

55 CONCUBINES

Concubinage is probably the feature of the Chinese family system most foreign to Western experience. Although it is undoubtedly true that the vast majority of Chinese men could never afford a concubine in addition to a wife, still the practice of concubinage colored Chinese life at many levels. Poor families were affected as the suppliers of daughters. They were always aware that if they could not afford to marry their daughters off, they could sell them to rich men. This step meant turning an economic liability into an asset, but most people tried to avoid it, not only because they worried about the happiness of their daughters but also because their own prestige was involved. For families of modest means, concubinage meant that if the first wife failed to produce a surviving son after perhaps ten years of marriage, a concubine might be purchased in the hope she would bear a son. In families of prosperous merchants, landlords, scholars, and officials, concubinage was an even more common part of family life. Most members of such families would have spent at least a part of their lives in large households in which one or more men had a concubine in addition to his wife.

Below are three sources that reveal various aspects of concubinage. The first concerns the way concubines were offered for sale. Probably most of the girls had entered this market after their parents turned them over to a broker for a sum of money, signing a contract giving up their rights to her. The second is a memoir written by Mao Xiang (1611-1693) recording how he ended up taking a singing girl as his concubine. As he presents it, it was the girl who pursued him, eager for a patron who would pay her debts and buy out the contract which bound her to the owner of her establishment. The writer presents his wife as rather neutral in the whole process, but certainly in many cases wives or earlier concubines were displeased when a man took a new concubine. Some of the interpersonal dynamics in a household with wives and concubines is depicted in the last piece, an episode from the novel Jin Ping Mei, published in 1610. This novel recounts the varied adventures of Ximen Qing, a congenial but unambitious and undisciplined heir of a prosperous commercial family whose household had grown to include a wife and five concubines. In the episode included here, Lotus, the newest concubine, demonstrates the malice she could vent on her competitors.

THE THIN HORSE MARKET

Upwards of a hundred people in Yangzhou earn a living in the “thin horse” business. If someone shows an interest in taking a concubine, a team of a broker, a drudge, and a scout stick to him like flies. Early in the morning, the teams gather to wait outside the doors of potential customers, who usually give their business to the first team to arrive. Any teams coming late have to wait for the next opportunity. The winning team then leads their customer to the broker’s house. The customer is then served tea and seated to wait for the women. The broker leads out each of them, who do what the matchmaker tells them to do. After each of her short commands, the woman bows to the customer, walks forward, turns toward the light so the customer can see her face clearly, draws back her sleeves to show him her hands, glances shyly at him to show her eyes, says her age so he can hear her voice, and finally lifts her skirt to reveal whether her feet are bound. An experienced customer could figure out the size of her feet by listening to the noise she made as she entered the room. If her skirt made noise when she walked in, she had to have a pair of big feet under her skirt. As one woman finishes, another comes out, each house having at least five or six. If the customer finds a woman to his liking, he puts a gold hairpin in her hair at the temple, a procedure called “inserting the ornament.” If no one satisfies him, he gives a few hundred cash to the broker or the servants.

If the first broker gets tired, others will willingly take his place. Even if a customer has the stamina to keep looking for four or five days, he cannot finish visiting all the houses. Nevertheless, after seeing fifty to sixty white-faced, red-dressed women, they all begin to look alike and he cannot decide which are pretty or ugly. It is like the difficulty of recognizing a character after writing it hundreds or thousands of times. Therefore, the customer usually chooses someone once his mind and eyes can no longer discriminate. The owner of the woman brings out a piece of red paper on which are listed the “betrothal presents,” including gold jewelry and cloth. Once he agrees to the deal, he is sent home. Before he even arrives back at his lodgings, a band and a load of food and wine are already waiting there. Before long, presents he was to send are prepared and sent back with the band. Then a sedan chair and all the trimmings—colorful lanterns, happy candles, attendants, sacrificial foods—wait outside for the customer’s arrangement. The cooks and the entertainer for the wedding celebration also arrive together with foods, wine, candy, tables, chairs, and tableware. Without the customer’s order, the colorful sedan chair for the girl and the small sedan chair for her companion are dispatched to get the girl. The new concubine performs the bowing ceremony with music and singing and

considerable clamor. The next morning before noon the laborers ask for rewards from the man, then leave to prepare another wedding for another customer in the same manner.

HOW DONG XIAOWAN BECAME MY CONCUBINE

I was rather depressed that evening, so I got a boat and went with a friend on an excursion to Tiger Hill. My plan was to send a messenger to Xiangyang the next morning and then set out for home. As our boat passed under a bridge, I saw a small building by the bank. When I asked who lived there, my friend told me that this was [the singing girl] Dong's home. I was wildly happy with memories of three years before. I insisted on the boat's stopping, wanting to see Xiaowan at once. My friend, however, restrained me, saying, "Xiaowan has been terrified by the threat of being kidnapped by a powerful man and has been seriously ill for eighteen days. Since her mother's death,* she is said to have locked her door and refrained from receiving any guests." I nevertheless insisted on going ashore.

Not until I had knocked two or three times did the door open. I found no light in the house and had to grope my way upstairs. There I discovered medicine all over the table and bed.

Xiaowan, moaning, asked where I had come from and I told her I was the man she once saw beside a winding balustrade, intoxicated.

"Well, Sir," she said, recalling the incident, "I remember years ago you called at my house several times. Even though she only saw you once, my mother often spoke highly of you and considered it a great pity that I never had the chance to wait on you. Three years have passed. Mother died recently, but on seeing you now, I can hear her words in my ears. Where are you coming from this time?"

With an effort, she rose to draw aside the curtains and inspected me closely. She moved the lamp and asked me to sit on her bed. After talking awhile, I said I would go, not wanting to tire her. She, however, begged me to remain, saying, "During the past eighteen days I have had no appetite for food, nor have I been able to sleep well. My soul has been restless, dreaming almost all the time. But on seeing you, I feel as if my spirit has revived and my vigor returned." She then had her servant serve wine and food at her bedside, and kept refilling my cup herself.

Several times I expressed my desire to leave, but each time she urged me to stay.... The following morning, I was eager to set off on the trip home, but my friend and my servant both asked me not to be ungrateful for Xiaowan's

kindness as she had had only a brief chance to talk with me the previous night. Accordingly I went to say goodbye to her. I found her, fresh from her toilet, leaning against a window upstairs quite composed. On seeing my boat approaching the bank, she hurried aboard to greet me. I told her that I had to leave immediately, but she said that she had packed up her belongings and would accompany me. I felt unable to refuse her.

We went from Hushuguan to Wuxi, and from there to Changzhou, Yixing, and Jiangyin, finally arriving at Jinjiang. All this took twenty-seven days, and twenty-seven times I asked her to go back, but she was firm in her desire to follow me. On climbing Golden Hill, she pointed to the river and swore, "My body is as constant as the direction of the Yangzi River. I am determined never to go back to Suzhou!"

On hearing her words, I turned red and reiterated my refusal, "The provincial examination is coming up soon. Because my father's recent posts have been dangerous ones, I have failed to attend to family affairs and have not been able to look after my mother on a daily basis. This is my first chance to go back and take care of things. Moreover, you have so many creditors in Suzhou and it will take a lot to redeem your singing-girl's contract in Nanjing. So please go back to Suzhou for the time being. After I have taken the examination at the end of summer, I will send word and meet you in Nanjing. At any rate, I must await the result of the examination before I even think about these matters. Insisting on it now will do neither of us any good."

She, however, still hesitated. There were dice on the table, and one of my friends said to her jokingly, "If you are ever going to get your wish [to become his concubine], they will land with the same side up." She then bowed toward the window, said a prayer, and tossed the dice. They all landed on six. All on board expressed their amazement, and I said to her, "Should Heaven really be on our side, I'm afraid we might bungle the whole thing if we proceed too hurriedly. You had better leave me temporarily, and we'll see what we can do by and by." Thus against her wishes she said goodbye, concealing her tearstained face with her hands.

I had pity for her plight but at the same time once I was on my own felt relieved of a heavy burden. Upon arrival at Taizhou, I sat for the examination. When I got home in the sixth month, my wife said to me, "Xiaowan sent her father to bring word that since her return to Suzhou, she has kept to a vegetarian diet and confined herself to her home, waiting on tiptoe for you to bring her to Nanjing as you promised. I felt awkward and gave her father ten taels of silver, asking him to tell her that I am in sympathy with her and consent to her request, but she

must wait till you finish the examination.”

I appreciated the way my wife had handled Xiaowan's request. I then directly proceeded to Nanjing without keeping my promise to send someone to fetch her, planning to write to her after I had finished the examination. However, scarcely had I come out of the examination hall on the morning of the 15th of the eighth month when she suddenly called at my lodgings at Peach Leaf Ferry. It turned out that after waiting in vain for news from me, she had hired a boat, setting out from Suzhou and proceeding along the river with an old woman as her companion. She met with robbers on the way, and her boat had to hide among reeds and rushes. With the rudder broken, the boat could not proceed, and she had had practically nothing to eat for three days. She arrived at Sanshan Gate of Nanjing on the 8th, but not wanting to disturb my thoughts during the examination, she delayed entering the city for two days.

Though delighted to see me, she looked and sounded rather sad as she vividly described what had happened during the hundred days of our separation, including her confinement at home on vegetarian fare, her encounter with robbers on the river, and her other experiences of a voyage fraught with danger. Now she was more insistent than ever on getting her wish. The men in my literary society from Kashan, Sungjiang, Fujian, and Henan all admired her farsightedness and sincerity and encouraged her with their verses and paintings.

When the examination was over, I thought I might pass it, so hoped I would soon be able to settle my affairs and gratify her desire to become my concubine. Unexpectedly, on the 17th I was informed that my father had arrived by boat.... I had not seen him for two years and was overjoyed that he had returned alive from the battlefield. Without delaying to tell Xiaowan, I immediately went to meet him.... Before long she set out by boat in pursuit of me from the lodging house at Peach Leaf Ferry. A storm at Swallow's Ledge nearly cost her her life. At Shierhui she came on board and stayed with me again for seven days.

When the results of the examination were announced, I found my name on the list of the not quite successful candidates. I then traveled day and night to get home, while she followed weeping, unwilling to part. I was, however, well aware that I could not by myself settle her affairs in Suzhou and that her creditors would, on discovering her departure, increase their demands. Moreover, my father's recent return and my disappointment in the exams had made it all the more difficult to gratify her desire at once. On arrival at Puchao on the outskirts of my native city, I had to put on a cold face and turn ironhearted to part from her, telling her to go back to Suzhou to set her creditors at ease and

thus pave the way for our future plans.

In the tenth month, while passing Jinjiang, I went to visit Mr. Zheng, the man who had been my examiner. At that time, Liu Daxing of Fujian had arrived from the capital. During a drinking party in his boat with General Chen, my friend Prefect Liu, and myself, my servant returned from seeing Xiaowan home. He reported that on arrival at Suzhou she did not change out of her autumn clothing, saying that she intended to die of cold if I did not see my way to settle her affairs promptly. On hearing this, Liu Daxing pointed to me and said, "Pijiang, you are well known as a man of honor. Could you really betray a girl like this?"

"Surely scholars are not capable of the gallant deeds of Huang Shanke and Gu Yaya," I replied.

The prefect raised his cup, and with a gesture of excitement exclaimed, "Well, if I were given a thousand taels of silver to pay my expenses, I'd start right away today!"

General Chen at once lent me several hundred taels, and Liu Daxing helped with a present of several catties of ginseng. But how could it have been anticipated that the prefect, on arrival at Suzhou, failed to carry out his mission, and that when the creditors had kicked up a row and the matter had been brought to a deadlock, he fled to Wujiang? I had no chance to make further inquiries, as I returned home shortly afterwards.

Xiaowan was left in an awkward position, with little she could do. On hearing of her trouble, Qian Qianyi of Changshu went to Bantang himself and brought her to his boat. He approached her creditors, from the gentry to the townsmen, and within three days managed to clear every single debt of hers, the bills redeemed piling up a foot in height. This done, he arranged a farewell banquet on a pleasure boat and entertained her at the foot of Tiger Hill. He then hired a boat and sent someone to see her to Rugao.

On the evening of the 15th of the eleventh month when I was drinking wine with my father in our Zhuocun Hall, I was suddenly informed that Xiao wan had arrived at the jetty. After reading Qian's long interesting letter, I learned how she had gotten here. I also learned that Qian had written to a pupil of his, Zhang of the ministry of rites, asking him to redeem her singing's girl's contract at once. Her minor problems at Suzhou were later settled by Mr. Zhou of the bureau of ceremonies while Mr. Li, formerly attached to that bureau, had also rendered her great assistance in Nanjing.

Ten months thereafter, her desire was gratified [and she became my concubine]. After the endless tangle of troubles and emotional pain, we had what we wanted.

THE SPITE OF LOTUS

Now that she was the favorite, Lotus became more and more intent on having her own way. She was never at peace. Suspicious of the others, she was constantly peeping from behind doors and spying through cracks. One day, in a bad mood over nothing, she upbraided her maid Plum. Plum was not the docile type who could accept criticism quietly, so to vent her anger she ran off to the kitchen, where she pounded her fists on the tables and pans. Snow, the fourth wife, watched all this and teased her, "You silly little thing. If you want a man so much, can't you look elsewhere? Why must you have your fits here?"

Angry already, Plum now lost her temper. "How dare anyone insult me!" she declared. When Snow saw fit to ignore her, Plum ran back to her mistress. She embellished the incident and told Lotus, "That one says you personally handed me over to the master so that we could keep him all to ourselves."

Plum's story did nothing to improve Lotus's bad mood. That morning she had risen earlier than usual to help Moon, the principal wife, get ready for a funeral. She had been so tired she took a nap, and was just going back to her own suite. On her way there she ran into Jade, the third wife.

"Why are you looking so worn out?" Jade asked.

"Don't ask me! I had to get up early," Lotus replied, then added, "Sister, where are you coming from?"

"I stopped at the kitchen."

"Did the one there tell you anything?"

"No, not that I can think of."

Lotus did not let on what was bothering her, but she was forming a hatred for Snow. She and Jade sat down and passed some time doing needlework. After finishing the tea and cakes Plum and Chrysanthemum set out, they decided to play a game of chess. But no sooner had their game become exciting than Ximen was announced and entered the room.

Ximen gazed in satisfaction at the two well decked-out ladies. Silk hair nets revealing curls at their temples, earrings of blue sapphire, white silken dresses with red bodices and embroidered skirts, tiny arched and pointed slippers—how exquisite their taste was! "Just like a couple of courtesans, worth at least a hundred taels of silver!" he teased.

"Courtesans, my word! You have one in your household, but she's in back, not here," Lotus bantered back.

Jade rose to withdraw, but Ximen caught her and drew her back into the room. "Where would you be going? As soon as I arrive you try to escape! Tell the truth—what have you two been doing in my absence?"

"Nothing wrong," Lotus answered. "We were both feeling low, so we started a game of chess." Lotus helped him put the chessmen back and commented that he had returned from the funeral rather early.

"Yes, there were a lot of officials there and it was terribly hot, so I made a quick exit."

When Jade asked about Moon, Ximen said she would be coming later in the sedan chair and that he had sent two servant boys to meet her. He sat down next to them and asked, "What were your stakes in this game?"

"Oh, we were just playing for the fun of it," Lotus answered.

"Then let me challenge you each to a game. Whoever loses forfeits a tael of silver to pay for a party."

"But we don't have any money with us." Lotus objected.

"Never mind. You can give me a hairpin as security."

First he played with Lotus and she lost. He began to reset the pieces for a game with Jade, but Lotus suddenly tipped over the board, causing the chessmen to fall in a jumble. Then she ran out of the room and into the garden.

Ximen chased her and found her picking flowers. "What a spoilsport! You run away because you lost, my lovable little oily-mouth," he called to her, panting.

Coyly, Lotus looked up at him. "What a villain, to pursue me just because I lost! You wouldn't dare do that to Jade!" She playfully pelted him with blossoms.

Ximen went up to her and took her in his arms, then stuck out his tongue to give her a piece of candy from his mouth.

Their diversions were soon interrupted by Jade who called, "Moon has just returned. We'd better go."

Lotus broke loose from Ximen and said she would talk to him more later. Then she hurried after Jade to pay her respects to Moon.

Moon asked them, "What makes you two so merry?"

"Lotus lost a tael of silver playing chess with the master, so she will have to host a party tomorrow," Jade answered. "You must come."

Moon smiled and Lotus soon took her leave. She rejoined Ximen in the front suite and had Plum light some incense and draw a hot bath so that later they could amuse themselves like a couple of fish.

Although Moon was Ximen's principal wife, her ill health usually kept her from fulfilling all the duties of the mistress of the house. Grace, the second wife, performed most of the social duties such as paying visits and receiving guests, and handled the household budget. Snow, the fourth wife, took charge of the servants and was the chief cook. Wherever Ximen was in the house, if he wanted something to eat or drink, he would send his request to Snow via one of the maids of the lady he was visiting.

That night Ximen stayed with Lotus. They drank some wine, took a bath, and went to bed. The next morning things started to happen. It began when

Ximen cajoled Lotus by promising that right after breakfast he would go to the temple market to buy her some pearls. But when he told Plum to fetch him breakfast (ordering lotus-seed cakes and carp soup), the girl would not budge.

Lotus intervened, "There's a person in the kitchen who says I induced Plum to yield to you so that she and I could keep you for ourselves. She called us all sorts of names. So don't make Plum go there."

"Who are you referring to?"

"I don't want to name names. Even the pots and pans have ears around here. Just send Chrysanthemum instead."

Ximen did as he was told. More than enough time passed to have cooked two breakfasts and Lotus had the table all set, but Chrysanthemum still did not return. Ximen was near to losing his patience, so Lotus sent Plum after all, telling her, "Go see where that slave is dallying. She must've taken root someplace!"

Reluctantly Plum complied and found Chrysanthemum standing in the kitchen. "You depraved slave," she scolded. "Mistress will cut you to pieces! What's keeping you? Master is out of patience! He wants to go to the market and I must bring you back with me at once."

She would have continued, but Snow interrupted "Silly wench, you behave like some Mohammedan on a feast day! Isn't the pot made of iron? Will the soup get hot just by sitting in it? I have some gruel ready, but instead he wants cakes and soup. What kind of a worm is at work in his stomach?"

This was more than Plum could take. "Impudence! Do you think I came here for the fun of it? Are you going to get the stuff ready or not? Just wait! Master will be furious when I tell him about this!" Dragging Chrysanthemum by the ear, she turned to go.

As they left, Snow shouted, "That slave and her mistress are both too cocksure!

But my time will come!”

“Maybe it will! What do I care?” Plum retorted.

Still in a huff, Plum produced Chrysanthemum before her mistress, who noticed how pale her face was. “What’s the matter?” Lotus asked.

“Ask her! I found her standing in the kitchen. That person was taking forever to prepare a little breakfast! All I said was that the master was in a rush and you wanted to know what was keeping her. That kitchen woman called me a slave wench and other ugly things. She even reviled the master calling him some extravagant Mohammedan! Does she think he needs her permission before asking for something? She complained that he wouldn’t eat her gruel! She seems to think the purpose of a kitchen is not cooking but cursing!”

“What did I tell you!” Lotus exclaimed. “We shouldn’t have sent Plum. I knew that that one would pick a quarrel and insinuate that Plum and I had made you into our exclusive property! Oh, why do I have to endure such insults!”

Her outburst produced immediate effect: Ximen dashed into the kitchen and began kicking Snow. “You evil bag of bones! What gives you the right to curse the girl I sent to fetch some breakfast? You call her a slave? If you want to see a slave, look at the reflection in your own puddle!”

Snow knew better than to talk back to Ximen, but as soon as he left she turned to Lai Bao’s wife. “What evil luck I’m having! You are my witness. You saw her prance in here like some demon! Did I say the least thing to her? But off she goes with that little maid and tells lies to the master so that he abuses me for no fault of mine! Just wait! I’ll be on the lookout! Sooner or later that impudent slave wench and her mistress will make a false move!”

Unknown to Snow, Ximen had paused to listen outside the door. Convulsed with rage, he barged back in and pummeled her. “You depraved slave, you slut! Tell me now you didn’t insult her! I heard you with my own two ears!” He kept hitting her until she could not take the pain any longer, then stormed off, leaving her shrieking.

Hearing the commotion, Moon, who had just risen and was having her hair dressed, sent her maid Jewel to investigate. Jewel came back and related the whole story. “He’s never wanted cakes before,” Moon remarked. “But Snow should have done his bidding as quickly as possible, and certainly she shouldn’t have scolded the maid over nothing.”

She sent Jewel back to the kitchen to tell Snow to finish the breakfast. So, in the end, Ximen got his meal and was off to the market with one of the servant boys.

Snow could not get over how she had been mistreated. As soon as Ximen was out of the house she went to Moon's room to give her version of the incident. Little did she know Lotus had followed her and was eavesdropping outside the window to everything she told Moon and Grace. "You have no idea what this woman is capable of!" Snow ranted. "She is absolutely man-crazy and can't stand to spend even a single night alone! Even a dozen husbands wouldn't be enough for her! She got rid of her first husband by poisoning him! Just imagine what she's planning for us! She's turned our husband into some kind of beady-eyed chicken who never notices the rest of us!"

"Now, now," Moon tried to calm her, "weren't you at fault? He did send the maid for the cakes, and if you had sent her right back with them, none of this would have happened. There wasn't any call for you to provoke her."

"I was the one who got provoked! That maid was impertinent even when she used to work for you, but you never objected when I corrected her, even the time I hit her with the back of a knife. What makes her so privileged now that she works for Lotus?"

"The fifth mistress is outside," Jewel warned as she came in.

The next moment Lotus entered. Looking straight into Snow's face, she stated, "If you know for a fact that I had poisoned my first husband, then why didn't you stop the master from bringing me here? That way you wouldn't have had to worry about me getting him all for myself. As for Plum, she doesn't belong to me. If you object to the current arrangements, let her wait on Moon again. Then I wouldn't care if you picked quarrels with her. But don't worry—there's a simple solution to everything. When the master comes back I'll ask him to write out a letter of divorce!"

"I really don't understand why you two have to squabble," Moon interjected. "If only you both talked a little less ..."

"But Lady," Snow objected, "her mouth pours forth words like a river! No one is a match for her! If she lost her tongue she could still make the master believe anything by merely rolling her eyes! If she had her way, all of us, except perhaps you, would be driven out of here!"

For a while Moon let them hurl insults back and forth at each other. Then when Snow said, "You call me a slave, but you're the real slave," and seemed on the point of striking Lotus, Moon ordered Jewel to remove Snow from the room.

Back in her own suite, Lotus took off her clothes, removed her makeup, and mussed up her dark hair. In this disheveled condition, she threw herself on her bed and sobbed.

When Ximen returned that evening with four ounces of pearls, he found Lotus in this state, demanding a divorce. “I never cared anything about your money,” she protested through her tears. “It was just that I loved you. But what do I get in return but insults? Now I’m called a husband murderer! It would be better if I didn’t have a maid, since anyone who works for me has to put up with such treatment!”

Lotus’s tale turned Ximen into a demon. He whirled through the house until he set down on Snow. Grabbing her hair in one hand, he thrashed her with his short stick, not stopping until Moon came to restrain him.

“Let’s everyone behave,” Moon said, then addressing Snow, added, “Don’t upset the master.”

“You culprit! You evil bag of bones!” Ximen railed at Snow. “I heard what you called them in the kitchen! Just let me catch you one more time!”

All this Snow suffered because of Lotus’s spiteful scheming. There’s a verse to prove it:

Lotus depended on her husband’s favor
To make Snow suffer deep humiliation.
Using gratitude to accumulate hatred—
The consequences will take centuries to unfold.

Ximen returned to Lotus’s room and took from his sleeve the pearls he had bought her. Lotus was no longer petulant; Ximen had taken her side and fought her battles for her. She repaid his affection tenfold and his delight in her only increased.

Translated by Patricia Ebrey

* The “mother” here may well be the woman who managed her, rather than her natural mother.