Introduction

This book traces changing gender relations in China between the tenth and the fourteenth centuries by examining how writings about courtesans, concubines, and exemplary women developed and changed over that period. This particular framework, as is so often the case in historical research, came into being through a series of nagging questions, false starts, and serendipitous discoveries. The project began as an inquiry into women’s literacy in the Song dynasty (960–1270); but when preliminary research demonstrated the importance of courtesans in the production of poetry in the period, my interests began to shift. In general understandings of Chinese history, courtesans are most commonly associated with the late Tang dynasty (618–907), when they first became a notable phenomenon in urban settings, and the late Ming dynasty (1368–1644), when their relationships with eminent men helped spur a celebration of romantic “emotion” (qing 情). The Song dynasty, by contrast, tends to be best known as the era that developed Neo-Confucianism, the conservative moral philosophy that advocated strict personal moral cultivation and warned against the dangers of human desire. I was startled, therefore, when I began to investigate the presence of courtesans in Song social life, to discover how prevalent they were. I was curious about their social roles and began to wonder how the ubiquitous presence of such women could be reconciled with—or whether it was somehow related to—the development of Neo-Confucian morality.

These questions became more complicated—and more interesting—when I realized that some of the entertainers described in my sources, although sometimes called courtesans (ji 妓), were actually more like what we think of as concubines: rather than living in brothels, they belonged to the household of their master and entertained for him and
his guests. Patricia Ebrey, in her early work on Song concubines, had mentioned such women, but she did not attempt to explore how they differed, on the one hand, from courtesans in the marketplace, or, on the other, from concubines who were not entertainers. Meanwhile, an important study of laws on concubinage from the Tang to the Ming had emphasized the impact of Neo-Confucian thinking on concubines’ place in the family, and argued that during this period concubines had become “domesticated,” that is, they had come to be treated increasingly like family members, especially in ritual and law. Again, the juxtaposition intrigued me: what was the role of entertainer-concubines in Song households, and to what extent were they associated with changing Neo-Confucian ideas about what a proper concubine should be?

Finally, probably the most obvious and widely acknowledged change in gender relations between the Tang and the Ming dynasties was the development of the “cult of widow fidelity.” The ideal of women being loyal to their husbands, and not remarrying after their husbands’ deaths, had been articulated in classical times in China, but prior to and even during the Song most women had not been expected to adhere to that ideal. Moreover, even when they did so, they were admired but not particularly celebrated. By Ming times, however, women in the thousands were publically extolled for remaining faithful—sometimes even to the point of committing suicide—after their husbands’ deaths. Shrines and other monuments were built in their honor, and volumes devoted to the recording of their biographies. Since at least the early twentieth century, historical scholarship had attributed the origins of the fidelity cult to the influence of Neo-Confucianism, but the precise mechanisms of that influence remained unexplored. Recent studies by Bettine Birge

3. This is sometimes called the “chaste widow cult” or “chastity cult.” On early twentieth-century views of the cult, see Mann, “Widows,” 37–40.
4. There is an extensive literature on the fidelity cult in later imperial China. Important studies in English include Elvin, “Female Virtue and the State”; T’ien, Male Anxiety and Female Chastity; and Carlitz, “Desire, Danger, and the Body” and “Shrines.” Paul Ropp provides an excellent critical survey of the majority of English language literature on the subject in “Passionate Women.”
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and Zheng Guiying demonstrated that new laws promulgated by the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) encouraged widow fidelity by making remarriage more difficult economically. Birge in particular argued that those laws, which restricted widows’ right to take property into a new marriage, grew out of a confluence of Neo-Confucian ideology and Mongol property regimes.6 But neither Birge nor Zheng addressed the development of the fidelity cult per se. What specific factors, I wondered, had led to the widespread and public honoring of faithful women, and to what extent was Neo-Confucianism implicated in that development?

In addressing these questions, this book has benefited from the considerable knowledge that scholars of Chinese gender relations have produced over the last few decades.7 In English, Patricia Ebrey’s numerous studies have drawn a general picture of women’s lives and kinship ideology under the Song, and my numerous debts to her pioneering work will be obvious.8 Likewise, although my findings challenge some of her conclusions, Bettine Birge’s research on women’s property rights in the Song and Yuan has raised important questions and drawn attention to the centrality of women and their property in household strategizing.9 Paul Smith’s studies of Han elite families under the Yuan have profoundly influenced my own understanding of Yuan society.10 More broadly, scholarship on gender in both earlier and later periods of Chinese history has also helped to illuminate many aspects of male-female relations in these “middle period” centuries.11 All of this work has provided an important foundation for the explorations I have undertaken here.

The period examined in this book encompasses nearly five centuries: this longue durée allows me to trace subtle changes in gender ideology that would be invisible in a shorter time frame. These centuries saw the

7. In Chinese, in addition to the scholarship cited in the chapters below, I have learned much from works by Deng Xiaonan, Liu Ching-cheng, Jen-der Lee, and Angela Chi Ke Leung.
8. See the various works by Ebrey cited in the bibliography.
10. See especially Smith, “Family” and “Fear of Gynarchy.”
11. The bibliography on gender relations in Early Imperial, Late Imperial, and twentieth-century China is now (thankfully) too extensive to cite exhaustively. Important studies for this book are cited individually in the chapters below.
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rise and fall of several dynasties and a major reconfiguration of Chinese political and social systems. Although the general contours of these changes are well established, they form the backdrop to this study and so are worth reviewing here.

The period known to historians of China as the “Tang-Song transition” began with political decline and growth in population and the economy during the late eighth and ninth centuries. Over the next few centuries, Chinese society was marked by a southward shift of population, rapid improvement in agricultural output, growing commercialization and urbanization, and the emergence of markets. These developments were associated with political decentralization that lasted from the mid-eighth to the late tenth centuries, and were accompanied as well by the precipitous demise of a quasi-aristocratic ruling class that had dominated Chinese political life for centuries. In the late tenth century, the early Song emperors expanded the merit-based examination system, turning it into the main route to political success. By relying on the examinations for the majority of official recruitment, the Song government substantially undermined hereditary access to office-holding, while also making it possible for descendants of newly wealthy families to enter the bureaucracy. In combination with continued economic expansion and the spread of printing technology and education, this contributed to the dramatic growth of a literate elite class. Over the course of the Song, the expansion of this class outstripped the ability of the government to employ it, with the result that the elite—and the definition of elite status—became increasingly independent of the government. No longer defined by office-holding, the so-called local elite of the Southern Song and later dynasties derived wealth and power from landholding (often supplemented with wealth from trade or other commercial enterprises) and dominance in local affairs, while reaffirming its membership in an empire-wide elite group through participation in classical learning and the examination system.

The development of the local elite was also marked by changes in kinship relations. For centuries, Chinese families had practiced partible inheritance, with property in theory divided equally among all sons. As family status came to depend on the continuing accomplishments of its members, and society in general became more competitive, partible inheritance meant that downward mobility became a serious threat to
elite families. Those families responded by creating new kinship institutions designed to keep patrilineal kin groups together in the interests of prosperity for all. Annual ceremonies at ancestral graves were held to enhance kin-group solidarity. A few families established charitable estates (yi zhuang 义庄), corporate property-holding entities the income from which (at least theoretically) benefited all members of the group. Those members were identified in newly-compiled genealogies that encompassed all male descendants from a specified apical ancestor (often one who had made the family prosperous in the early Song). These developments also had implications for women, who were exhorted to devote themselves to the support and perpetuation of their husbands’ family lines.

All of these changes also coincided with the articulation and development of Neo-Confucian philosophy. That philosophy, usually credited to the Northern Song brothers Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107) and Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032–85), reasserted classical Confucian ideals but gave them a new cosmological grounding. The classical gender ideology that the Cheng brothers and their followers taught frequently (though, as we shall see, not always) supported contemporary family practices associated with an increasingly patrilineal orientation of society.

By the turn of the eleventh century, the Song dynasty had unified most of China into a centralized polity, but the Song was never able to take complete control of northern territories that had been under Chinese rule in the Tang. Instead, the Song lived under constant threat from hostile northern neighbors, and was ultimately demolished by them in two stages: in 1126, the capital and roughly the northern half of erstwhile Song territory was conquered by the Jin dynasty, leaving a reconstituted Song regime in charge of a much-diminished empire in southern China. A century and a half later, in 1279, the Southern Song was annihilated by the Mongols, who ruled China for a little less than a century before their own dynasty, the Yuan, was brought down by internal rebellion in 1368.

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13. Historians thus refer to the period from 960–1126 as the Northern Song, and the period from 1127–1279 as the Southern Song.
14. The Mongols had conquered the Jin and taken control of erstwhile Song territory
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Long before these conquests, the Song government had been weakened by virulent factional politics. Factional infighting began as early as the 1040s, but intensified greatly in the period between 1068 and the end of the Northern Song, when the policies of the reformer Wang Anshi (1021–86) polarized the bureaucracy. Factional infighting continued through the next several decades as the throne supported first one group, then another, until the capital was overrun in 1126. Once the new emperor Gaozong (r. 1127–62) had been declared in the south, new factions crystallized around the issue of foreign policy, with one side determined to retake the north at all costs, and the other, more pragmatic, willing to make peace with the Jin. Over the succeeding century, the pacifists generally prevailed, but the government continued to be riven by factional conflict until the Mongol conquest.

In general, the Mongol Yuan dynasty has been less well studied than others, and there is still much we do not (and, given the poor state of the sources, may never) know about politics and life under the Yuan regime. We do know that the Mongols brought with them radically foreign ideas about society and government, which they attempted, not always successfully, to impose on their Chinese subjects. In particular, they abolished the examination system, preferring to rely on recommendation to staff their bureaucracy. They were largely dubious of Confucian scholarship and were especially hostile to Han Chinese in the south, who had resisted their rule so resolutely. Even after the court was persuaded to resume examinations in 1313, standards were more difficult for southern Chinese. As a result, the majority of southern Chinese elites found themselves disenfranchised under the Yuan, which furthered the process of elite separation from government. More generally, misrule and lawlessness rendered the Yuan a time of social instability and frequent violence, forcing the elite to adopt new strategies of survival.

in the north in 1234, but the dynasty was not declared until 1271. The Mongols’ conquest of the Song was effectively complete by 1276, when they took the Southern Song capital, but a rump resistance held out until 1279.

15. Von Glahn, “Imagining Pre-Modern China,” 36. The studies in the volume in which this essay appears represent some of the best recent work in English on the Yuan and surrounding dynasties.

All of these factors conditioned the developments I trace in this book, and also how those developments can be traced. Any historical inquiry is shaped by the available sources, and the changes between Northern Song, Southern Song, and Yuan significantly affected the nature of the sources that survive from those periods. Generally speaking, the sources for the Song are much more numerous and varied than those for earlier periods in Chinese history, as the development of printing in the late Tang helped ensure that many more texts survived from subsequent periods. But, as I have described elsewhere, the surviving record of the Song shifts systematically between the first and second halves of the dynasty, with more information on the capital and its denizens available for the earlier period, and more information about local elites in the countryside from the latter. The inquiry here necessarily reflects those biases. Similarly, both Southern Song sources and surviving Chinese sources from the Yuan are dominated by works of southerners, so we cannot be sure how well the picture they provide applies to northern China.

In addition to these historical shifts in the sources, any study of gender relations in the Song and Yuan is also constrained by the fact that the surviving record is virtually all from the hands of men: with very few exceptions, almost no writings by women from the Song and Yuan are extant. Our understanding is also hampered by the formality and formalic nature of a significant part of the historical record. Longstanding generic conventions restricted both what could be said and how it could be said, and this left many important aspects of life—including much of the interaction between men and women—unrecorded. Finally, the highly conservative nature of the Chinese written language itself also conspires to disguise historical change: the persistence of specific words over centuries has hidden the extent to which the meanings of those words changed over time. Indeed, one central argument of this book is that common understandings of the critical terms *ji* (妓, courtesan), *qie*

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18. One important silence in available sources relates to footbinding: we know from archaeological evidence and a few textual references that the practice of footbinding was spreading during the period under study here. This practice was certainly implicated in gender relations, but the sources are too sparse to allow me to address the topic in any meaningful way.
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(qi, concubine), and jie fu (節婦, principled or faithful wife or widow) were transformed over the course of the Song and Yuan.

In order to elucidate the sometimes subtle processes of transformation, this book is structured by time period and topic: I examine the categories of courtesan, concubine, and exemplary woman through each of the Northern Song, Southern Song, and Yuan dynasties. This frankly schematic organization highlights political disruptions that, perhaps surprisingly, often had a significant impact on gender norms. At the same time, it allows us to consider each time period from multiple perspectives, juxtaposing the image of the period that we get from writings on courtesans and concubines with the very different images that appear in writings on exemplary women. This juxtaposition in turn helps reveal coincidences and correlations that would be obscured or rendered invisible by a single point of view.

Accordingly, chapters 1 through 3 explore how the growth of commerce and the broadening of the elite contributed to the commercialization of women’s bodies for entertainment and reproduction. The development of entertainment culture in the Northern Song created new concerns about familial roles and social stability. These concerns erupted in late Northern Song political debates that focused heightened attention on the roles of concubines in families, as well as on the faithfulness of upper-class widows. Entertainment culture played into the latter development as well, as popular genres of writing about courtesans and their romantic fidelity to their lovers began to be deployed to describe other types of faithful women.

Chapters 4 through 6 demonstrate that the popularity of both courtesans and concubines spread throughout society in the Southern Song. The proliferation of female entertainers caused disruption to families and government alike, precipitating a conspicuous cultural reaction. Moralists railed against the pernicious influence of courtesans on local government offices, while both funerary inscription writers and judges in law cases increasingly emphasized the familial rights of concubines as mothers of literati descendants. Over the same period, faced with the trauma of the Northern Song conquest and continued political instability, literati authors began to commemorate the loyal martyrdom of upper-class women as a means to encourage political loyalty in men. By
the end of the Southern Song, concerns for family stability and concerns for dynastic survival came together in funerary inscriptions insisting that, like those martyrs, upper-class widows who did not remarry should also be seen as exemplars and models for male loyalty.

Chapters 7 through 9 reveal that, under the Yuan, the talents and humanity of courtesans came increasingly to be appreciated by literati men, while the entertainment functions of concubines were even further downplayed. As the idealized role of concubines became ever closer to that of wives, an explosion of text production celebrated the fidelity of upper-class widows, depicting them now not only as models for the behavior of others, but as central to the expression and survival of Confucian culture.

When I began researching the three categories of courtesan, concubine, and exemplary woman, I did not know how or even whether their stories would intersect; but the chapters below reveal that transformations in the roles of courtesans, concubines, and exemplary women were intimately related not only to each other, but to the social and political upheaval that marked Chinese society from the tenth to the fourteenth centuries. In particular, although this is not a book about Neo-Confucianism, its findings force us to reassess the putative role of Neo-Confucian thought in determining the trajectory of gender relations in China, and, more generally, its leading role in the social developments of the Song and Yuan. More broadly, the investigations in this book help us see both how the Song and Yuan periods set the foundation for the gender order of Late Imperial China, and also what distinguished the Song and Yuan from the Ming and Qing (1644–1911).

Inevitably, given the nature of the sources, this book is more about men’s writing about women than it is about the experiences of women themselves. But looking at what men wrote about women allows us to glimpse aspects of social life that are invisible in other sources. It reveals that men were thinking about women, interacting with women, and reacting to them more often than we sometimes assume. It shows that men’s relationships with other men were often conditioned by the presence of women. And it shows that men’s concerns about women’s place in family and society helped shape their understandings of their own social and gender roles, and vice versa: as men’s social roles shifted, so
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did their concerns about women. By exploring the different ways that Song and Yuan men understood various categories of women in society, and by tracing the ways those understandings changed over time, we gain important new perspectives on a transformative period in Chinese history.