

CHINESE SOCIAL HISTORY – Postclassical Period

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POSTCLASSICAL SOCIETY

The Scholarly Tradition. Society in post-classical China functioned in much the same way as it had under the Han (206 BCE-220 CE). There were monarchs, aristocrats, artisans, clergy, peasants, laborers, etc. Each played their role in an organized and generally stable society. During the Tang period (618-907), another class of society emerged, the Confucian elite, sometimes also known as degree holders or Mandarins. These government officials helped society function as the population of China skyrocketed. They also created a custom known as the “scholarly tradition” in China, a concept that is well understood and highly valued in East Asia to this day. Scholars, or those with other specialized learning in China, are much more highly valued than in the western world. For hundreds of years in China, it was believed that society could neither function nor progress without learned, moral men to provide a philosophical framework for actions taken by the state. Service to the state and to the emperor was the highest calling to which a man could aspire.

Women in Post-Classical Society. Women, however, could not aspire to serve the state. The Confucian elites articulated a moral code which kept women both out of public service and even out of the public eye. If possible, it was the job of women to stay at home, take care of the household and prioritize either fathers, husbands or sons. Women’s goals and aspirations were always secondary to those of the men around her. Strict adherence to this code was complicated for peasants and laborers. Peasant women worked alongside their husbands in the fields and rice paddies.

Foot-binding. In the Song period (960-1279), if not before, there arose the custom of foot binding among those who could afford it. It is not clear why this particular activity began, but it had the effect of crippling any woman who had the misfortune of experiencing it. Late in childhood, girls’ toes were doubled under the soles of their feet, bound tightly and kept there as their feet grew. This was a very painful ordeal. Over time, it retarded the growth of bones in the feet and created very small feet that were said to resemble the beauty of a golden lotus. Women with bound feet were unable to walk very far or engage in any sort of work which required them to stand for long periods of time. It was not possible to work in the fields or rice paddies. However, this condition conveyed status and made women more desirable for marriage. Though foot binding was outlawed in the early 20th century, it existed in the rural areas for another decade or so. Today, a tiny number of very elderly women with bound feet survive in China.

Concubinage and Polygamy. Women in China also had to endure the peculiar institution of concubinage. Concubines existed in all societies in the pre-modern world. In China, it existed until outlawed in 1949. In general, girls who became concubines were from very humble origins. In this system, young women were sold by their father or older brother to a wealthy and powerful man. She would then become his sexual companion for life. The offspring of concubines were not afforded the same level of legal legitimacy that the children of first, second or third wives enjoyed and could not inherit unless no other heir existed, and most often not even then. However, they existed within a well-established legal framework and were not considered only sex slaves who could be discarded at will without cause. They were a part of the family and treated as such. Nonetheless, the young women sold into these situations rarely had a say in the decision to become a concubine. It was sometimes considered a badge of honor to have a daughter sold as a concubine to a wealthy, powerful man who could also provide financial assistance to the father’s household as well. Nonetheless, the concept of free will for women in post-classical China was at best a secondary consideration.

Unmarried Men. It is not clear how large a percentage of women were concubines in post-classical China. However, the practice was widespread. One of the enduring problems in post-classical China was the lack of suitable women available to marry working class men. Polygamy and concubinage among elite men was at the root of the problem. Poor, unmarried men who were never able to marry and

start a household of their own were destined to remain on the periphery of society and often became law breakers and trouble makers.