for some property to be diverted to daughters as dowries. Marriages regularly allocate privileges, claims, and obligations, usually in different ways for men and women. In the Chinese case, in a patriarchal marriage the husband gained sexual access to his wife and his patriline gained claims to her labor and the children she would bear. But the wife also gained privileges through marriage, such as the claim to maintenance on her husband's estate and a place of honor in ancestral rites. Marriages everywhere confer honor: individual men and women become recognized adults by marrying; at the same time families gain in standing by marrying their children respectfully. In most societies weddings are great occasions for displaying status; sometimes more is spent on the ritual festivities than on the durable items that end up in the dowry as families perform the rites elaborately to confirm or enhance their status.

Viewed from the perspective of the individual family, every marriage provides a chance to gain or lose economically or socially. Marriages are thus occasions for thinking tactically, for balancing many considerations. A family head need not make similar matches for each daughter; in one case he may seek useful affines, in another emphasize the financial considerations, in a third think first of his daughter's welfare. Marriage choices can be compared to market choices, with the various decision makers weighing an assortment of factors, including the age and attractiveness of their children, the supply of potential spouses, other demands on their resources, and so on. In the Chinese context the flexibility of marriage decisions stands in contrast to
inheritance and succession, where choices were few and preferences clear. Because property had to be divided among all sons, parents had little leeway to manipulate in favor of one heir or another.

Viewed from the larger society, however, the range of possibilities open for each match fades. Certain types of marriage systems structure the ways wealth, power, and status are distributed in the society from one family to another and from one generation to another and the ways rights, privileges, and honor are assigned differentially to men and women. Jack Goody has developed the most influential model of the structural consequences of systems of marriage exchange. In “Bridewealth and Dowry in Africa and Eurasia” (1973) Goody distinguishes between those societies that transmit property through daughters via dowry or inheritance (including to some degree most of the state-based societies of Eurasia) and those that do not (notably the bridewealth societies of Africa). He argues that societies with “diverging devolution” (the same types of property passing through both men and women whether through inheritance or dowry) are marked by monogamy, family control of daughters’ marriages, emphasis on virginity, strong ties between affines, greater class distinctions, and stronger women’s property rights (a set of characteristics I shall refer to here as the “dowry complex”). Goody shows many logical links between these characteristics. Where families send their daughters with dowries, Goody explains, they do not want misalliances and cannot risk letting daughters choose on the basis of attraction. When marriages require matching property, property stays disproportionately in the upper classes, and class inequalities are thereby strengthened. Families providing portions for a daughter want some guarantee that the property will be used to her benefit, especially if she is widowed (1973:17–47). In some societies (like China) daughters did not regularly receive family property but could be residual heirs, that is, allowed to transmit the family property through uxorial marriages when there were no sons; these, too, Goody classes as societies practicing diverging devolution (1976a:10–36). In Production and Reproduction (1976b) Goody adds a developmental dimension to this model, linking diverging devolution to the introduction of the animal-drawn plow and the greater economic surplus it allowed. Diverging devolution is thus also related to greater social and economic differentiation and the development of states. In this book he also analyzes concubinage and the inequality in the household created by an unbalanced marriage exchange (i.e., the purchase of concubines, who, unlike wives, do not bring dowries). In The Development of Family and Marriage in Europe (1983) Goody brings these conceptions to bear on the complex historical changes in Western history from the Roman Empire to early modern times, showing that marriage forms do not flow automatically from economic structures but are complexly tied to dominant institutions and ideologies. Goody’s analyses, taken together, provide a new way to think about the linkage of gender and
kinship. Goody’s studies do not show women relegated to a domestic sphere defined by the biology of motherhood, while men operate in a public sphere shaped by the political economy and the forces of history. To the contrary, he describes a domestic domain shaped by productive processes and the transmission of property (see Collier and Yanagisako 1987:4–6).

Goody’s work on marriage has been utilized by several China scholars (Parish and Whyte 1978; Ebrey 1981, 1986; Watson 1984; Holmgren 1985). His model provides an alternative to full reliance on the lineage model of Chinese kinship, which makes patrilineal kinship so central that transmission of property through women in uxorilocal marriage or via dowries appears to be a peripheral embellishment of little structural importance (cf. Freedman 1958; Baker 1979). Yet there are obstacles to wholesale acceptance of Goody’s model: the relative weakness of women’s legal claims to property in China; the fact that many, maybe even a majority, of marriages did not involve significant transfers from the bride’s side; and the difficulty in characterizing China as either a dowry or a bridewealth society as both co-existed (e.g., McCleery 1976). Moreover, it is not clear that a model designed to explain the broadest differences between dissimilar societies can also provide insight into the narrower differences that China scholars seek to understand, such as why dowry was more prominent in India than in China, or why dowries were more substantial in some parts of China than in others. In some areas of north and central China, peasants are reported to have spent considerable sums on dowries (Fei 1939:44; Yang 1945:79, 110, 113; Gamble 1954:383; Cohen 1988). In the south, especially in areas with dominant lineages, dowries among the poor were often modest affairs, costing the woman’s family significantly less than the amount they received in betrothal gifts (see Kulp 1925:173–75; Watson 1981). Do differences in kinship organization or agricultural methods explain these differences? Did women in areas with large dowries have higher status than those in areas without them?

Goody’s theories do not place much weight on ritual and the display of status through marriage and have been criticized as being overly “econocentric” (see Comaroff 1980; Harrell and Dickey 1985). Other anthropologists have delved more deeply into the symbolic dimensions of marriage exchanges and the ways they establish and restructure the relations of all the parties concerned (wife-givers and wife-takers, but also husbands and wives, or husbands’ families and daughters-in-law). The benefits that flow from a marriage are not all tangible or clearly specified. In the classic study of gift giving, the French sociologist Marcel Mauss argues that gifts create an imbalance between the giver and the receiver. The recipient is indebted to the giver until the gift is repaid, at which time the debt is canceled or, if the return gift exceeds the initial gift, a new state of imbalance is established (1966). Basing their analyses on Mauss’s work, many anthropologists argue
INTRODUCTION

that the transfer of goods at marriage maintains economic and political differences by confirming them. Bourdieu, for instance, writes that marriage was “one of the mainstays of both the dynamic and the static elements of the entire social system” to the extent that it afforded the families he studied “one of the most important opportunities for monetary and also symbolic exchanges that asserted the family’s position in the social hierarchy and thereby confirmed that hierarchy itself” (1976:124). Marriage, in effect, becomes part of the system of social reproduction in which status, rank, and class differences are passed on to the next generation. Marriage exchange, after all, involves not only the giving and receiving of land, money, and jewelry but also the offering of words, bows, and other “gifts” of respect. Sometimes the potential for expression of status is not equal in all forms of marriage. In China it is generally thought that only “major” marriages (patrilocally married couples with mature brides) could be used to full advantage in the display and celebration of high status (cf. Fei 1939:54–55; Freedman 1957:65).

Where marriages regularly join families of unequal rank, the relationship of marriage to inequality differs from the cases discussed above. Hypergamy (women marrying up) or hypogamy (women marrying down) creates patterns of social inequality based on prestige or rank, families confirming or enhancing their status by the partners they pick and often subsidizing families of higher rank by providing dowries (Leach 1954; Dumont 1957; Inden 1976; Parry 1979). These patterns sometimes create a visible pecking order, for the families to whom one sends daughters will never be the same ones from whom one receives brides. It has often been suggested that Chinese society tends toward hypergamy (see Ahern 1974; Freedman 1979), but the degree of status differences and the relative incidence of hypergamous marriages have never been adequately studied. A tendency toward hypergamy does seem plausible, however, given the asymmetry inherent in a patrilineal, patrilocality system. After marriage, a woman’s status will largely be determined by the social and economic standing of the family she has joined, and so she will gain by marriage “up” into a prosperous family. By contrast, the welfare of the groom and his family is less affected by the family origins of the new daughter-in-law, so they have little to lose by taking a bride from a family of less wealth or social standing. Such brides had attractions; in fact, they were thought to be harder workers and more easily satisfied with their situations.  

In Goody’s model, transmitting property through women is linked to strong social ties among affines. Indeed, in China and elsewhere marriages are often considered opportunities to make new allies. In the Chinese case, however, affines were not invariably considered useful; they could also prove burdensome or meddlesome. Within the Chinese repertoire of kinship practices, close or distant ties to affines were both well-established possi-
bilities (see Gallin and Gallin 1985). For instance, in the dominant lineages of Kwangtung, the rich and the poor seem to have followed different strategies. The rich put great emphasis on strong ties to affines, gave handsome dowries, and married with families some distance away. The poor neither gave dowries nor made any efforts to maintain extensive ties to wives’ or mothers’ families (Watson 1981). In Taiwan, the value placed on affinity seems to have varied with the form of agriculture; where cooperation was needed for temporary agricultural labor or political assistance, affinal kinship tended to be strongest (Pasternak 1972:60–67).

From the work of European historians, we know that marriage also relates to inequality by means of succession and inheritance. In societies where only those born into fully legal marriages could succeed to thrones, fiefs, or estates, marriage was a crucial mechanism in the transmission of power. The authority to determine what constituted a legal marriage consequently became a source of contention between the church and civil authorities (e.g., Duby 1978). Thus, ritual and ideology need not merely highlight inequalities or obfuscate transactions: the power to define marriage can have great consequence for individuals’ social status and inheritance. In the Chinese case, from early imperial times there were laws that defined a legal marriage (as opposed to common-law marriage or concubinage). Yet the legal status of a marriage did not determine the status of heirs, who could inherit at their father’s will (Freedman 1979:118; Watson 1985:105–16). Ruling families are the exception to this generalization, for only one son could succeed to a throne or fief, and the status of their mothers’ marriages was usually a key issue in deciding which of several sons succeeded, making the link between marriage and the status of offspring different from that in other families.

Placing the Chinese case in comparative perspective raises several key questions that the authors of this volume pursue. Did anything resembling a “dowry complex” develop in China? How significant were hypergamy or hypogamy? Did the symbolism and the tangible benefits of marriage exchanges reinforce or mask the inequalities between wife-givers and wife-takers and men and women? Did forms of marriage differ when succession to a fief or office was at stake?

COLLABORATION

Our current knowledge of Chinese marriage is based largely on observations made during the last century by social scientists. Given the many continuities in Chinese marriage practices, these studies provide considerable insight into earlier periods. Yet they are no substitute for historical research. We have as a consequence tried to remain open to the possibility that marriage institutions changed in some fundamental ways from early to modern times, as they did in the West. The historians writing here have had to decide
how well the terms and concepts commonly used by anthropologists convey what they know of past societies. Although no set of terms is fully adequate, a common vocabulary aids communication among ourselves and with scholars of other societies. In this book we use key terms in the following ways:

_wife_. “Wife” seems a fully adequate translation of _ch’i_ and any terms the Chinese considered a synonym for _ch’i_ (such as _shih_, _shih-jen_) or a polite title for _ch’i_ (such as _fu-jen_).

_secondary wife_. In the preimperial period aristocratic marriages often involved a principal wife bringing with her one or more younger women from her own or related lineages who could also serve as mates of her husband. These women, called _ying_ in Chinese, are referred to here as secondary wives.

_concubine_. “Concubine” is used as a translation of _ch’ieh_ and words used as alternatives for _ch’ieh_, such as _hou-shih_ and _ts’e-shih_. We prefer it to “secondary wife” not merely to avoid confusion with the ancient practice described above but also because China from Han times on was legally monogamous—a man could have only one wife.

_second wife_. If a man remarried after the death or divorce of his first wife, his new wife is a second wife. From Han times on, she was usually called a _chi-shih_, or “successor wife” (or successor “room”).

_betrothal gifts/brideprice/bridewealth_. Gifts (including money) presented by the groom’s family to the bride’s to seal the betrothal, no matter what their value, are referred to here by these terms, the choice depending on the context and the preferences of the authors. “Betrothal gifts” is a translation of the Chinese terms _na-ts’ai_, _p’in-ts’ai_, _p’in-li_, _li-chin_, _p’in-chin_, and other synonyms and as such avoids some of the difficulties of the common terms “brideprice” and “bridewealth.” In contrast to the classic bridewealth systems of Africa, in China the money or goods received by the bride’s family were often used to prepare her dowry.

_dowry_. We are labeling any material possession the bride brought with her into marriage, no matter how meager, her dowry. This could include clothes, jewelry, bedding, money, land, and so on. Chinese terms with much the same meaning are _chuang-tien_, _chia-chuang_, _tzu-sung_, _tzu-chuang_, and so on. Some authors here also use the term “trousseau” to refer to the part of a bride’s dowry consisting of her clothes, jewelry, and cosmetics. Labeling something “dowry” is not meant to imply anything about the claims various parties had to its use or disposal, which are instead treated as subjects for research.

_indirect dowry_. When the bride’s family used the betrothal gifts it received to prepare the dowry, the gifts from the man’s family that eventually became dowry can be referred to as indirect dowry. This designation
places emphasis on the final destination of the property, rather than the initial phase of the flow, and is useful in analyzing the transfer of property over time. It should be remembered, however, that “indirect dowry” is not a translation of a Chinese term, nor does it reflect the way Chinese conceptualized marriage gifts and payments.

Although we have agreed to use these terms in the ways described here, we have not fooled ourselves into thinking that such labeling solves all of our problems of classification and analysis. For instance, several of us have difficulty employing the vocabulary of dowry and indirect dowry, with the implication that these two are similar in that in either case the property ends up with the woman. In the Chinese case, lumping these two together may be useful for short-term perspectives (a woman with a substantial dowry may have status and power other women do not, whether the dowry came entirely from her parents or indirectly from her parents-in-law) but is inadequate for looking at the larger transfer of property over time. In China the notion of individual property rights was weak, circumscribed by the claims of potential heirs. The heirs to a woman’s dowry were her sons and thus the patriline of her husband. Indirect dowry that originated from her husband’s patriline would therefore end there also. This pattern is in marked contrast to the situation where a woman’s parents detach part of their property and permanently transfer it to the patriline of her husband, giving her trusteeship during her lifetime. As this discussion makes clear, however, this distinction is relevant only to property that can be passed to heirs. Clothes, bedding, and even furniture would probably be worn out by the time the woman dies. A distinction between dowries in land or ones in movable goods would still not solve this problem because in a commercialized society like late imperial China cash could be used to buy land, and land could be sold to meet current expenses, such as funerals. Moreover, whether a wife’s dowry served to enlarge the estate of her sons would depend not merely on the initial assortment of goods but also on how it was used and managed over the years.

IMPERIAL MARRIAGES

Rather than introduce the chapters of this volume chronologically, I will highlight some of the relationships among them by looking at marriage at three social levels: the imperial family and clan, the educated elite, and ordinary people. For the premodern period, there are more studies of the marriages of imperial families and clans than of any other segment of society. There have been studies of the families from which empresses and other consorts were selected, the kinds of families chosen to provide husbands for princesses, the methods used to keep empresses or their kin from gaining too
much political power, and the needs of imperial families to exemplify ritually
firmly within imperial politics; they deal both with the efforts of the throne to
safeguard or enhance its political control and of other groups to use marriage
to gain greater access to political power. From these studies we know that
by marrying their daughter to an emperor or future emperor, a family could
gain not merely prestige and wealth but also office. Years later its officials
might have considerable influence in court affairs, especially if the daughter
gave birth to the next ruler. Women were pivotal figures between the two
families in imperial marriages and could sometimes make use of their posi-
tion to gain exceptional power.

The theoretical literature on marriage discussed above offers new ways to
approach imperial marriages. Is political power another resource that can be
allocated through marriage, like wealth and prestige? Does the inevitable
hypergamy and hypogamy of imperial marriages make them exceptional or
only extreme? How did the public nature of imperial marriages affect the
relations of the spouses or their families?

Three of the essays in this volume examine imperial marriages and the
social, political, and gender inequalities they involved. In a path-breaking
analysis, Jennifer Holmgren identifies the underlying structural logic of Han
Chinese imperial marriages. Recurrent features can be explained, she argues,
by the conjunction of the basic Chinese marriage system—monogamy, sur-
name exogamy, women’s continuing links to their natal families, and filial
piety—on the one hand, with the unique requirements of succession to the
throne by a single heir on the other. Because the emperors regularly forced
collateral lines, even their brothers and adult younger sons, to leave the
capital, the emperors’ wives and mothers (empresses, empress dowagers, and
grand empress dowagers) often played leading roles in decisions concerning
succession and marriage, and their families could sometimes dominate the
bureaucracy. Yet in many ways emperors’ sisters had stronger positions than
dempresses, as they could come or go from the palace, were immune from
punishment, could dominate their husbands, and could influence their
brother the emperor even if he were a strong-minded adult. In tracing histori-
cal examples of these processes, Holmgren argues provocatively that
changes in imperial marriage, such as the Ming practice of selecting imperial
wives from nonelite families, were unrelated to changes in marriage practices
in the larger society. Rather, she asserts that imperial marriage patterns are
totally explicable by reference to imperial politics and the underlying logic
already described.

Holmgren contrasts these Han Chinese marriage patterns to those
of several non-Han states whose native marriage systems allowed polygyny,
the levirate, and marriage to distant agnates and generally fell more on the side of bridewealth than dowry societies. The imperial families of these states developed several different marriage systems, the T'ao-pa of the Northern Wei denying any power to the mothers of emperors, the Ch'i-tan of the Liao marrying exclusively with one consort clan, and the Mongols of the Yuan marrying with the rulers of allied tribes, preventing their women from gaining control of the throne by allowing succession only to adult sons.

Holmgren's broad overview is complemented here by close studies of imperial marriages in two dynasties, one Han and one non-Han. John W. Chaffee examines the marriages of imperial clanswomen in the Sung dynasty, thus shifting the focus from control of the throne to the use of marriage as a means of connecting the civil elite to the large imperial clan with its thousands of members. He pays particular attention to the issue of hypogamy and the symbolic and political complexities of marriages in which the wife outranked her husband and his parents. His evidence shows clearly that even at a considerable distance from the throne, marriages involved a significant distribution of wealth and privileges. Imperial clanswomen had to be married into the elite not merely to help the throne forge ties to the political elite but also to avoid the dishonor of having its women marry too low. Given the size of the imperial clan, these marriages were decided not by the emperor but by a bureaucracy in which members of the official elite played leading roles.

In her study of the marriages of the Manchu rulers of the Ch'ing dynasty, Evelyn S. Rawski focuses on those closest to the throne, the sons and daughters of emperors and the emperor himself. The Ch'ing forbade intermarriage between the Manchu rulers and the civil elite of Han Chinese officials, thus using marriage to maintain the distinct identity of their special followers, the Chinese and Manchu bannermen. Whereas the Ch'ing adopted the traditional Han Chinese ritual code for wedding ceremonies, they did not adopt other, perhaps more fundamental, elements of Han marriage practices. In particular, Ch'ing empresses were not as powerful as their counterparts had been in Han Chinese dynasties because their sons were not the presumptive heirs. Rawski thus concurs with Holmgren that the differences in the marriage systems of different dynasties were closely related to differences in their succession practices.

Rawski makes the intriguing point that Manchu imperial marriages are difficult to classify as either monogamous or polygamous. As she sees it, a highly fluid set of social relations was made to appear sharply stratified by ritual and institutional distinctions not simply between the empress and consorts but also between each of the seven grades of consort. In reality, the mode of entry, social background, and privileges of these women, she argues, were not clearly distinguished, in contrast to Han commoner practice. Particularly significant was the emperor's right to promote his mother to empress.
dowager after he succeeded to the throne, leading to two empress dowagers in the senior generation (his father's empress and his mother).

These three chapters contribute not only to our understanding of imperial governance in China but also to our knowledge of Chinese marriage mythology. Stories about the marriages of emperors and princesses—along with the marriages of the rulers of preimperial states discussed in Thatcher's chapter—provided much of the stock of images used to think about marriage and affinal relations in Chinese society at large. The dangers of matrilateral or affinal interference were underlined to all by stories of emperors who had been reduced to puppets by powerful "outside" relatives. Indeed, the treachery and scheming of women were easily evoked by stories of the machinations of women close to the throne, from empress dowagers to slave girls.

ELITE MARRIAGES

Besides studies of imperial marriages, the existing literature on marriage in Chinese history includes detailed research on marriage connections among social and political elites. Studies of marriage from the late Han through the T'ang period have shown that the highest-ranking families marry as much as possible within their own ranks and use such marriages as markers of status. The state sporadically attempted to regulate these practices either by ruling that marriages must be confined to status equals or by attempting to prohibit exclusive practices that undermined the state's ability to control honor and prestige (Twitchett 1973; D. Johnson 1977b; Ebrey 1978; Wong 1979; Mather 1980).

After mid-T'ang, the state paid little attention to the marriage choices of political elites. The elite of the Sung dynasty and later are generally viewed as less closed than those of earlier periods, and historians have tended to look at their marriages as creating networks rather than closed circles. Robert Hymes has studied the marriages linking seventy-three elite families in Fuchou, Kiangsi, in the Sung and Yuan (1986a; 1986b). He generally assumes that these marriages were motivated by political strategies. When officials' families had less need of ties to other official families, they used the occasion of their children's marriages to strengthen their links to local landowners and literati. Beverly Bossler has examined in similar detail the marriages of the national elite that resided in Kaifeng in the Northern Sung. Her findings raise doubts about the notion that marriages were politically motivated; she does not always find families following what has been thought to be the politically advantageous course or reaping the assumed benefits when they did (Bossler 1988). In a study of the Wu lineage of Hsien-ning City, Hui-chou, during the Ming, Keith Hazelton found that lineage members had extensive
marriage networks; about two-thirds of Wu wives came from nine different surnames, and no single surname accounted for more than 15 percent of the total (Hazelton 1986:158–60). By contrast, Hilary Beattie showed that the two most prominent lineages of T‘ung-ch‘eng in Ch‘ing times intermarried for five generations, Yao women providing a majority of the wives of Chang men in several lines for two or three generations in a row (1979:104–5). Jerry Dennerline found a comparable situation in nineteenth-century Wu-hsi, with about a third of the marriages of one line of Ch‘iens to Hua families. He shows that such patterns went back to the early Ming in some lines, while other lines, for various strategic reasons, had spread their marriages much more broadly (Dennerline 1986:181–86). The diverse patterns uncovered by these case studies demonstrate above all the flexibility of the ways marriage connections could be used by members of the elite in the late imperial period. Benefits were to be gained by alliances to powerful lineages in one’s home area. But creating affinal links to as many families as possible also offered advantages, as did ignoring politics in some marriages and emphasizing instead property exchanges.

Three chapters in this volume complement these studies of elite marriages. Each focuses on a period of major social change and thus aids, in a preliminary way, our understanding of how changes in Chinese society were connected to shifts in marriage structures. Melvin Thatcher examines elite intermarriage patterns for an earlier period than attempted before, the part of the mid-Chou called the Spring and Autumn period. Besides describing basic marriage rules and practices, he examines the bilateral marriage relations among the ruling houses of the separate states of this period. According to his evidence, already in the Spring and Autumn period ritual and ideology were used to distinguish women by rank into wives and concubines of various grades, a distinction reiterated in other chapters. Moreover, marriages were already marked by property transactions. Although the main assets of the period (fiefs, offices, and land grants) could not be conveyed through marriage, grooms’ families made gifts of cloth to brides’ families, and brides might bring with them clothes, jewels, maids, or even bronze vessels. Men in the ruling elite could have more than one primary wife (unlike in later periods), and divorce was relatively easy and common. In this and other ways Thatcher’s portrayal of the marriage system of this aristocratic society suggests parallels with some of the non-Han societies Holmgren describes. In these less bureaucratized societies marriage and kinship played larger roles in the structuring of political relations than they typically did in imperial China.

Thatcher’s chapter can be usefully contrasted with mine, in which I link political strategies and property transfers. I argue that in the T‘ang, when the aristocratic families depended on the inherited prestige of their family names, marriages with particular families could confer enormous honor and
be worth the expenditure of large sums for betrothal gifts. In the Sung, when the prestige of old family status was much diminished and bureaucratic rank more highly valued, the elite often sent their daughters into marriage with large dowries, even of land. During this period many of the features of the dowry complex Goody has described as common in Eurasia were evident in China. Not only were there monogamy and parental control of marriages (well established at least by the Han), but also the landowning class transmitted significant amounts of property through daughters, and women's claims to dowry received some legal recognition. In exploring reasons for this trend toward larger transfers through dowry, I suggest that economic changes, such as freer transfer of land and commercialization, were preconditions. The political value of connections then served to push these trends further. Dowries made better bait than betrothal gifts because property was permanently transferred to the other line and affinal ties were stronger when both sides had lingering claims to property.

Susan Mann's chapter deals with another dimension of elite marriages: the connections writers saw between marriage and gender differentiation. Much of the existing research on marriage in Chinese history concerns the ideology of the ideal wife and the cult of widow chastity (see Swann 1932; O'Hara 1971; Ropp 1976; Holmgren 1981, 1985; Sung 1981; Waltner 1981; Elvin 1984; Mann 1985, 1987). It is by now well established that ideals of womanhood changed over time for reasons that varied from ethnic antagonisms to concerns for men's political loyalties and anxieties about status. Moreover, it can be shown that even constant ideals had different effects on behavior in different periods, depending on the incentives provided by property law, kinship groups, charitable ventures, and government honors. These studies show that we need to keep in mind how ideology and state power worked with the transfer of property in creating gender inequalities in China. In her chapter here, Mann brings the rhetoric on women's spheres into the discussion of elite marriage practices. She argues that the remarkable social mobility of the mid-Ch'ing period led to anxiety about the blurring of boundaries between people of different status, including the boundaries between wives and lower-status women. Literati writers of this period reexamined classical writings on marriage rituals and the proper roles of husbands and wives, emphasizing not wives' subordination but the ways they complemented their husbands by taking charge in their own spheres. Valorizing the role of wife, the literati placed much of the task of protecting family and class honor on wives and daughters.

Taken together, the three chapters on elite marriage show us three sides of marriage and also three points in time. The politics of alliance were never absent from elite marriages, but they were probably also never so well developed as they were among the ruling families of the Chou, where marriage had important links to succession by a single heir and where rulers needed
alliances transcending their borders. Property, again, could never have been a trivial consideration in elite marriages, but the amounts involved seem to have become a particular concern in the T'ang-Sung period, and changes in the nature and direction of transfers were complexly associated with commercialization and increased competition for elite status. Nor was concern with the meaning of marriage new to the Ch'ing. Since the time when the ritual classics were written, writers had tried to deny or transcend the political and financial aspects of marriage and to reconcile the fact that marriages entailed not just unions of families but unions of men and women. Yet these efforts gained special urgency in the eighteenth century with the greater commercialization of society and the instability of social boundaries.

PROPERTY AND THE MARRIAGES OF ORDINARY PEOPLE

English-language studies of gender differentiation in premodern China have tended to concentrate on ideology, yet there is also a large literature, especially in Chinese and Japanese, on the history of marriage as a legal institution. Laws on family property, divorce, exogamy, incest, bigamy, adultery, and rape shaped the marriage practices of men and women in all social classes. Studies of marriage-related law are the basis for our characterization of traditional China as a society that practiced monogamy, concubinage, divorce, and adoption and followed a property regime that favored transmission through males (see Ch'ü 1965; McCreery 1976; Dull 1978; Tai 1978; Shiga 1978; Meijer 1981; Ng 1987; Ocko 1989). Since Engels's time, scholars have argued that the subordination of women was a result of their inferior property rights. Accordingly, scholars studying the legal and economic position of women in modern China have often drawn on these studies of traditional law, either as evidence of what China was like before modern reforms or as keys to understanding the traditional social forms that persisted into modern times.

Three chapters in this volume build on these prior studies of legal institutions to reconsider how women related to property. Focusing on the Hong Kong region in the early twentieth century, Rubie S. Watson analyzes the social and legal distinctions among wives, concubines, and maids. She argues that a crucial distinction between wives and concubines was the property transaction that marked their marriages, then goes on to examine the consequences that flow from these differences. In other words, she does not stop at the distribution of property, but looks at the consequences for the distribution of power, respect, and security within the domestic sphere. She stresses the importance of dowry in giving women the dignity of wives and the autonomy of property holders. Wives even had advantages over their husbands in one regard: they could have private property separate from the larger family property. Concubines not only lacked private funds but also usually lacked contact with their natal families and thus could not provide effective matri-
lateral relatives for their children. Maids were not permanent members of the household, but merely indentured servants until marriage or concubinage. Their lives were often harsh while in service, and when they left it was often to become a concubine in another household.

Although dowry seems indubitably to have enhanced a woman’s prestige and autonomy, and the more dowry the better, the relation between women’s status and money was not simply linear. Gail Hershatter’s chapter on prostitution in early twentieth-century Shanghai shows that money, status, and autonomy were much more complexly related. The highest prices were paid for beautiful preadolescent girls who could be trained to serve the male elite. They lived in much greater comfort than lower-class prostitutes but were also watched more closely by their owners and faced much greater obstacles to getting out of prostitution because their owners would demand much higher redemption fees. Prostitution illustrates the extremes to which the commodification of women could go. Prostitutes had little control over their lives. Others sold or pawned them into prostitution; madames decided which clients they would accept; only with outside help did they have any chance to leave “the life.” The existence of the market for prostitutes made it clear to all that there was a price for women. To a peasant family, a daughter was worth so much as a bride, so much as a maid, so much as a prostitute. Prostitution in China was treated as a legal contractual arrangement in which one owner of a woman sold or pawned her to another.

Jonathan K. Ocko explores in more depth the role of the state in defining and enforcing the links between property and women in his chapter in this volume. In the Ch’ing code, women’s relation to property, unlike men’s, was nearly always mediated by marriage. Whatever property a woman got from her natal family came as a marriage portion; whatever claims she had to the use of her husband’s estate after his death depended on her staying there, not leaving her husband’s family to marry someone else. In the twentieth century, new laws fundamentally altered the legal basis of gender differentiation, and Ocko examines the revisions of the law code aimed at improving women’s property rights, especially the 1950 and 1980 marriage laws and the 1985 inheritance law. He shows that despite the persistence of long-held cultural notions now labeled “feudal,” some real change is discernible, above all in the rights of widows to inherit from their husbands. In the Ch’ing widows were trustees for the heirs, but only if they did not remarry. In current law, admittedly not always enforced, widows own in their own right half of the community property of the marriage and inherit half of their husband’s share; moreover, they are free to take this property into another marriage. Changes in behavior, Ocko shows, have lagged far behind changes in the law. Disjunctures between economic organization and legal strictures are probably partly to blame, as is the political instability of judicial institutions. In recent decades punishment of transgressions appears to have been sporadic.

The market aspects of marriage are viewed differently in William Lavelle’s