

INTRODUCTION

The Sung period began just over a thousand years ago, in 960, and lasted more than three centuries, to 1279. It has long been a favorite period among Western students of China, in no small measure because the art of the period appeals to modern tastes. Sung paintings, calligraphy, silk tapestries, and porcelain all convey a sense of restraint and mastery, subtlety and refinement. Gazing at a delicately colored porcelain dish, a meticulously rendered depiction of a busy city street, or a sketch of a lone figure before a lofty mountain, we feel it would have been pleasant to live among these objects and the people who made them or cherished them. What we know of the politics of the period corresponds to this image of civility. The Sung is remembered not for despotic or cruel emperors, corrupt eunuchs, or regional warlords, but for highly principled scholar-officials who entered the civil service by means of a competitive literary examination and were motivated by a strong desire to serve their rulers and aid the common people.

The image of the Sung period among Chinese is less positive. Many prefer the previous dynasty, the T'ang (618–907), a period they associate with virile emperors, military expansion, passionate poets, and cultural confidence. To them, the Sung seems an effete period, when China's leaders became too refined, sophisticated, and thoughtful for the country's good. High-mindedness was not enough at the beginning of the dynasty to oust the Khitan from borderlands previously held by the T'ang, in the middle of the dynasty to prevent the Jurchen from conquering the ancient northern heartland of China, or in the final half-century to resist the steady incursion of the rapidly expanding Mongols.

But the Sung should not be summed up in likes and dislikes. Current scholarly opinion among Chinese, Japanese, and Western historians is that the Sung was above all a period of change, a turning point in the long sweep

of Chinese history.¹ The changes that occurred between the mid-T'ang and the mid-Sung went beyond the rebellions, invasions, and dynastic wars that have marked all periods of Chinese history. They reached the most basic social, cultural, political, and economic structures of Chinese civilization, features that normally change very slowly over the long term. The late T'ang government gave up interfering in the distribution of land, which could thenceforth be freely bought and sold. It also overhauled its taxation policies, deriving less from land and more from commerce. Between 700 and 1100 the population doubled to about one hundred million. Migration on a huge scale shifted the population southward; those living in central and south China rose in number from about a quarter to over half of the total population.

People moved south to avoid war, but also to take advantage of economic opportunities. Convenient water transportation and a milder climate made possible rapid commercial and agricultural expansion. Steady improvements in wet-field rice productivity were allowing denser settlement in rice-growing regions. All over the country commerce burgeoned, from local trade in agricultural products to maritime trade in porcelains that extended throughout Southeast Asia. The government assisted by increasing the money supply, even issuing paper money. Ten to twenty times as much cash circulated at the end of the eleventh century as ever had during the T'ang. In 1107, in addition to copper cash and silver bullion, over twenty-six million units of paper money were outstanding, each worth a "string" of a thousand copper coins.

Commercial expansion fueled the growth of cities. Kaifeng, the capital of the Northern Sung (960–1126, the period when the Sung government held most of "China proper"), was conveniently located near the north end of the Grand Canal and not far from major deposits of coal and iron. It was about as populous as the T'ang capital, Ch'ang-an, had been at its height, but was a more commercial city, dominated as much by markets of all sorts as by palaces and government offices. Other cities also grew at an unprecedented pace, dozens reaching populations of fifty thousand or more, leading to urban-rural cultural differences more marked than in any earlier period. During the Southern Sung (1127–1279, when the government did not hold the northern third of the county), the capital, Hangchow, at the southern end of the Grand Canal, grew extremely rapidly, reaching an estimated two million people—the largest city in the world at that time.²

Of the many technological advances during these centuries, the invention of printing warrants special note, as it revolutionized the spread of ideas, old and new, and contributed to fundamental changes in social structure. No longer was it necessary to copy books laboriously by hand. From mid-T'ang to mid-Sung the price of books dropped to perhaps one-tenth of its previous level. The Confucian classics and the Buddhist and Taoist canons were all published in their entirety. But these were not the only books to circulate

in large numbers: there also appeared a profusion of books on agriculture, medicine, and divination, collections of anecdotes and stories, individual authors' prose and poetry, religious tracts and treatises, and reference guides that served the needs of local magistrates, candidates for the examinations, and anyone who wished to compose elegant letters.³

Economic expansion and easier access to books facilitated growth in the educated class. This development was further stimulated by changes in the way men were selected to become government officials, long the most prestigious occupation. Already in the late T'ang, the old aristocratic families that had been politically dominant for centuries were losing their claim on the central government as their special preserve. After bringing an end to a century of warlord domination, the early Sung government took steps to expand the civil service examination system. By the middle of the dynasty about half of those holding government posts had entered the bureaucracy after passing these examinations (with most of the rest gaining entrance thanks to privileges extended to the close relatives of higher officials). Competition to gain office through the examinations increased steadily over the course of the dynasty. In the early eleventh century, fewer than 30,000 candidates took the prefectural examinations; this number rose to nearly 80,000 by the end of the century and perhaps 400,000 before the dynasty's end. By the mid-1000s, indeed, it is fair to say that social and political leadership had been taken over by the educated class (*shih-ta-fu*), landholders, by and large, who prepared their sons to take the civil service examinations and to occupy positions of leadership at local and national levels in politics and culture. And now, for the first time in Chinese history, a large proportion of this ruling class was from central and southern China, often from families that had settled there fairly recently, in the waning years of the T'ang or even later.⁴

The growth of the examination system and the steady increase in the size of the educated class contributed to the intellectual ferment of the Sung. Although basic Buddhist doctrine and practice had by Sung times been completely sinified and incorporated into general Chinese culture, Buddhist philosophy and metaphysics no longer dominated speculative thinking. The best minds, it seems, turned instead to perfecting the arts of the literati: poetry, painting, calligraphy, history, philosophy, and classical studies. Confucian teachings were revived in a form so new that they are generally termed in English Neo-Confucianism. Teachers attracted hundreds of students, many of whom, though intent on preparing for the examinations, were drawn into discussion of subjects such as the nature of sages and restoring government by sages. Leaders of the movement to revive Confucianism sought ways to reconcile the vision of an ideal order found in the classics with the rapidly changing social and political order of their day. They argued, often bitterly, about the examination system. They sought to revitalize ancestral rites,

combat such Buddhist practices as cremation, and give ritual definition to educated men's responsibilities toward their kinsmen. Personal self-cultivation became a major concern of thinkers, especially among followers of Ch'eng I (1033–1107) and Chu Hsi (1130–1200). In the Southern Sung, Confucian scholars, frustrated with the failure of the government to regain the north, took increasing interest in building a more ideal society from the bottom up—reforming families and local communities, establishing academies, and spreading their message through publishing.⁵

Ordinary working people, generally illiterate, were affected by cultural changes as well. Urbanization, denser settlement, expanded interregional commerce, and the growth of the educated class altered patterns of cultural communication. As communities that had been largely isolated from one another came into greater contact, local cults spread across wide regions of the country. At the same time, new forms of localized kinship groups emerged, bringing educated men and their peasant cousins together for joint ancestral rites, joint protection of graves, and the pursuit of other common interests. For every man who attempted the civil service examinations, a dozen must have gone to school long enough to learn to read or write but not enough to master the classics. It thus became more likely that every county, if not yet every market town, had schools and learned men.⁶

THE SUNG AND CHINESE WOMEN'S HISTORY

Women's history, as it has developed in the West, has been closely tied to feminism and the goal of improving women's lives. As activists have shifted their rallying cries, historians have been stimulated to ask new questions of the past. In the last couple of decades, they have analyzed the ideological basis of women's subordination and the historical processes by which particular constructions of gender differences have come to be accepted as matters of fact. Through assiduous searching, they have discovered that women left a much larger literary record than previously supposed. Women's history can even be credited with enlarging and recasting the questions historians ask, thus, for instance, stimulating new interest in the personal and emotional in the lives of both men and women. Today, even for periods as early as the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, there is a large body of scholarship showing what women were doing and analyzing gender as integral to the basic structures of culture and society.⁷

The volume of historical studies on women in China is still much smaller than that for women in the West, but gradually we are gaining a more nuanced understanding of how women's experiences have been tied to the development of Chinese history. It is now possible, for instance, to provide a relatively sophisticated analysis of the role women played as the mothers, wives, and sisters of the emperors and of how imperial marriage politics

functioned in the overall political structure.⁸ The connections between gender differentiation and basic philosophical and religious ideas have been analyzed, and minute attention has been directed to the didactic works that instructed women in their roles.⁹ Notions of women's spheres, we now see, had enormous influence on the sorts of public roles women were able to play in religion and the arts.¹⁰ The entertainment quarters provided some women with opportunities to develop their literary, musical, and artistic talents, yet inhibited other women who did not wish to be associated with that milieu.¹¹ In the late Ming (1368–1644), however, women writers and artists began to appear in greater numbers, a development that led, by the eighteenth century, to debates among scholars on women's roles.¹² The cult of widow fidelity ironically reached its peak in the same period. The extraordinary honor and rewards given to young women who renounced remarriage or even committed suicide have been analyzed from many angles—ranging from the state's interest in promoting virtue, to popular attitudes about suicide, to regional economic circumstances, to family structure among the educated elite, to widows' rights to property.¹³ Indeed, it is now clear both that widows were actively making choices and that the cultural framework that shaped those choices rewarded certain forms of self-sacrifice. Even more research has been done on Chinese women in the twentieth century, especially on efforts to improve women's situations through political means. The focus here has been on connections between the feminist movement and successive political reforms and revolutions, with most scholars emphasizing the difficulty of effecting fundamental change in gender relations or of removing all the institutionalized disadvantages that hinder women.¹⁴

Why pick the Sung as the period to study Chinese women? Historians of Chinese women have usually selected a particular period in order to make a point of contemporary relevance (a time-honored practice also among Chinese historians, who call it using the past to criticize the present). Thus the T'ang (618–907) has attracted scholars who wish to show that in such a prosperous and vibrant age elite women participated in society with considerable freedom.¹⁵ They can point to some T'ang women as role models, but, more importantly, they can demonstrate that granting greater autonomy to women is not incompatible with Chinese culture. By contrast, those who would rather expose the cruelties imposed on women—such as footbinding, infanticide, prostitution, and pressure on widows not to remarry—have generally been drawn to the Ch'ing (1644–1911), when such practices are best documented.¹⁶

The Sung has attracted scholars because it was a time when women's situations apparently took a turn for the worse.¹⁷ It is associated with the spread of footbinding and strong condemnation of remarriage by widows. Because male dominance in Chinese history has so often been explained as a matter of ideology, scholars have looked to the revival of Confucianism in

the Sung to explain these changes. In his influential *History of the Life of Chinese Women* (1928), for example, Ch'en Tung-yüan argued that women's lives started to deteriorate after the philosophers Ch'eng I and Chu Hsi promoted "the idea that women must value chastity," making the Sung "the turning point in women's lives."¹⁸ Some authors have gone so far as to credit particular Sung scholars with actively promoting footbinding, infanticide, and widow suicide.¹⁹ Placing the blame on Neo-Confucianism has been a convenient way for modern writers to condemn patriarchy in China without condemning Chinese culture as a whole.

Another reason for focusing on the Sung would seem on the surface to be quite contradictory: the evidence that women had particularly strong property rights during that period.²⁰ From surviving legal decisions we know that Sung judges, when called on to supervise the division of an estate, would set aside shares for the daughters for their dowries that were half the size of the sons' shares. Moreover, all women who brought dowries into marriage retained considerable control over their use and disposal as long as they lived, even taking them with them into second marriages. Neither in earlier nor in later periods did as much property pass through women's hands as a matter of course.

The conjunction of these two rather different signs of change in women's situation was what motivated me to focus on the Sung period. The great historical changes of the T'ang-Sung period could hardly have escaped having some impact on women's situation. Because the family is a property-holding and tax-paying unit, strategies for family survival and advancement must have been affected by changes in land tenure and taxation policies. The intensive character of wet-field rice cultivation had to have influenced the division of labor in the household. Urbanization and commercialization must also have had some effect on women's opportunities to support themselves. Cultural conceptions about gender differentiation necessarily fit into larger mental maps of the nature of human existence, the bonds between individuals, the moral basis of authority. Cultural changes so sweeping as the sinification of Buddhism and the revival of Confucianism must have influenced how people thought about basic issues. Given that much of the rhetoric on family had a clear class character, new class structures and new modes of interaction across class lines would certainly have reshaped this rhetoric. The task, then, is to discover how the history of women during the Sung fits into our understanding of the broad historical changes associated with that period.²¹ How do we make sense of the spread of footbinding, especially when it seems to have occurred at the same time that women's rights to property were particularly strong? How valid are the charges against Sung Neo-Confucianism? What were the effects of economic growth and a new sort of elite? Does knowledge of what was happening to women raise new questions about these historical transformations?

MARRIAGE AND WOMEN'S LIVES

In this book I focus on the intersection of women and marriage. The overwhelming majority of Sung women married and had no public career. Men effectively dominated the public sphere: they ran the government, operated the businesses, wrote the books, and built the temples. To understand the lives of the majority of women, we must look at them where they were—in the home. Their interactions in this sphere with one another and with men were central both to individual women's sense of identity and to men's conceptions of women as persons and as a category of persons.

Historians who see women's history as a means of breaking down stereotypes about women's place in society tend to neglect the married women who stayed home rearing children and tending to family affairs, preferring instead to uncover exceptional women who gained power or prominence in the largely male worlds of rulers, artists, writers, or rebels. Even though most women in premodern societies identified themselves with their roles in their families, the history of women and the history of the family have been treated as two distinct, at times even antagonistic, disciplines. Historians of women who look on the family as the central institution of women's oppression have criticized historians of the family for writing about families in ways that obscure gender-based differences, whether in interests, resources, or goals. They have argued that men's and women's experiences of the family are quite different, and that the family most historians have studied is the family as defined by men.²²

In the Chinese case, a reluctance to focus on women within families may reflect distaste for the profoundly male-centered ideology of the Chinese family. The descent line from father to son to grandson was taken to be the core of the family: obligations to ancestors, family property, and family names were all transmitted along the patriline. Texts that can be broadly labeled Confucian presented family and kinship as at bottom a set of connections among men; indeed, people could and did compile family histories that failed to mention any women. Legal texts presented an equally idealized model of authority relations in the family. Senior generations had authority over junior ones, and men had authority over women. At all social levels, land, tenancies, houses, furniture, and most other property was conceived as family property; when transmitted to the next generation, sons alone got shares. Because sons had to stay home to continue the descent line, wives were brought in for them. Marriage thus moved a girl from one family to another, from a position of subordination to her father to one of subordination to her husband and his parents. Wives were not free to divorce or abandon their husbands at will; men, though, could divorce wives on a wide variety of grounds. They could also take concubines, for although monogamy restricted them to one wife at a time, it did not restrict them to

one woman. According to the dominant ethical and legal model, in short, the Chinese family was thoroughly patrilineal, patriarchal, and patrilocal. Women were well aware of that model and their marginality in it. Still, most found it to their advantage to respond to the incentives and rewards that this family system offered women and to work within it.²³

It is easy to criticize the traditional Chinese family system as being oppressive to women, as Chinese reformers of both sexes have been doing since the beginning of this century. But no one is trying to revive this system; so pointing to its disagreeable features is not as useful as examining how women came to fashion their lives in terms of it and work as hard as men at keeping it going. Emphasizing women's victimization, in other words, only tends to obscure what women were able to accomplish.

To admit the power of the dominant ideology and legal structure does not mean that they must be used as the organizing framework for inquiries into women's lives. In this book I have adopted two strategies to give a truer picture of women's experiences. First, I focus on marriage rather than the family. By making marriage the central issue, we can see family life more from women's perspective. Marriage was many things: it was a series of rituals; it was a legal framework determining authority over people and goods; it was a way of creating affinal ties to other families; it was a set of gender-specific roles, laden with expectations about how men and women acted toward each other; it was a sexual union; it was the foundation of parenthood and family membership. It came in a variety of recognized forms: standard patrilocal first marriages; second marriages for either men or women; uxorilocal marriages of daughters or widows; and the quasi-marriages of concubines. Men's experience of family was marked by continuity, women's by discontinuity. Most men remained tied to the family into which they were born. A woman, in the best of circumstances, moved once to be married. In less fortunate circumstances, she could be sold and resold as a maid or concubine; she could be divorced; she could be sent away when widowed.

My second strategy is to view marriage as a cultural framework encompassing a variety of partly contradictory and often ambiguous ideas and images. To grasp these ideas and images we must set aside our usual ways of thinking. To modern sensibilities (including modern Chinese sensibilities), the best foundation for personal happiness and social order consists in strong ties between husbands and wives based above all on love. We may realize that the individual pursuit of love is not always successful, but we tend to assume that the total sum of human happiness is best realized when people are given considerable freedom to find loving spouses. In premodern China, by contrast, it was the parent-child tie that was viewed as central to personal happiness and social order. Women were at a disadvantage in that their ties to their parents were weakened when they moved away to marry. Yet their sons would stay home, so they might end up living twice as long

with their sons as they had with their husbands. Thus the emphasis on parent-child ties gave women ample opportunity to build satisfying lives as mothers.

The value placed on motherhood and on parent-child ties more generally did not, however, make Chinese women's lives any less conflicted than our own. Partially contradictory notions of gender, sexuality, and affinity were also part of the cultural framework in which they fashioned their lives. Sung sources are full of husbands and wives who considered themselves tied to each other by forces of destiny, widows who sued their relatives for property, and wives who talked their husbands into keeping their daughters at home and bringing in husbands for them, not to mention all the tales of passion and jealousy, so disruptive of domestic relations. The existence of these assorted ideas and practices was widely recognized and tacitly accepted even if not synthesized into a single, coherent model. Most people understood that no matter what the legal and Confucian models might imply, families were not units in which members shared assumptions, interests, and goals uniformly; rather, they were contexts within which young and old, men and women, wives and concubines, negotiated their relations with one another, often pursuing different interests and thus coming into conflict.

I am not suggesting that Sung society was any different from our own in these regards. We are aware that in our society actions rarely have unambiguous meanings: parents do not all convey the same meanings when they urge a child to eat more, nor do clothing styles convey sexual messages unambiguously. And people are certainly not always consistent: a wife may defer to her husband one minute and undercut him the next. Such inconsistency is not necessarily based on class, regional, or gender differences; after all, a single individual can adhere to contradictory ideas and feel conflicting emotions. The coexistence of multifaceted, ambiguous, and often opposed ideas makes life confusing, but it is not necessarily bad in itself, for it gives people room to maneuver and thus to alter, at least slightly, the circumstances in which they live. Sung women's lives become more interesting and believable when we begin with the assumption that they lived in a world as complex, fluid, and riddled with ambivalence as the world of today. Even if men made sense of their lives primarily in terms of the dominant ideologies, for women, I would argue, the contradictory ideas and ambiguous images that swirled around them were every bit as crucial.

NARRATIVES

Given the many things I set out to do in this book—explore the complexities of a changing society, perceive both individuals and structures, detect both the possibilities for negotiation and the weight of convention—I have drawn on all the sources I could find. To understand the legal system, I turned

to the standard histories, government document collections, and the Sung code, the *Sung hsing-t'ung*. I gleaned details of wedding rituals and the market in maids and concubines from descriptions of local customs, and information about prevailing ideas on pregnancy and childbirth from medical treatises. To discover images or symbols that helped shape people's thinking, I turned to such sources as poems, marriage proposals and agreements, and the phrases used to decorate a house for a wedding. Paintings proved a good medium for learning about gender distinctions. For the vocabulary of family relations and family ethics, I made use of advice books, most notably Ssu-ma Kuang's (1019–1086) *Precepts for Family Life* (*Chia-fan*) and his "Miscellaneous Proprieties for Managing the Family" (*Chü-chia ts'a-i*) and Yüan Ts'ai's (ca. 1140–ca. 1195) *Precepts for Social Life* (*Yüan-shih shih-fan*).²⁴ Because these two authors saw problems differently, they often complement each other, confirming the prevalence of certain practices or else indicating where educated men might disagree. Philosophical writings have also proved useful, particularly those of Ch'eng I (1033–1107) and Chu Hsi (1130–1200), influential thinkers who put greater emphasis on patrilineal principles than Ssu-ma Kuang or Yüan Ts'ai.²⁵

The drawback of these prescriptive and discursive texts is that they were written largely by men whose intellectual framework tended to deny multiplicity and change. Those who set words to paper can record only a tiny fraction of what goes on around them; the act of writing, moreover, forces them to impose order on the object, issue, or event in question and thus to simplify and rationalize. In China, the order they imputed was generally one that denied change. Thus writers, in deciding what to say about family, marriage, gender, and related topics, focused on what they saw as most true, and what was most true was what matched eternal patterns: basic human relations such as the parent-child bond, they assumed, were uninfluenced by time. As a consequence, the legal, ritual, and philosophical texts that set out to explain the principles of family organization obscure not only the messier side of social life, but also change over time.

Because generalizing authors left out so much, in this book wherever possible I have drawn on narratives of specific people in specific circumstances. The advantages of narrative can be illustrated by a story that is cited twice more in this book, once each in the chapters on concubines and on divorce. It was recorded by Hung Mai (1123–1202), one of the most engaging writers of the Sung period.

Wang Pa-lang was a rich man from Pi-yang in T'ang-chou [Honan]. Every year he went to the Chiang-huai area, where he was a large merchant. While there he fell in love with a prostitute. Each time he went home, he would treat his wife badly, trying to drive her out. His wife was intelligent. She had borne four daughters, three of whom were already married, but since the youngest

was only a few years old, she figured she could not leave. Consequently, she responded to her husband meekly, "I have been your wife for over twenty years. Our daughters are married and we have grandchildren. If you chase me out, where can I go?"

Wang left again, this time bringing the prostitute back with him and setting her up in an inn in a nearby street. The wife, at home, had little by little to pawn or sell everything she had stored in her cases, until there was not a thing left in the house. When Wang returned and saw this, he was even angrier. "You and I can never get together again. Let's settle things today." His wife, finally becoming agitated, said, "If that is how it is, we must go to court." She grabbed him by the sleeve and dragged him to the county court, where the magistrate granted the divorce and divided the property in two. Wang wanted to take the little girl, but his wife objected. "My husband is shameless. He abandoned his wife and took up with a prostitute. If this girl goes with him, she will certainly end up in degraded circumstances." The county magistrate agreed with her and so she got custody of the girl.

The woman went to live in another village. She bought such things as jars and jugs and lined them up by her door the way shopkeepers do. One day her ex-husband passed her door and spoke to her as though they were on the same familiar terms as before. "How much money can you make on these? Why not try something else?" She chased him away, railing at him, "Since we have broken our relationship, we are like strangers. How do you get to interfere in my family affairs?" Thereafter they never saw each other again.

When the daughter came of age, she was married into the T'ien family of Fang-ch'eng [a county within their home prefecture of T'ang-chou]. By then the woman's property had grown to one hundred thousand strings of copper cash, and the T'ien family got it all. Mr. Wang lived with the prostitute and died away from home in Huai-nan. Several years later his ex-wife also died. When she was ready to be buried, the daughter, troubled that her father's body had not been brought back, sent someone to get it, wanting to bury him with her mother. After the two bodies were washed and dressed, they were laid on the same table, and while those in charge were not paying attention, the two bodies turned their backs on each other. Thinking this a coincidence, the daughter cried and put them back in their original place. But before long it happened again, so she knew that this couple were as emotionally estranged in death as in life and still hated each other. Nevertheless, she buried them in the same grave.²⁶

This story is just one of thousands of surviving narratives about women written in the Sung dynasty. It is full of potent images. It depicts a smitten man, alienated from his wife because of his attraction to a prostitute. It also depicts a resourceful woman who, though she could not do whatever she pleased, was still capable of resisting pressure and pursuing goals. We are given some context: we see that the woman had to fashion her life within legal and economic limitations on what a woman could do inside or outside of marriage. The letter of the law on divorce—for instance, the rule that a man

could not divorce his wife without grounds, or even with grounds if she had nowhere to go—is shown to mean little if he could simply abandon her. Still, women could benefit from flexible application of the law—as in this case, where the magistrate set aside the husband’s claims to custody of his child.

From this narrative we see that wives and daughters had possibilities not often mentioned. Wives could have property of their own that they were free to sell; a family with no sons might pass its property to a daughter and her husband; and that daughter would be expected to take on the ritual duties normally expected of sons, such as burial. This story also depicts conflict between a husband and wife—Wang’s wife knew her interests were not the same as her husband’s—but at the same time it underscores the strength of Confucian values that favor overcoming conflict by moral effort. Without such values the daughter would not have tried to bring her parents’ bodies together and, indeed, forced them to cohabit despite their apparent objections. We thus are left with many disparate, unintegrated truths: male dominance and female resourcefulness, the power of sexual attraction and the power of a mother’s devotion to her child’s welfare, marital incompatibility and the value placed on the unity of parents.

A great many other narratives exist that are in some ways comparable to the story of Wang Pa-lang and his wife. Hung Mai collected stories from all sorts of people, including domestic servants, monks, strangers he encountered at taverns, and colleagues he got to know during his years as a provincial official.²⁷ Most of the 2,692 stories in the surviving edition of his *I-chien chih* concern uncanny phenomena like the postmortem hatred between Wang and his wife, but since strange events often occurred at home, the tales inadvertently reveal some of the dynamics of domestic life. His stories were not crafted to fit didactic models, and he did not suppress or resolve the contradictions that occurred in ordinary thinking. And even if we read his stories as highly inventive ghost stories, Hung Mai presented them as true accounts of actual events—events hard to explain perhaps, but events that did happen.

Dozens of other authors besides Hung Mai recorded short narratives of events in women’s lives. Particularly plentiful are anecdotes based on gossip about famous men.²⁸ Gossip may not always be accurate in its details, but it is not without a certain historical significance. To evaluate depictions of virtuous people, after all, we also need to know what was considered unattractive, inept, foolish, or scandalous, something in which such anecdotes excel. And we need a sense of what was taken as a reasonable explanation for unattractive behavior—the circumstances authors mention to help their readers understand why men might trade concubines or wives leave their husbands.

A brief anecdote recorded by Chou Mi (1232–1308) can serve as an example of these sources. It impugns the paternity of the much-hated chief councillor, Han T’o-chou (d. 1207).

When Wang Hsüan-tzu was an erudite at the imperial academy, one of his maids got pregnant. Because his wife would not tolerate the situation, the maid was sent to a female broker [to be resold]. The father of Han P'ing-yüan [i.e., Han T'o-chou] was from the same prefecture as Wang and serving at court with him. When he heard that the Wang family's pregnant maid had been discharged, he took her, first telling Wang his intentions. Before long, she had a son, who was none other than P'ing-yüan.²⁹

Those reading this story would understand that Han wanted a son and saw in the pregnant maid an opportunity to get a child who could be raised as though it were his natural child. We may well wonder about the factual basis for stories like these, but people of the time accepted them; indeed, they sometimes ended up recorded in the official biographies of leading political figures in the *Sung History*. The biography of Wang Yen (890–966), for instance, records the following incident:

When Yen was military commander, he was friends with Wang Hsing of P'ing-lu, and their wives treated each other like sisters. After Yen reached high rank, he slighted Hsing, who felt bitter about it. When Yen's wife got sick, Hsing told people he could cure her. Yen then hurried to visit Hsing. Hsing told him, "I am not a competent physician, but think [the illness may be related to the fact that] when you were in Shan, you had just your one wife but now you have lots of courtesan-concubines. Couldn't it be that having to put up with poor treatment has made the lady discontent and thus ill? If you could discharge your female attendants, her illness would probably be cured." Yen took this as a personal insult. He falsely accused Hsing of something else and saw that he and his wife were both executed.³⁰

Gossipy anecdotes like these are particularly useful for the insight they provide into ideas about sexuality and sexual attraction, touching as they do on the whole gamut of upper-class men's connections to the market in women. We see men purchasing concubines, having them entertain their guests, and getting into trouble when they lose control over them. We see wives unable to contain their jealousy and sons suspected of incest with their fathers' concubines. We see fathers and mothers in the lower classes looking for ways to profit from the demand for attractive young girls. Telling these stories allowed men to work out some of their feelings about the fragility and dangers inherent in their relations with women.

Standard historical sources can also be mined for narratives of particular women. The *Judicial Decisions* (*Ming-kung shu-p'an ch'ing-ming chi*), for example, contains over two hundred rulings concerning family disputes that reached the government courts. The rulings were written by judges, who were educated men, but the litigants were ordinary people in all walks of life. Of most relevance to this book are the accounts of disputes concerning incest, the validity of marriages, the claims of daughters, wives, and widows

to dowries and other property, and the rights of widows to adopt heirs or otherwise decide family affairs.³¹

The collected writings of Sung authors are a rich source for funerary biographies. As eulogies, these biographies follow rather fixed conventions and unfortunately survive only for members of the educated class.³² Each biography gives a basic account of its subject: dates, ancestry, native place, spouse, children, character, accomplishments, and virtues. The subjects of these biographies were usually officials or their relatives, both male and female; many were the friends and relatives of prominent writers, since these are the people whose collected works have been best preserved.

The men, and occasionally women, who decided what to reveal about a deceased woman close to them—a mother, sister, wife, daughter, or daughter-in-law—were crafting an image of her that also reflected on them and their identity. When this information was further organized and edited by a skilled writer (almost invariably a man), the account naturally took on more and more the characteristics of a literary creation. But biographies are not all artifice. When authors knew their subjects, especially when they wrote about their own mothers, wives, and sisters, their feelings come through clearly. Actions women took upon being widowed, for instance, are recounted in apparently factual ways. And when read carefully, biographies contain a wealth of details useful for determining the criteria on which people selected spouses for their children.³³ Funerary biographies also provide the only significant information from the Sung on such vital data as age at marriage, numbers of children, length of marriage, and length of widowhood. To make use of these data I collected biographies of women whose husbands' biographies also survived. By going through the standard index of Sung biographical materials, I found 189 couples for whom biographies exist for both husband and wife; 166 of these biography pairs give birth dates for both spouses, making them more useful for quantitative purposes. Of these 166 pairs, 135 were for a man and his first wife, and 31 were for a man and his second, third, or fourth wife. All of the statistics given in this book are based on these biography pairs.³⁴

Here is the first half of a fairly typical funerary biography, written by Han Yüan-chi (1118–1187) about Miss Shang-kuan (1094–1178), the mother of an acquaintance.

Tomb Notice and Inscription for Miss Shang-kuan, Lady of Jung-kuo

Miss Shang-kuan was of a prominent descent group of Shao-wu [Fukien]. Her father quickly attained the rank of senior grand master of the palace through his Confucian scholarship and held a series of prominent posts, the first to bring eminence to their family. Miss Shang-kuan was sedate from birth and never spoke or laughed foolishly. Her father was impressed with her and spent a very long time picking a mate for her. The late Mr. Chi, [who eventually

rose to] vice minister of revenue, had a good reputation while in the imperial academy and had passed in the top class, so she was sent to marry him. His home was in Lung-ch'uan in Ch'u-chou [Chekiang]. He had been orphaned at a young age and was poor. Miss Shang-kuan thus did not get to serve her parents-in-law, but at each of the seasonal sacrifices she would make offerings to them in accord with the family's means, meticulously attending to purity. She and her husband both admired those who would not stop once they had started something. She once sighed and said, "I am a daughter-in-law of your family and should serve the dead in all ways as I serve the living."

After her husband was appointed an instructor at the preparatory school of the imperial academy, a bad person in the Chi clan surreptitiously sold the graves of their ancestors at Ch'ing-p'ing village to a Buddhist temple. Her husband took leave to come back to redeem [the land] but, since he had no savings, was going to take out a loan. Miss Shang-kuan, with tears in her eyes, said, "The reason my parents sent me with a dowry was so that I could help your family. How could I use it while your graves are not protected?" She then emptied out her dowry chests to redeem the hill, and with the remainder bought a lot more land and had a temple built to protect [the grave property], saying, "This way later generations will know that they got this from you and outsiders will not dare interfere." With this, everyone in the Chi clan, young and old, praised her as worthy and went along with her plan. Even today woodcutters do not dare look at the grave forest, saying, "This was donated by Miss Shang-kuan."

Her husband served as edict attendant at the Hui-yu Hall and then was assigned to Kuang prefecture. After three years he was granted a temple guardianship [a sinecure], but before he left Kuang he died. None of their sons had reached maturity, so Miss Shang-kuan took charge of the coffin, bringing it back several thousand li to be buried in the Ch'ing-p'ing graveyard, managing everything meticulously. When finished, she said sadly, "I will not turn my back on the Chi family, and will educate their sons so that they can take their place in the ranks of the literati. But there is no one to depend on in my husband's family. Why not depend on my own parents?" So she brought her children across the mountains to live with her father. At the time, all of [her father's] sons had already died; she was the only surviving child. Every day [Miss Shang-kuan] served her two parents, then personally taught her sons to read and recite, not going to bed until midnight. This was her normal schedule.

Both of her parents were over ninety when they died. After their deaths, [Miss Shang-kuan] left their home and built a house in the prefectural capital, where she lived in a complex household of a hundred members. Her sons proved capable, and one after the other served as prefects. She had over ten grandsons, some of whom have received office, some of whom have studied for the examinations. Her six or seven grandsons-in-law are known for their Confucian cultivation and local service.

Unfortunately, over the last decade or so, three of her sons died, leaving only the youngest, Kuei, to serve her. [Miss Shang-kuan] was over eighty, and other people would not have been able to bear the grief, but she had been