

A “National Disgrace”?

Concubines on International Stage in Late Qing and Early Republican China

Xia Shi

Assistant Professor of History

New College of Florida

xshi@ncf.edu

Abstract

Among a variety of women gradually becoming active in the public arena of late Qing and early Republican China, scholars have given little attention to concubines. Consequently, beyond their legal status and reformers’ efforts to abolish the custom of concubinage, we know little about their public activities and the issues and social reactions surrounding these activities. Piecing together a variety of primary sources, including newspaper reports, foreign travelers’ accounts, memoirs and diaries of contemporary observers, this paper investigates how under the influence of the Western custom of wives accompanying their official husbands for formal functions, contemporary Chinese officials were obliged to bring their wives out of domestic seclusion to appear with them in public, particularly in occasions when foreigners were present. However, many wives did not feel comfortable to do so. Consequently, a unique opportunity opened up for their concubines to actively play wife’s roles on social and diplomatic occasions domestic and abroad, which brought an unusual degree of visibility and respectability to a traditionally lower class category of women—a phenomenon rarely seen in previous eras. This paper demonstrates that the public appearances of these concubines caused social controversies and heightened gender politics. Although these women took unprecedented steps in a changing public world and historical period, they had to endure social criticisms, contempt and discrimination. As concubine became an increasingly stigmatized social category, these women also became embodied subjects of the burdens of China’s past.

Keywords: Concubine, wife, public, visibility, Republican China

As interactions with the West intensified following the Qing empire's defeats and forced opening for trade, in the gender realm, the Chinese custom of concubinage, together with the practice of footbinding, became targets of attack by both Westerners and progressive Chinese intellectuals, growing to epitomize all that was wrong with traditional China. Scholars have examined reformist movements' and governments' legal attempts to stamp out concubinage and particularly noted the persistence and surprising resilience of this social practice up to the Communist takeover in 1949. This was partly due to, as these scholars have pointed out, the loopholes within the new Guomindang (GMD) civil code (1929-30), in addition to the law's uneven regional implementation.¹ Qing law and society considered concubinage a semi-legitimate marriage and a concubine a minor wife, whereas the GMD civil code, for the purpose of promoting principles of monogamy and gender equality, refused to acknowledge concubinage as a marriage of any kind but chose to define a concubine as a household member, and thus implicitly tolerated her existence and protected for her certain rights. However, despite the legal changes, Republican society (1912-49) generally continued to view a concubine as a minor wife, as Lisa Tran has pointed out.² In reality, many women continued to become concubines as well, though we lack statistics on the exact number of this category of women.

There were also some notable changes of concubines' domestic and social status. According to historian Cheng Yu, the changing customary terms that people used to address concubines partly show that concubines' domestic status was gradually coming to match that of wives by early Republican period. In particular, she points out that in *Dream of the Red Chamber* (紅樓夢), one of China's four great classical novels composed in the middle of the eighteenth century, concubines were still called 'yi niang' (姨娘, aunt mother, 'yi' originally means mother's sisters), which was already a flattering term. However, they would never be

addressed as ‘*taitai*’ (太太, Mrs.) or ‘*ru furen*’, (如夫人, like a wife), for these two terms were exclusively saved for the main wives. By late Qing, in the satiric novel *Exposure of the Official World* (官場現形記), concubines were generally being referred as ‘*yi taitai*’ (姨太太, aunt Mrs.). By the early Republican era, the previous term ‘*yi niang*’ was already being used exclusively for servants. ‘*Yi taitai*’ as a general term to refer to concubines had not only become very popular, but also developed a negative connotation of social contempt, since concubinage in this era was often regarded as one of the regressive symbols of Chinese tradition. Behind concubines’ backs, servants and other people in society often used this term to curse these women. In front of these women, *taitai* was widely used to refer to both concubines and main wives, merely adding a number before the term to indicate the order that they were brought into the household. This suggests that domestically, they were viewed as belonging to the same category of spouse, rather than as in the past when concubines were mostly regarded as a lower level servant. In news media and on formal occasions, out of politeness, the term ‘*ru furen*’ was often used instead to refer to concubines.³

Additionally, Cheng points out that the social backgrounds of the concubines were changing too. More concubines were from poor families rather than from the traditional debased or mean people (賤民) category, which was more common in earlier historical periods.⁴ Some concubines had even received modern education, whereas the main wives tended to be Confucian-educated or completely illiterate, ironically reversing the previous literacy distinctions between a concubine and a main wife.⁵ Lü Simian (呂思勉), a history professor from southern China, while teaching at the northeastern city Shenyang in 1920, noticed the prevalence of the social custom of concubinage. In particular, he was amazed that even many female graduates of women’s normal colleges became concubines and local people

were not surprised by it.⁶ As we will see in this paper, during this period, a concubine's modern education was an important asset that could contribute to her husband's favouring her over his old-fashioned illiterate principal wife to be the candidate to accompany him to appear in public functions.

Since the late Qing, as women's domestic seclusion was increasingly regarded as an outdated practice that was retarding China's modernization, social and cultural constraints relaxed and many women gradually stepped out into the public world. Much scholarship has traced the emergence of the ideal of 'New Women' and the activities of its real life avatars, such as female revolutionaries, doctors, students, teachers, and other types of professional women.⁷ However, little attention has been given to the concubines who began to show up in the public arena as well during this period. Did their public activities carry similar symbolisms to that of the 'new woman'? Were they equally welcomed in this new public world?

This essay focuses on one particular type of concubines' public activities to examine the unprecedented tensions and sensitivities surrounding these women's public presence in a changing era. It shows that since the late Qing, under the influence of the Western custom of wives accompanying their official husbands for formal functions, contemporary Chinese officials were obliged to bring their wives out of domestic seclusion to appear with them in public. However, their wives often did not feel it appropriate to do so, or found the abrupt transition from a domestic to a public role difficult to adjust to. Consequently, a unique opportunity opened up for their concubines, who were often former courtesans, to frequently play the roles of "public wives" on social and diplomatic occasions domestic and abroad, which brought an unusual degree of visibility and respectability to a traditionally lower class category of women.

This never happened before in Chinese history, not only because women from respectable families previously were not supposed to be active in public, but also because a concubine's public skills and literacy mattered far less than her beauty and ability to produce sons. Gail Hershatter succinctly summarized the logic behind choosing a main wife versus concubines: 'Principal wives were usually acquired for a man by his family on the basis of matched backgrounds and with the aim of enhancing family assets and status, and a courtesan could not contribute much on any of these counts. Concubines, by contrast, were usually picked by the men themselves with an eye to sex, romantic attraction, and good conversation, as well as the production of male heirs.'⁸ Even during the late Ming dynasty (1368-1644), a time when talented courtesans attracted scholar officials' special attention due to the cult of *qing* (情, passion, love) and became symbols of loyalism, once they married into elite households and became concubines, they faded into the domestic world and were never needed to play such a public role.⁹

Although the number of women involved was small, the degree of publicity and visibility that these concubines received during the early Republican period deserves our particular attention. By investigating how they were being perceived, treated, and discussed when they were in public eyes, we can gain a deeper understanding of the important social and cultural issues at stake surrounding their public appearances. To be sure, this paper does not intend to argue how prevalent this phenomenon was in Chinese society. First, only a minority of the wealthy and the powerful had the resources and platforms to take their concubines to public functions, particularly those with foreigners' presence, which determined that this had to be a trend among a very small proportion of the population. Second, even within this small group, the severely limited sources on this topic make it very difficult to estimate and generalize. Almost no

concubines wrote about themselves, and in many cases, we do not even know the full names of the concubines (some concubines also had very different names before and after marriages), which creates further obstacles for us to trace their lives and activities. Their powerful men also rarely mentioned these women in the records left by them, since for high officials family matters were often viewed as too trivial and inappropriate, compared to national political affairs, to be worthy to record and publish. As for newspaper reports, if they did mention concubines accompanying their official husbands in public, many of them did it by passing without going into details on what these women did specifically.

Considering these limits, this paper instead pieces together primary sources from different angles, including foreign travellers' accounts, memoirs of contemporary observers, and occasional newspaper reports, and selects several relatively well-documented cases of concubines' public activities to shed some light on this phenomenon. Specifically, it examines how the foreign expectation that men should include their wives in public meetings created a new role for concubines, and the misunderstandings that grew from these interactions. It analyses how factors like a concubine' youth, adaptability, former courtesan background, and modern education could make her more comfortable with public life and interaction and thus better suited to company her spouse on the diplomatic social circuit than a hitherto secluded main wife.

In addition to the apparent respectability and privilege accompanying the new public role of the concubine, this paper further discusses the social discrimination, contempt, stigma, and mistreatments these women suffered and endured. It argues that these were not merely due to their low-class courtesan backgrounds and weak inheritance rights protections provided by a modernizing legal system, but also because of the nationalist preoccupation of how the public appearance of concubines may have affected international perceptions of China as backward. In

addition, this mistreatment also had to do with the fact that concubines were gradually becoming the competitors and additional moral risks of those progressive new (good) women who were determined to legitimise Chinese women's public roles on the same new stages. In sum, this study shows that when concubines were on the public stage, their appearances were full of contradictions: they simultaneously represented modernity and backwardness of China; they were viewed at once respectable and despicable. The conflicting images of the public concubine in the early Republican period reveal a China caught in between a social reality inherited from legacies of the Chinese past and new ideals of gender and nation inspired by Western definitions of modernity.

Late Qing Pioneers

The first well-known case of a Chinese official bringing his concubine with him abroad is Guo Songtao (郭嵩燾; 1818-91), Qing ambassador to Britain, who brought his concubine surnamed Liang (梁) with him when he assumed his post in London in 1877. During their two-year stay, concubine Liang assumed the official role of 'Madame Guo'. After learning the prominent role that upper class women played in social interactions and official functions in the West, Guo and Liang followed the Western custom, attending many tea parties (茶會) together and even hosting a major reception in June 1878 in the name of Liang at the Chinese embassy with over 800 guests in attendance.¹⁰ Although London media later did learn that Liang was only a concubine rather than Guo's main wife and possibly thought it inappropriate and even scandalous, mostly their reports focused on Liang as a living representation of an oriental lady, with bound feet and slave girls, and commented that the reception Liang hosted 'had been the first occasion on which

a Chinese lady had appeared in general society, where gentlemen as well as ladies were present'.¹¹ Eventually, Queen Victoria herself gave the Guo couple a special audience at Osborne, shortly before the ambassador's return to China in January 1879, which finally set the seal of respectability on concubine Liang.¹²(Figure 1 here) Domestically, Guo was heavily criticized by conservative factions of the Qing court and later recalled as a punishment, partially for breaking the Chinese propriety by not keeping men and women apart, rather than on the fact that he took his concubine instead of his principal wife abroad and thus lost face for China internationally, a nationalist concern later emerged in the early Republican period, as we will discuss soon.¹³

The heavy criticisms and official punishment Guo received for his daring actions and open-minded attitude on gender issues alarmed later diplomatic officials of the Qing, who seem to be extremely careful in not repeating Guo's 'mistakes.' The case of Hong Jun (洪鈞, 1840-93) and his concubine Sai Jinhua (賽金花, 1874-1936) testify to this. Sai met Hong, then a metropolitan degree (進士) holder, when she was working as a courtesan in Suzhou, Southern China. Soon, she married him, changed her name to Hong Mengluan (洪夢鸞), and moved with him to Beijing in 1887. Before long, she accompanied him on a diplomatic mission to Russia, Germany, Austria and Holland and spent three years in Europe, visiting St. Petersburg, the Hague, Vienna, Paris, London, and Berlin, where she met King William II, Empress, and Chancellor Bismarck. The place she lived longest was Berlin, from 1887 to 1891.¹⁴ It seems that Hong learned from the lessons of Guo and took extra precautions to not allow his concubine to play the role of a public wife and hostess and mingle with men. Hong's journal during this period only mentioned Sai's activities a couple of times, including once entertaining female guests upstairs (thus gender separated) at the Chinese embassy during a New Year's party held by

Hong; celebrating Hong's promotion with several diplomats' wives by drinks; and going to have tea at a German official wife's house. It seems that she never attended any formal public occasions as the wife of a Chinese envoy, as Guo's concubine did. In January 26, 1888, German Palace had a ball and all the wives of foreign diplomats attended, except the Chinese embassy that had no females present. In July of the same year, German prince invited all foreign diplomats' wives and daughters to watch operas and later attend his wedding, but Hong did not take Sai with him to attend either of the two occasions.¹⁵ In May 1889, Sai gave birth to a daughter in Berlin and two years later, they returned to China after Hong's term ended.

In Hong's case, although we do not have sources directly explain why he took Sai instead of his principal wife to abroad, we can speculate from some descriptions in a late Qing best-selling novel *Niehai hua* (孽海花, Flower in a Sea of Retribution), which fictionalizes the travels of Hong (as Jin Wenqing, 金雯青) and Sai (as Fu Caiyun, 傅彩雲). Although it was first published in 1905, about two decades after their actual journey, the story was set in the 1880s. The novel gives us some fictional examples of the principle in operation of a wife calling on a concubine to accompany a husband on a trip abroad, which, according to some scholars, at the time, was a more common practice than a wife herself taking on the duty.¹⁶

One scene was particularly illustrative. On the eve of Jin Wenqing's journey abroad, Caiyun steps out of the wedding sedan in the official garb of the principal wife. All the friends and relatives standing up in the hall immediately noticed this disorder, a blatantly and publicly trespassing of the social marker of hierarchy, and started whispering. Sensing the doubts, Jin's principal wife, Madame Jin, stepped forward,

“Dear friends and senior relatives, you may find today’s ceremony and the costume of the bride surprising. Please allow me explain. It stands to reason that I should accompany Wenqing when he goes abroad. However, because of my physical indisposition, I will be unable to travel. The new bride of today will take over my responsibilities. Since the wife of an ambassador becomes the visible representation [*guan-zhan*] of the whole country, no attention to detail should be spared. Therefore, I am willing to lend her my power and my official costumes. When they return from abroad, of course, she will then return them to me.” When her clear voice died down, everybody murmured praise.¹⁷

Clearly, the public excuse here the principal wife used was ‘physical disposition’. However privately, in the previous chapter, while Madame Jin was talking to her husband behind closed doors, she stated her resolve not to go abroad as a result of her principles based on ‘cultural difference’: ‘I have heard that, following foreign customs, an ambassador’s wife is also expected to receive guests, attend parties, even shake hands and kiss foreigners. Having been brought up properly in a distinguished household, not in a thousand years would I ever get used to this sort of business.’¹⁸

Madame Jin’s refusal to accompanying her husband abroad was based on her cultural upbringing. As a proper woman from ‘a distinguished household,’ she had been taught to adhere to the Confucian doctrine of gender-based separation of spheres: men in charge of the public sphere and women, domestic. She clearly viewed traveling abroad and interacting with foreigners in public an outright transgression of this gender norm. In contrast, Caiyun, the courtesan/concubine, was the appropriate candidate for the role of an ambassador’s wife on

display, because she had already violated the demarcation between the domestic and the public by her previous position as a public woman.

‘The Number One Concubine of Republican China’

Compared to the late Qing, during the early Republican period, we see that concubines more frequently accompanied their official husbands to offices, public functions, and on official trips domestic and abroad. This is partly because as Western influences intensified in China, women’s domestic seclusion gradually lost its legitimacy as markers of virtue and respectability and more and more women began to actively engage with the public arena newly opened to them. As Paul Bailey has pointed out, the decades immediately before and after the 1911 Revolution were marked by the ‘growing public visibility of women’ as students, workers, consumers, and activists, becoming ‘one of the most striking social and cultural changes of the period’.¹⁹ Meanwhile, as Chinese officials started interacting with foreigners more often, more of them often found themselves need a ‘social woman’ to play the role of a ‘public wife’ on many occasions, sometimes even within China, as the Republic accelerated its speed of modernization and became increasingly Westernized. This is not to mention the fact that as the Beiyang government in Beijing was dominated by different warlords at different times; the frequent changing hands of leadership brought a number of officials’ wives and concubines opportunities to appear for official functions.

Despite women’s seclusion was no longer a celebrated virtue for elite women and rules against women going out were increasingly becoming relaxed, some old-fashioned main wives still found the transition from *nei* to *wai* difficult to adjust and therefore willingly let the

concubine accompany their husbands in public functions. As Elizabeth Croll has noted: ‘Some [main wives] had spent all but the last few years of their lives in the seclusion of their homes. Now, because of their husbands’ occupations, they were expected to accompany them and meet and talk with foreigners, make speeches and play independent public roles of their own. They had found this abrupt transition from a domestic to a public role very hard and were sometimes not even sure that they approved of the new trends which their own activities represented.’²⁰ Meanwhile, many concubines were young and adaptable. Those who were previously courtesans also had some social and entertainment skills. Others had a certain amount of modern education. All of these made them more suitable for public functions and as a result, it is not difficult to understand why they gradually became valued and relied upon by their husbands.

The case of Li Yuanhong (黎元洪; 1864-1928), whose official career culminated twice as President of China, and the arrangement between his main wife and his concubine best illustrate this. By all accounts, Li’s main wife, Wu Jingjun (吳敬君; 1870-1930), was a typical old-fashioned secluded woman. Bound-footed, Wu was a devout Buddhist and not fond of public activities. When Grace Seton, an American traveller and writer, met her in Beijing in 1922, Seton described the ‘First Lady of the Land’, as ‘middle-aged, conventional, of the old order, who receives hardly anybody’.²¹ A ‘Mistress of Ceremonies’, served as ‘the link between Madame Li and the foreign diplomatic world of Peking’ and assisted her in arranging the limited public activities that she had to attend. She usually lived at their home in Tianjin and Seton was able to see her because she happened to be in Beijing to take care of her grandson who had a fever. Seton observed during their meeting that Madame Li was ‘much more reserved and showed less comfort in welcoming a foreign woman’. Regarding her as a ‘representative of the old order’, Seton heard from one of the ladies of the Diplomatic Corps ‘five years ago when her

husband first became President and Madame Li was dragged from the seclusion so beloved of Chinese women, she was terrified at the ordeal of having to meet half a dozen foreign women and to have to shake hands with them'.²² The wife of Wellington Koo (顧維鈞; 1888-1985), an important diplomat in the Beiyang government, also recalled Madame Li's obvious awkwardness on diplomatic occasions in her memoir.²³

Clearly, Li's main wife tried to fulfil her duty as the First Lady of China in the modern Western way, but did not enjoy doing it at all. Most of the time, she preferred to stay at their home in Tianjin rather than accompany her husband by living together with him in Beijing, the capital. Newspaper reports, though brief, suggest that during most of Li's political career, it was his concubine, Li Benwei (黎本危), who accompanied him as 'Madame Li' for public occasions and travelling. She was even later referred to as the 'number one concubine of Republican China' (民國第一如夫人).²⁴ In contrast with the main wife, Li Benwei proved to be very good at socializing and entertaining. This probably had a lot to do with her background as a former courtesan. In 1905, Li Yuanhong, then a lower-level commander under the eminent statesman Zhang Zhidong (張之洞), went to a brothel in Hankou, Hubei Province, to entertain a high-ranking official who came to inspect the New Army that Li was assisting Zhang to train. By midnight, it was said that Li was very drunk and slept at the room of a courtesan named Wei Hongbao (危紅寶). After that night's encounter, Li soon married Wei as his concubine and gave her a new name--Li Benwei.²⁵ By then, he was about forty-two years old, and she, under twenty. Young, adaptable, pretty, and literate, Benwei soon became Li's indispensable assistant and accompanied him to public occasions whenever needed, whereas his main wife mostly focused on domestic matters including raising their four children. (Figure 2 here)

After they moved to Beijing , Li Benwei became a socialite in the societies of Beijing and Tianjin areas. It was said that the upper class circles there all knew that ‘Lady Li Benwei’ had been studying English and French with teachers lately and that she soon was able to have direct conversations with foreigners.²⁶ After Yuan Shikai died in 1916, Li Yuanhong became the President of China twice, respectively during 1916-17 and 1922-23. During this period, Li Benwei was in charge of entertaining the female guests at most parties and balls. It was said that because she had become very familiar with Western customs, she could often make her guests feel at home. Among the first five Presidents of Beiyang Period, Li Yuanhong had the best relationship with the foreign diplomatic world of Beijing.²⁷ His concubine surely played her part in facilitating this friendly relationship. During this period, Li also took Benwei to Japan for an official trip and apparently introduced her to some Japanese in informal meetings as his wife. According to Cheng Yu, this came as a surprise to those Japanese who knew the truth, for although Japanese officials had concubines too, they generally kept these women in secret, away from the limelight, or at least would never present them as wives.²⁸

It should also be pointed out that there were exceptional situations when a main wife had to be chosen over a concubine to be seen publicly together with their official husband. This seems to be particularly true when a concubine’s presence in front of foreigners on formal occasions could arouse sensitive Chinese nationalist sentiments, which I will further discuss in the case of Zhou Ziqi’s concubine. Ironically, this was because concubine could bear symbols not only of modernity but also of China’s ‘backwardness’. This ‘backwardness’ particularly became an issue when a public woman was needed to represent China and Chinese women in a positive way on an international stage. Li Yuanhong’s eldest daughter in her later years claimed that at very important occasions like formal receptions for foreign guests, it was invariably her

mother, the main wife, who travelled to Beijing from Tianjin to play the public role of ‘Madame Li’, rather than Li Benwei.²⁹ If this was true, it suggests that when serving as President of China, Li was sensitive to how foreign dignitaries, if accidentally came to know that Li Benwei was merely his concubine, might perceive him and China.

A ‘National Disgrace’?

During the Republican period, we also notice that a woman’s status as a concubine or main wife had greater significance in public than in the late Qing, particularly when she was on an international stage. Early twentieth century witnessed concubinage, along with the Confucian cultural universe within which it was situated, coming under fire. Although women who had to become concubines could still gain public sympathy for her unfortunate fate, concubine as a social category—*qie* (妾)—had gained a strong social stigma. It was viewed as a tainting influence on almost anything it touches, to the point that, according to historian Wang Xiang, even concubines themselves avoided calling themselves ‘*qie*’ and instead used terms such as ‘*yitaitai*’ and ‘*ru furen*’ to identify themselves.³⁰ Tran has pointed out that the image of concubine was often ‘a hapless victim’ or ‘a conniving vixen’ in popular perceptions.³¹ However, beyond this polarized stereotype, scholars have not paid much attention to the stigmatization of concubine in early twentieth century China.

This stigmatization, on the one hand, was due to the traditionally low-class origin of this category of women, since many concubines were former prostitutes or courtesans. These women tended to be viewed as having low moral worth or lack ‘*ren’ge*’ (人格, personhood), to use a newly created term of the era.³² On the other hand, this resulted from waves of vehement attacks

that progressive intellectuals launched upon the custom of concubinage since the late Qing. The New Cultural Movement further deepened its comprehensive assaults on Chinese traditions and by the 1920s, criticisms on concubinage reached its height. In these critiques, the ‘evilness’ (罪惡) of concubinage was consistently raised to levels far beyond women themselves and principles of gender equality. For example, an editorial on *Dongfang zazhi* (東方雜誌, The Eastern Miscellany) in 1911 called concubinage ‘a major stain’ (一大污點) of Eastern Civilization (東洋文明) after comparing the ‘lineage centred’ (家族制) ‘Eastern Societies’ with ‘individualistic and independent’ (個人獨立) ‘Western Societies’.³³ Another critic in a 1924 issue of *Rensheng zazhi* (人生雜誌, Life) called concubinage a ‘prominent mark’ (顯著標誌) of ‘barbarian nations’ (野蠻民族) in the twentieth century.³⁴ A third critic published an article titled ‘concubine is an obstacle obstructing human evolution’ in a specially compiled issue of a journal *fei qie hao* (廢妾號, A call for abolition of concubinage), apparently the first of its kind, in 1922. The author called concubine ‘social parasites’ and argued that their existence were poisonous for the evolution of nation and society.³⁵ In these discourses, the social category of concubine was often mixed together with the custom of concubinage, becoming glaring symbols of the degenerate Chinese nation/civilization. These comments reveal not only the stigmatization of concubine but also progressive intellectuals’ deep sense of shame about this Chinese custom.

In this context, it is not difficult to understand why during this period, when a concubine’s public presence bore national symbolism, she could arouse strong public protests. The case of Zhou Ziqi’s concubine demonstrates this. Zhou Ziqi (周自齊; 1869-1923) probably was the first Beiyang official who frequently took his concubine for various official functions domestic and abroad. Zhou himself was a Columbia University graduate who later held many

important positions during the Beiyang government, including Minister of Finance, acting Premier, and acting Minister of Education. His concubine was a famous drum performer he purchased from Tianjin named Wang Xishun (王喜順, after marriage, her name was changed to Zhou Shunqin, 周順勤). Some even say that Zhou started the trend of having women appear in various ministries in China. He also took this concubine to Japan for official business, just like what Li Yuanhong and another Beiyang official, Liang Shiyi (梁士詒), who briefly served as Premier of China from 1921 to 1922, had done.³⁶

In November 1921, Zhou took Wang Xishun to the Washington Naval conference in the U.S, which apparently caused some public outcry. Local overseas Chinese felt greatly shamed by the presence of her, a concubine, in the Chinese diplomatic delegation. They called her a ‘national disgrace’ (國辱) and strongly protested against her.³⁷ A contemporary Chinese newspaper also reported that during the three-month duration of the conference, even the aforementioned wife of Wellington Koo, whose husband was an important member of the Chinese delegation, looked down upon Zhou’s concubine and consequently forced her to move out of the place that the Chinese delegation leased for the conference stay, despite her being pregnant. Later she gave birth to a son in the U.S., which greatly pleased Zhou since he still had no sons (only two daughters by his first wife), when he was already over fifty years old.³⁸

(Figure 3 here)

To understand why the brief presence of a Chinese concubine in a foreign country could arouse such strong social protests among overseas Chinese, we also need to understand the significance of the Washington Conference and the Chinese public sentiment surrounded it. It was a particular patriotic and anxious moment for many Chinese, domestic and abroad. In addition to establishing a naval balance of power, another major purpose of the conference was

to straighten out other international entanglements in the Far East. The Chinese delegation's major task was to recover China's sovereignty in Shandong Province. During the Paris Peace Conference and its subsequent Treaty of Versailles in 1919, Shandong was transferred from the hands of the defeated Germany to Japan, which aroused strong public protests against both foreign imperialist powers and the weak performance of the Chinese government. These protests directly induced the well-known May Fourth Movement in China. Therefore, the Washington Conference was deemed with high expectation by the Chinese as an opportunity to reach a just settlement through diplomacy.

Overseas Chinese in the U.S. strongly felt this sentiment as well. According to the wife of Wellington Koo, during the conference, when negotiations between Japanese and Chinese delegates became deadlocked, a group of threatening angry Chinese students even broke into the drawing room of their residence, loudly berating Wellington, then Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Beiyang Government, for the Chinese delegation's supposedly weak-kneed policy toward Japan. Only after Wellington composedly explained their challenges and made clear the firm stand being taken by the Chinese delegation, these students felt reassured and eventually left peacefully.³⁹ Considering this context, it is not difficult to imagine that Wang Xishun's status as the stigmatized concubine and her former background as a low-class entertainer could make these Chinese feel her presence at such an important and formal international conference inappropriate and even humiliating for the Chinese nation, particularly when a strong and positive image of China was desperately needed to facilitate diplomatic success.

The memoir of the wife of Wellington Koo also informs us that wives of diplomats during this conference needed to attend endless rounds of parties and entertainment, including a dinner hosted by then American President Warren Harding and his wife to honour the chief

delegates and their wives at the White House. This suggests that Zhou Ziqi's concubine probably needed to attend these events as the 'wife' of a Chinese diplomat and high official as well. It is unlikely that she remain secluded at the place they stayed and did not appear in these public functions. Mme. Koo must have seen her on these social occasions too often to contain her disgust towards Wang Xishun, which eventually made Wang feel so uncomfortable as to decide to move out to avoid her.

Mme. Koo, whose maiden name is Oei Hui-Lan (黄蕙兰; 1889-1992), was one of the few modern-educated wives of Chinese officials who actively accompanied their husbands on various public and diplomatic functions and served as hostess during the Beiyang period. Growing up in an extremely wealthy Chinese merchant family in Indonesia, she was home schooled and able to speak six different languages. Her modern and cosmopolitan upbringing and social skills proved to be highly beneficial for both Koo's diplomatic career and fostering positive international perceptions of China and its women. Her two memoirs written in 1945 and 1975 left detailed accounts of how busy she had been on numerous social and public occasions as a Chinese diplomat and official's wife. It was clear that she was very comfortable with and adroit at playing the role of a modern public wife on the international stage. In addition, Mme. Koo, whose own mother, as a main wife, suffered a life-long unhappy marriage due to her husband's many concubines, was particularly observant and sensitive to the many concubines she encountered in the social and diplomatic circles in the 1920s:

According to those in the inner circles of Chinese diplomacy, anyone visiting a Chinese embassy or legation for the first time would meet a diplomat's wife who was roughly the same age as her husband. The next time around, the wife would

be 20 or 30 years younger. I was living in an age when Chinese women were struggling to be freed from a long-term yoke of oppression such as Western women have never had to endure....Now, in diplomatic circles, I was watching the concubines, who had seen how foreign women were treated, rebelling against their substatus. Because divorce still was not recognized in China unless it was blessed by the ranking elders of both families, the liberation of the concubines involved sleight-of-hand tactics. The genuine wife was sent away, usually back to her family, while the concubine, formerly the number two wife, stayed on and took the wife's place and authority. It was as simple as that and, so far as the legitimate wives were concerned, as humiliating.⁴⁰

Her account suggests that it was quite common for Chinese diplomats to bring their concubines to live with them at a Chinese embassy or legation abroad. Secondly, the concubines who had public experiences were gradually learning Western gender norms and practices. Rather than endure their low domestic status as previous generations did, some of them demanded better and more equal treatment. The practical and tactical solution often was to set up separate households at different locations rather than divorce. Consequently, the concubine was able to 'take the wife's place and authority' particularly when the wife was absent. This confirms with Cheng's observation on the growing trend of separate living arrangements for wives and concubines during this period, mostly in urban areas.⁴¹

Mme. Koo's resistance to the presence of concubines in official parties probably was not only due to a personal unpleasant family history of concubines, but also because Chinese women like her had to protect their own reputations *while also* forging new public social roles for (good)

women. For progressive women seeking to break the traditional nei/wai barriers that required good women to stay in the domestic realm, the simultaneous presence of concubines, who were often former sing-song girls and courtesans, particularly in front of Western audiences in new social spaces, was a moral danger that jeopardized their whole project—legitimising Chinese women’s public roles. Courtesans already had a public life in China; now ‘good women’ wanted some of that space too. When the aforementioned Grace Seton met Mme. Koo in Beijing in 1922, Mme. Koo told Seton that she had been ‘nearly everywhere,’ and at present was ‘only assisting Minister Koo in social diplomatic duties, hoping to introduce the Chinese feminine sphere to the Western world.’⁴² ‘The Chinese feminine sphere’ Mme. Koo was consciously trying to promote and represent required the removal of concubines from that same social space, so as to minimize the huge social risks her daring appearance as a ‘proper’ wife in public was already facing. Therefore, her concern was not just snobbery or old-fashioned loathing of low-class concubines, but also about building a progressive new *public* social space for *good women*. (Figure 4)

After coming back from the Washington Conference, Wang Xishun continued her role as a public wife and hostess. In December 1922, in her Beijing home, she invited Grace Seton over for tea, in response to a letter of hospitality given to Seton by Zhou Ziqi. Thanks to Seton’s later published account of her China trip, we get a closer glimpse of this woman since few Chinese sources about her left. After entering ‘a very large drawing room charmingly furnished in the French manner’, Seton describes her hostess:

Young, in the twenties, very pretty with a satisfying taste in dress, exquisite jewels and a winning smile, I found Mrs. Chow Tzu-chi [Zhou Ziqi] altogether

charming. Educated in a fashionable girls' school in Tientsin [Tianjin], her native city, Li Yu [probably another name of her] developed a real interest in music, studying Chinese music at home and European music later, in Washington, where in 1921 she accompanied her husband on a diplomatic mission. In fact, music and charity are the two things which occupy most of her time. She is director of a school for poor children and a member of the Woman's Charitable Society. Mrs. Chow [Zhou] is an example of one phase of the varied social life in Peking. She likes movies and theatres, riding, skating and walking, although her big limousine seemed to be in no way neglected.⁴³

The 'diplomatic mission' in Washington that Seton here referred to was none other than the Washington Naval conference mentioned earlier. This account also further reveals that despite coming from the low-class profession of an entertainer, Wang Xishun was educated at a modern girls' school and therefore literate. All of these contradict to the prevalent 'backward' and 'passive' concubine image of the era. (Figure 5 here)

Seton also assumed that her hostess, this 'social woman', whose English name was 'Shirley T. C. Chow', was the wife of Zhou Ziqi. Actually, after his first wife surnamed Wang died in 1916, Zhou remarried to a woman named Tang Kangyu (唐康玉) in 1918, but this woman was barely mentioned anywhere, whereas Wang Xishun became the woman often accompanied and associated with Zhou.⁴⁴ Croll notices this common misunderstanding among Westerners in her study of European women writers in late Qing and Republican China: 'Even when it looked as if some rapport might have been established, there were instances of culturally-derived misunderstandings which could beguile the unsuspecting foreigner. For

example, European wives often thought quite incorrectly that they had been privileged to meet the wives of their husbands' business or official acquaintances even though it was not usual for the women to accompany them to tea-house or restaurant meetings.'⁴⁵ She further gives the example of one American woman writer who thought she was meeting the wife of one of her husband's business acquaintances only to find afterwards that 'a flower girl had been hired especially for the occasion.'⁴⁶ This further suggests that besides using concubines to play the role of a public wife, hiring outsiders was another practical alternative adopted by Chinese couples to meet this particular demand of social interactions with foreigners. Moreover, it seems that in addition to officials, businessmen who often dealt with foreigners was another social group that occasionally needed the presence of a public wife for social functions, though no sources I know offer further information regarding how this trend operated in the business world.

Seton clearly did not speak Chinese; therefore, it was up to the Chinese who were present at the tea party to decide if they wanted to reveal information of women's identities as wife or concubine to her. Also at this occasion, Seton met 'an interesting group of women', including a 'Mrs. Tsai Lun [Zai Lun], a wife of the fifth brother of the Imperial Prince Ch'ing, who was Councillor-in-Chief under the Empress Dowager Tzu His [Ci Xi].' Actually, Seton was mistaken again. 'Diana T'sai Lun' was only a concubine of Zai Lun (載掄). She also shared similar entertainment background with Wang Xishun, since she originally was a Peking opera singer.⁴⁷ Clearly, here Seton was kept in the dark about the true identities of the women she met at the tea party.

Nevertheless, Seton eventually became aware of the concubine issue that was being heatedly discussed in the 1920s China and were informed at some other occasions some of the women she met were concubines. She was puzzled considerably over 'a vexing question': On the

one hand, she found that ‘Some of the sweetest, most attractive women I met were secondary wives.’⁴⁸ On the other hand, she also learned that there was an organized effort to ‘give a social black eye to concubinage’. Consequently, she even suspected, ‘These women must not be classed as concubines, as the western mind understands the term.’⁴⁹

Seton’s account also reveals the awkward and complicated aspects of concubines’ presence at least within the upper-class women social circles she encountered. Seton learned that the Tianjin Chinese Woman’s Patriotic Association, whose members included ‘several hundred educated ladies and wives of the most intellectual families in the city’, had announced that no concubines were eligible to join the club. This had ‘caused much discussion in Chinese society and has involved unpleasant consequences, as many of the concubines are personal friends, even relatives, of the members’. However, this Association was prepared to ‘stand by its decision and forgo the support of thousands and thousands of concubines who as a rule are wealthy and generous’.⁵⁰

The prevalence of social contempt and discriminations against concubines during the Republican period is noteworthy. Many progressive women’s organizations of the era, such as the YWCA, banned their participation. Women volunteers of the YWCA (often main wives) were willing to work for concubines but not with them, for they feared that being seen publicly together with them would tarnish their reputation as ‘good women,’ a similar concern shared by the wife of Wellington Koo in front of an international audience.⁵¹

Conclusion

By the Nationalist period (1928-49), not only China had become a more unified country than under the decentralized warlords' rules, a new generation of women educated in modern public schools also grew up and became the principal (and in many cases, the only) wife of Chinese officials. Therefore, they had far less difficulty in playing the role of public wives by themselves. This is not to mention that major Nationalist officials were not allowed to have concubines (at least legally), since the newly issued GMD Civil Code promulgated the principle of monogamy. Even though some officials continued to have concubines in private, they dared not to take these women to major public functions as previously Beiyang officials did. The most notable example of a public wife during this period was Song Meiling (宋美齡; 1897-2003), best known as Madame Chiang Kai-shek. Coming from a powerful, wealthy, and respectable family, she was educated in the U.S. and spoke fluent English. Due to her family's Christian belief, Chiang had to cut ties with all his previous three women to formally marry her as his only wife in 1927. After marriage, she was seen publicly with Chiang on many public occasions, serving as his English interpreter, assistant, hostess, and companion. On 18 February 1943, as the First Lady of Republican China, she became the first Chinese national and the second woman to address both houses of the U.S. Congress. Later in that year, she accompanied Chiang to attend the Cairo Conference to discuss the progress of the war against Japan and the future of Asia. Although she did not have any children with her husband, nobody questioned if she could still be counted as a member of the Chiang family after his death in 1975. Her prominent public role often overshadowed the women who previously played similar roles during the late Qing and the Beiyang Period. However, those pioneer Chinese public women deserved to be recognized too, particularly considering the concubine status of many, for the unprecedented steps they took in a changing public world and historical period, the social criticisms, contempt and discrimination,

and other types of sufferings some of them had to endure living as embodied subjects of the burdens of China's past.

Can we infer that the status of the concubine rose during this period based on the aforementioned cases? Yes and no. On the one hand, the fact that these concubines were given opportunities to act on public stages and often respectfully treated 'just like a wife' seems to indicate that something unprecedented were happening. Domestically, some of them were also able to carve out a space of their own due to possessing some of the much-needed qualifications, including but not limited to modern education, social skills, youthful adaptability, presentable appearances, and so on, to play the important role of a modern public wife. Their separate living arrangements also made them less subjected to the hierarchical rules and whims of the main wives. On the other hand, their public appearances sometimes brought upon themselves social discrimination and contempt, being even viewed as a 'national disgrace.' Once their husbands died, most of them quickly lost their public platforms, power, and support. Due to the lack of effective legal protection of their rights of inheritance, sonless concubines were sometimes driven out of their husbands' homes by main wives and/or their children and had to remarry or make a living on their own.

Therefore, considering the various factors involved and the fact that so many aspects of their lives and Chinese society and culture in general then were in a state of flux and disorder, it is very difficult to give a simple straightforward evaluation to the complicated issue about the status of the concubine during this era. This is not to mention that individual concubine's life situations could vary greatly from one another depending on her specific circumstances. Nevertheless, what is clear from this study is that we have rarely seen this degree of public visibility in Chinese history, both before and after, both on the national and international level, in

print media and new forms of social gatherings, conferred to concubines, a traditionally lower-class category of women. Consequently, under bright spotlight, their presences, full of tensions and contradictions, often carried much larger symbolic meanings and caused more heated social discussions, for better or for worse.

¹ Lisa Tran, *Concubines in Court: Marriage and Monogamy in Twentieth-Century China* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015); Kathryn Berhardt, *Women and Property in China: 960-1949* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); and Margaret Kuo, *Intolerable Cruelty: Marriage, Law, and Society in Early Twentieth-Century China* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012). For a discussion of the role of women's groups in the legal campaign against concubinage, see Lisa Tran, 'Sex and Equality in Republican China: The Debate Over the Adultery Law', *Modern China: An International Quarterly of History and Social Science* 35.2 (March 2009): 191-223.

² Lisa Tran, 'The Concubine in Republican China: Social Perception and Legal Construction', *Etudes Chinoises* 28, (2009): 126.

³ Cheng Yu, *Qing zhi minguo xuqie xisu zhi bianqian* [The change of concubinage from Qing to early Republican China] (Shanghai: Shanghai shiji chuban gufen youxian gongsi, 2006), 319.

⁴ Cheng, *op.cit.*, 327. According to Matthew Sommer, in imperial China, the legal term *jian min* (賤民) included a variety of hereditary labourers, such as slaves, serfs, bondservants, and *yue hu* (樂戶, music households, including prostitutes and other people who did entertainment services). The defining factor in debased-status stigma was sexual immorality. The opposite of the debased category was *liang min* (良民, free common people) and the guiding principle for regulation of sexuality from the Tang Dynasty (618-907) until the early Qing was status performance—the assumption that one must perform the role conferred by a particular legal status—rather than according to a single standard across classes. In 1723, the Yongzheng Emperor “expunged the debased status of the key groups associated with prostitution.” This, in effect, “extended a commoner standard of morality and criminal liability to all,” rather than brought assumed emancipation or liberation of the oppressed people. See Matthew Sommer, *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 6, 211, 264-70.

⁵ Cheng, *op.cit.*, 327-28.

⁶ Zhang Genghua, *Renlei de xiangrui: Lü Simian zhuan* [Auspicious sign of humans: biography of Lü Simian] (Shanghai: Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe, 1998), 81.

⁷ To name a few scholarships on different types of 'new women', please see: Paul Bailey, *Gender and Education in China: Gender Discourses and Women's Schooling in the Early Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 2007); Wang Zheng, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment: Oral and Textual Histories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Lien Ling-ling,

‘Searching for the “New Womanhood”: Career Women in Shanghai, 1912-1945’ (PhD. Diss., University of California, Irvine, 2001); Christina Gilmartin, *Engendering the Chinese Revolution: Radical Women, Communist Politics, and Mass Movements in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); and Hu Ying, ‘Naming the First New Woman: The Case of Kang Aide.’ *Nan Nü: Men, Women, and Gender in China* 3, no. 2 (2001): 196-231.

⁸ Gail Hershatter, ‘Modernizing Sex, Sexing Modernity: Prostitution in Early-Twentieth-Century Shanghai’, in Susan Brownell and Jeffrey Wasserstrom (eds), *Chinese Femininities, Chinese Masculinities: A Reader* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 205.

⁹ About the cult of *qing*, see, for example, Kang-i Sun Chang, *The Late-Ming Poet Ch'en Tzu-Lung: Crises of Love and Loyalism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991), 9-18; Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 68-112; and Richard Wang, ‘The Cult of Qing: Romanticism in the Late Ming Period and in the Novel *Jiao Hong Ji*’, *Ming Studies*, no. 1 (1994): 12-55.

¹⁰ ‘The Chinese Legation,’ *The Times*, 20 June 1878, 9.

¹¹ *ibid.*; and Owen Hong-hin Wong, *A New Profile in Sino-Western Diplomacy* (Kowloon: Chung Hwa Book Company, 1987), 134.

¹² Guo Songtao, Liu Xihong, Zhang Deyi, and J. D. Frodsham. *The First Chinese Embassy to the West: The Journals of Kuo Sung-Tao, Liu Hsi-Hung and Chang Te-Yi* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), Introduction, xlvi.

¹³ Rudolf Wagner, ‘The *Shenbao* in Crisis: The International Environment and the Conflict Between Guo Songtao and the *Shenbao*’, *Late Imperial China* 20, no. 1 (1999): 117-24.

¹⁴ Lily Xiao Hong Lee and A.D. Stefanowska, *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Women, the Qing Period, 1644-1911* (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2015), 182-84.

¹⁵ Zhong Shuhe, ‘Sai Jinhua zai Bolin’ (Sai Jinhua in Berlin), *Luxun yanjiu yuekan*, no.11 (2002): 76-77.

¹⁶ Ellen Widmer, ‘Gentility in Transition: Travels, Novels, and the New Guixiu’, in Daria Berg and Chloë F. Starr (eds), *The Quest for Gentility in China: Negotiations Beyond Gender and Class* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 24.

¹⁷ Translation from Hu Ying, ‘Re-Configuring Nei/Wai: Writing the Woman Traveller in the Late Qing’, *Late Imperial China* 18, no. 1 (1997): 77.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ Paul Bailey, ‘“Women Behaving Badly”: Crime, Transgressive Behaviour and Gender in Early Twentieth Century China’, *Nan Nü: Men, Women, and Gender in China* 8, no.1 (2006): 194.

²⁰ Elizabeth Croll, *Wise Daughters from Foreign Lands* (London: Pandora, 1989), 110.

²¹ Grace Gallatin Seton, *Chinese Lanterns* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1924), 118.

²² *ibid.*, 129.

²³ Mme. Wellington Koo and Mary Van Rensselaer Thayer, *Hui-lan Koo: An Autobiography* (New York: Dial Press, 1943), 175-6.

²⁴ Zhang Yaojie, *Hongfen Minguo: zhengxue liangjie de nüquan chuanqi* [The fair sex in Republican China: feminist legends in political and educational circles] (Taipei Shi: Xinrui wenchuang, 2013), 39-49.

²⁵ According to Li Yuanhong’s eldest daughter, Li Benwei was purchased with 3000 *yuan* by Li. See Li Shaofen, ‘Wo de fuqin Li Yuanhong’ [My father Li Yuanhong], in Quanguo zhengxie

wenshi ziliao weiyuanhui (eds), *Minguo dazongtong Li Yuanhong* [The President of Republican China Li Yuanhong] (Beijing: Zhongguo wenshi chubanshe, 1991), 32-33.

²⁶ Zhang, *op.cit.*, 45.

²⁷ *ibid.*, 46.

²⁸ Cheng, *op.cit.*, 325.

²⁹ Li Shaofen, *op.cit.*, 33.

³⁰ Wang Xiang, 'Ru furen de fannao: zhongguo ershi shiji zaoqi youguan naqie de yiji, xushi yu xianshi' [Concubine's troubles: memory, narrative, and reality on taking concubines in early twentieth-century China] (MA Thesis: Shoudu Shifan daxue, 2012), 7.

³¹ Lisa Tran, 'The Concubine in Republican China: Social Perception and Legal Construction', *Etudes Chinoises* 28 (2009), 120.

³² About *ren'ge*, see Bryna Goodman, 'The Vocational Woman and the Elusiveness of "Personhood" in Early Republican China', in Bryna Goodman and Wendy Larson (eds), *Gender in Motion: Divisions of Labor and Cultural Change in Late Imperial and Modern China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005), 265-86.

³³ Du Yaquan, 'Lun Xuqie' [On taking concubines], *Dongfang zazhi* [The Eastern Miscellany], Vol 8, Issue 4, 1911, 5.

³⁴ Mei Lü, 'Fei qie tan' [A treatise on abolishing concubinage], *Rensheng zazhi* [Life], Issue 3, 1924, 13-16.

³⁵ Qiu Ying, 'Qie shi zunao renlei jinhua de zhangai wu' [concubine is an obstacle obstructing human evolution], *Feiqie hao* [A call for abolishing concubinage] (Hanzhou: Zhejiang Shuju, 1922), 30.

³⁶ Cheng, *op.cit.*, 325-26.

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ 'Zhou Ziqi zhi qie' [Zhou Ziqi's concubine], *Shibao tuhua zhouban* [Pictorial Weekly of Shibao], Issue 92, 1922.

³⁹ Koo and Thayer, *op.cit.*, 146.

⁴⁰ Mme. Wellington Koo and Isabella Taves, *No Feasts Last Forever* (New York: Quadrangle/New York Times Book Co, 1975), 217.

⁴¹ Cheng, *op.cit.*, 322-23.

⁴² Seton, *op.cit.*, 221.

⁴³ *ibid.*, 202-03.

⁴⁴ Bamu tairan, 'Zhou Ziqi siyin ji Wang Xishun mingfen',

http://weibo.com/p/2304187c3346700102x7iv?from=page_100505_profile&wvr=6&mod=wenzhangmod, 20 February 2017, accessed on 28 June 2017.

⁴⁵ Croll, *op.cit.*, 9-10.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

⁴⁷ 'Chinese Lanterns: Minguo nüxing renwu zaji',

http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_7940a8de0102vwbz.html, 26 November 2015, accessed on 26 June 2017.

⁴⁸ Seton, *op.cit.*, 157, n. 43.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 225.

⁵¹ Xia Shi, *op.cit.*, 112.