Living and Being Chinese

Edited by
RONALD G. KNAPP
and KAI-YIN LO

University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu
China Institute in America, New York
CONTENTS

Wen Fong  FOREWORD XI
Looking Back on Chinese Art, Architecture, and History

PREFACE XVII

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS XIX

Ronald G. Knapp 1 China's Houses, Homes, and Families 1

PART ONE  THE HOUSE

Nancy Shatzman Steinhardt 2 The House
An Introduction 13

Ronald G. Knapp 3 In Search of the Elusive Chinese House 37

Joseph C. Wang 4 House and Garden
Sanctuary for the Body and the Mind 73

Ronald G. Knapp 5 Siting and Situating a Dwelling
Fengshui, House-Building Rituals, and Amulets 99

Cary Y. Liu 6 Chinese Architectural Aesthetics
Patterns of Living and Being between Past and Present 139

Kai-Yin Lo 7 Traditional Chinese Architecture and Furniture
A Cultural Interpretation 161

Nancy Berliner 8 Sheltering the Past
The Preservation of China’s Old Dwellings 205
In late imperial China even the poorest and most humble families set apart some portion of their domestic quarters as a secluded space for the women. Men and women who were not related were not supposed to have any physical or even social contact, and within the family, male and female in-laws were supposed to keep their distance—eating at separate tables, for example. Men were expected to leave the inner quarters for work early in the morning, and except in rare circumstances respectable women were supposed neither to leave the house nor to allow anyone from outside the household to enter.

To the modern Western mind, the very existence in imperial China of seclusion—"inner quarters," or gui, "women's apartments," suggests an oppressive patriarchal order in which men confined women, the better to control and exploit them (Figure 11.1). Yet feminist historians recently have shown that within the context of late imperial society and its cultural ideals, the existence of "separate spheres" could offer some advantages and satisfactions and that it was not uncommon for life in the inner quarters to be experienced as active and gratifying. In this essay I discuss the constraints and the opportunities that the segregated lifestyle of late imperial China might have offered to different women, depending on their class, age, and their rank within the family.

Strict doctrines of gender segregation can be traced back well into pre-imperial times. As early as the fifth century B.C., Confucius had difficulty persuading one hard-line disciple that if he saw a woman drowning, it was not improper but humane to grab her by the hand to save her. Even at that early time, women were assigned to the "inside," nei, and men to the "outside," wai. These terms referred not simply to inside and outside spaces, but also to the activities and concerns appropriate to each, and the boundaries between the two were strictly policed. According to the Book of Rites, one of the five Confucian classics, "Male and female should not sit together, nor have the same stand for clothes, nor use the same towel and comb, nor let their hands touch in giving and receiving. A sister-in-law and brother-in-law do not interchange inquiries. . . . Outside affairs should not be talked of inside the threshold [of the women's apartments], nor inside affairs outside it" (translated by Ralphs 1996, 224).
It is probable that in the early dynasties such ideals of rigorous separation of male and female were largely confined to the elite. However, beginning in the Song dynasty, about a thousand years ago, neo-Confucian philosophers further elaborated the precepts regulating relations between men and women in terms that gradually became the orthodoxy at all levels of society (Bry 1987, 151–172). In a work on domestic etiquette, the statesman and scholar Sima Guang (1059–1106) set down detailed instructions for the spatial segregation of the sexes, and for communication between the inner and outer domains, as they should be practiced in an elite household. Sima Guang’s prescriptions were soon almost universally familiar, for they were incorporated into the famous neo-Confucian master Zhu Xi’s interpretation of the Family Rituals of ca. 1169. The Family Rituals gave instructions for the correct performance of ancestral worship, weddings, and funerals; it was widely quoted in works for popular circulation, and the ceremonial practices laid out by Zhu Xi were incorporated into the official legal code a century later by the Yuan emperor (Elbey 1990a, 199b).

Sima Guang writes:

In housing, there should be a strict demarcation between the inner and outer parts, with a door separating them. The two parts should share neither a wall, a washroom, nor a privy. The men are in charge of all affairs on the outside, the women manage the inside affairs. During the day, without good reason the men do not stay in their private rooms nor the women go beyond the inner door . . . . [Maid servants were supposed to enter the inner quarters only to conduct repairs or in emergencies; maids were not supposed to go outside.] The doormen and old servants serve to pass messages and objects between the inner and outer quarters of the house, but they must not be allowed to enter rooms or kitchens at will. (Translated in Elbey 1990a, 29)

Referring to this passage, the well-known moralist Yuan Cai (fl. 1140–1195) commented: “This is over half of what is needed to manage a household” (Elbey 1994, 286). Sima Guang wrote of a large compound in which the front courtyards were the “outer quarters” used to receive visitors and conduct business. The inner quarters were at the back of the compound, separated from the rest of the house by an interior gate. In many large houses the inner quarters were a separate building in a back courtyard. A Japanese book of 1799 entitled Shinzoaka kibun [Qing customs], gives detailed and lavishly illustrated first-hand accounts of merchant affairs and everyday life in the prosperous cities of the lower Yangzi, the region known as Jiangnan. It says that in the merchants’ houses of the southern cities the doors to the women’s quarters were covered with a curtain, but at night the double doors were closed and locked. In more ordinary houses, consisting of a single building, male visitors were received in the main room or on the front veranda, and the side rooms served as the inner quarters. In a poor family’s cottage, a curtain hung across the kitchen door might demarcate the inner quarters, behind which the women retreated when male visitors occupied the single living room (Shinzokan kibun, 112f.) (Figure 11.2).

Within the house social and generational rank was clearly marked by the allocation of rooms. According to geomantic principles, the cosmically most auspicious room was the one facing south at the center of the main hall, and this is where the family altar and ancestral tablets were placed. The private quarters or bedrooms of the senior couple and their eldest son (the ritual heir) and his wife would also be auspiciously located, south-facing and centrally placed. Younger married sons and their wives and children would usually occupy south-facing rooms in a different courtyard or further to the side of the hall. Chinese law allowed a man to have only one wife who was his legal and ritual partner. Concubines were much lower in status, and their rooms were located less auspiciously, in east- or west-facing wings.

Young children of both sexes lived with their mothers, but Sima Guang described the usual practice when he said that boys must move out of the inner quarters at the age of ten (Elbey 1990a, 35). Although a married man spent the night
in the room of his wife or concubine (Figure 11.3), during the day he would leave for the fields or for his office or shop; an educated man who was not a serving official would repair to his study in another part of the house (Bray 1997, 136–139). Men who married in the inner quarters were not true gentlemen and were likely to come to a bad end. Suoyo, the hero of the eighteenth-century novel The Dream of the Red Chamber (also called The Story of the Stone), is the despair of his ambitious father, for he avoids the outer sphere entirely and spends all his time with his female relatives. If it were not possible for men to go out, the inner spaces would be reclassified during the day to accommodate them. In the northern provinces the winters were bitterly cold, no outside work could be done, and everyone had to stay indoors to keep warm. The typical village house in the Beijing region consisted of three rooms: a main room containing the altar in the center, and on either side a bedroom containing a long, a hollow brick platform heated by flues that led from the stove. At night one bedroom would be occupied by the senior couple, the other by their eldest son and his wife and children. But during the winter days all the men and boys would occupy one bedroom, while the women and children would crow into the other (Küeser 1959, 6).

There were occasions when inner and outer worlds met in the same space. Perhaps the most significant of these were domestic rituals, including the ceremonies of the ancestral cult; the rituals of maturity for children, such as cupping for sons and pinning up the hair for daughters; betrothals, weddings, and funerals. The ritual unit was the married couple, and wives played an essential role in all Chinese domestic rituals. The liturgies laid down by Zu Xi and other authorities describe performances that resemble dances, where senior man and woman match movement for movement and gesture for gesture, repeated by all the married couples in the family in order of birth and generation (Figure 11.4). Where the man presents a cup of wine, the woman presents a bowl of tea; where the men ascend the right-hand staircase, the women ascend the left. A man became a full ritual member of his family by virtue of having a wife as a ritual partner. A concubine had no ritual status; even if her husband's legal wife died, she could never move up to fill the wide role because she had not been presented to the ancestors when she entered the household. Concubines therefore played no role in domestic rituals, and their inferior status was reflected in the relatively infrequent geometric location of their rooms.

Other occasions when inner and outer worlds met might include meals. But even in relatively easy-going households, like those described in the Shintzuiki kibun, no promiscuous mixing was allowed at meals. Until they were twelve or thirteen, boys and girls ate together at the same table, sitting with their immediate family group of the father, his children, his wife, and his unmarried sisters. Once they reached puberty, the boys had to sit separately. A bride might not eat at the same table as her father-in-law, nor could a wife sit with her husband's brothers. Sima
Fig. 11.5. An old couple eats together as their son and his wife pledge them. From a Wanli (1573–1620) edition of the Yuan dynasty collection by Guo Ming, Pipa ji (Tales of the Jade). Source: Zhou 1985, 302–303.

Guang’s rules of etiquette allow only the senior couple to eat together. They are served first, at a separate table (Figure 11.5), and then the men sit down at one table, the women at another, ranked in order of age. The children too sit at a separate table, with the boys on the left and the girls on the right, in order of age (ibid 1992, 27). A more common practice was for men to eat together in the outer room and for women to eat together in their own quarters (Shinazuka kibun, 155).

There were various occasions where married couples spent leisure time together. Illustrations of family scenes depict couples presenting their respects to the widowed matriarch (Figure 11.6), celebrating the festivals of the year (Figure 11.7), or simply enjoying a meal together. All respectable social activities involving people who were not family, however, were single-sex. Dorothy Ko (1994, ch. 5) documents how a busy official, living under the same roof as his wife, might lead a very separate life. Even if his social life was active, it was almost exclusively female. As an ethnographer of Guangdong in the 1930s put it, “There is no social life between men and women in the villages. The custom and ethical teaching of the Chinese are that men and women, unless they are members of the same family, should keep apart as much as possible; so even the male and female members of the same class never join together in a party, a feast, or a celebration. In making calls, extending congratulations or condolences, the men visit the men and the women visit the women” (Hayes 1985, 89). This pattern of behavior was already well established in the Ming and Qing dynasties, as we can tell from sources like novels or the etiquette sections of encyclopedias (Figure 11.8).

Observing the proper separation of the sexes was considered essential to the social and cosmic order, and not only space, but also work was strictly divided. The idea was that upper-class men studied and went into government; lower-class men were farmers, craftsmen, or merchants. Women’s work was essential and complimentary to that of men. Women were responsible for preparing food (Figure 11.9), for looking after the children and elderly, and for producing textiles and making clothes. The inner quarters might include heated rooms for raising silkworms (Figure 11.10) or sheds housing elaborate draw-loom looms (Figure 11.11) or reeling machines (Figure 11.12) in poorer families the equipment might include no more than a simple cotton loom and a spinning wheel (Figure 11.13) in a corner of the living room. The cloth that women spun and wove was not just for family needs. Until the late sixteenth century families were taxed in equivalent amounts of grain (produced by men) and cloth (produced by women), and many families would sell surplus cloth for cash. So although women conducted their work secluded within the inner quarters, what they produced tied them to the wider world as productive subjects of the Chinese state and as contributors to the family finances (Bry 1997; Gates 1996; Mann 1997).

Although women’s work was ideally all performed indoors, it was recognized

Francesca Bray

The Inner Quarters
that certain duties took a wife outside. In many regions peasant women would help out in the fields at busy seasons, even though they were hampered by their bound feet, and certain field tasks, like picking tea or cotton (Figure 11.14), routinely fell to women. If the family rice paddies were too far from the house for the farmer to come home for a quick meal at noon, he would have his wife or daughter bring a meal in a bamboo basket, together with bowl and chopsticks (Shinsen kibun, 682). Women did a lot of farm work near the house or in the courtyard—for instance, husking and grinding millet on the small rim-mills common in North China. The rooms of the house were not big enough for dressing rooms, so that had to be done outside (Figure 11.15), and washing clothes, going to market, or fetching water from the well were other necessary tasks that were likely to take women outside their walls. In principle upper-class women were expected to work productively too, sitting at their looms or supervising tasks in the kitchen. But by late imperial times, the most productive work that many well-off women did was a little embroidery (Figure 11.16). Embroidery was in fact often seen as important cultural work, both by women and by men. Men saw it as a symbol of domestic female harmony, while women were aware that the quilts and shoes they embroidered together would pass beyond the walls of the inner chambers to serve as one of the few material links between the senior women and the family daughters, who took such objects with them as part of their trousseau when they left home to get married (Bay 1997, 265–266). Shinsen kibun (p. 333) tells us that in wealthy homes the ladies did not make clothes for the family themselves, but some did handicrafts or embroidery as a hobby. For many less-well-off urban families, embroideries produced both as domestic and for Western markets became an important source of income starting in the eighteenth century (Mann 1997).
The inner quarters were a place for leisure and family life as well as working and sleeping. In the inner quarters of a merchant family, as described in Shinzei kibun, the married ladies’ rooms were on the ground floor of the building, and the upper floor contained the daughters’ bedrooms. It was reached by a staircase and the small windows covered with blinds to protect the young ladies from intruding glances. The floor was of polished boards, and the entrance was a double door. There were mats and rugs on the floor, with tables, chairs, and stools. The panels of the door stood open, but a woven blind hung inside. At the front of the top story was the tatami, or “dew platform,” a large balcony supported on pillars, with balustrades of wood or bamboo on three sides and an awning overhead to keep off the sun. With pots of orchids arrayed against the balustrade, the dew platform was a fragrant and breezy refuge from the summer heat (Figure 11.17). It served as a family sitting room, a place where women would work at their embroidery and other tasks and where the men of the family joined them to chat over breakfast and to relax over a pipe in the evenings (Shinzui kibun, 133). Family parties for viewing the moon in the eighth month were held on the dew terrace. So too was the girls’ ceremony of the Double Seventh, the night when the constellations figure the legendary lovers, the Herd Boy and the Weaving Girl, met in the sky and when offerings of fruit and cakes were made as young girls prayed to be given skills with the needle. In the homes of poor families without a dew platform the offerings had to be made at ground level, in the courtyard (Shinzui kibun, 40–43).

The Shinzei kibun illustration of the dew platform shows a glimpse of a Buddhist altar. In late imperial China, Buddhist piety was particularly associated with women and with the lower classes. Since Song times at least, women had been particularly attracted by the bodhisattva Guanyin, a merciful goddess to whom women who were pregnant or childless turned for protection and help. Although popular Buddhist doctrines held that women were intrinsically polluted and therefore barred from immediate salvation, the prospect of reincarnation and eventual admission to paradise and the possibility of improving one’s spiritual status through good works and piety made Buddhism an attractive escape for women from the shackles of the Confucian order.

In well-off households the inner quarters provided each married woman with a room of her own, where she kept her private belongings. Woodblock illustrations of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century novels and the pictures commissioned for the Shinzei kibun at the end of the eighteenth century show the inner quarters of homes as elegant retreats with every creature comfort. A lady’s bedroom would contain an elaborate alcove bed, a dressing table, tables and chairs, and a washstand with bowl and towels, most of which she would have brought with her as part of her dowry. She was well provided with toilet articles, mirrors, and sewing boxes. Musical instruments might be hung on the wall, and in a separate alcove, which could be locked, were piled her clothes chests, jewelry boxes, and household goods (Figure 11.18). The elaborate canopy bed, carved or lacquered and hung with
Fig. 11.19. Ming dynasty bed. Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Source: Used with the permission of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri (Purchase: Nelson Trust 64-64).  

Fig. 11.20. A young lady’s chamber with a spotted bamboo bed on which a book lies open; serving implements and boxes that might contain either makeup or writing implements are lying on the table by the bed. From the 18th century edition of Jia Qing (Tales of the three hairpins), collected by the Yuan author Ke Dianqiu. Source: Yu 1986, 131–133.

A poor woman’s dowry might consist at best of some pots and pans, quilts, and a few clothes. A rich woman in late imperial times would take to her new home a bed carved in precious wood, a chest of clothes for each season, jewelry, fine textiles, and cash, as well as household goods. All these were kept in the woman’s own room. In the houses described by Shin'obu kōbu the wives kept their belongings in a locked alcove, and even the maids had a key for their rooms, but the men bad nothing to lock up. Paradoxically the patriarchal order sought to control women by confining them, but in the process it created private spaces that served as sites of resistance to its control.

The relation between female virtue and seclusion was construed in two different ways in late imperial thought, with very different implications for the status of women. Either women were capable of moral choices and the pursuit of virtue, or they were innately immoral and lacking in self-control so that female “virtue” was in fact an absence of vice imposed by male control and strict spatial segregation. The first position was consonant with the view that male and female spheres had equal dignity and worth and was based on the premise that women, just like men, were naturally capable of moral and intellectual cultivation. The wife of a busy official would often be expected to run not only the household, but also the family property. The husband of Miss Li (1904–1977) was able to concentrate entirely on his responsibilities in government, “never having asked about family supplies.” Miss Li took on the management of their property as her responsibility, buying fertile fields and building a house by a stream. Once a peasant came into the courtyard carrying a sack of rice on his back, to the amazement of Miss Li’s husband, who had no idea who he was or what he carried. She just laughed and said, “That is our rent” (Ebrey 1992, 191). Wives commonly took on these managerial tasks, which brought them into contact with stewards, builders, tenants, and other men not of their family, right through the late imperial period (Ko 1994; McDermott 1990).

By the sixteenth century it was also becoming common for scholars to enact the role of mothers as educators and to advocate more and better education for women (Ko 1994). A literate woman could teach her sons the basics of reading and morality by taking them through the simpler classics. When boys reached the age of seven or eight, they would go on to a tutor or to school, but many distinguished men continued to consult their mothers as they progressed with their studies and careers (Hsuang 1994). In some circles women were considered no less capable of intellectual or literary achievement than men (Figure 11.21), and the fact that they were debarred from public affairs was thought to confer on them a heightened purity

Francesca Bray
of understanding and refinement of judgment in moral matters. Providing a formal education for daughters gradually spread from a few refined families to a more general practice of the urban well-to-do, and the perils of hiring a tutor for one’s daughters became a standard element in the plots of plays and novels.

From this perspective, then, women were worthy partners of men, and a woman’s virtue was not the product of her seclusion but stemmed from her moral character. But another view, which was probably more widespread in late imperial China, held that moral education and decorous behavior within the confines of the inner quarters offered no safeguard against the perils of the outer world. A woman found in the wrong place was given no credit for purity of intention. This was certainly the perspective embodied in the law. Qing legal records include cases where a woman of a country family was seen in the company of a man in some place such as the garden of the house; the conclusion automatically drawn was that she was involved in an illicit sexual relationship (Sommer 2001). That women were morally inferior and untrustworthy and that they must be kept locked up if the honor of the family was to be preserved was certainly the view most frequently expressed in the patriarchal genre known as “household instructions,” or jiaxun, a genre extremely popular among the petty gentry of the late imperial period (Purcell 1996).

Strict patriarchs were especially nervous of the people to whom they referred contemptuously as fu po, “the six kinds of old crones”; matchmakers, Buddhist and Daoist monks, women herbalists, fortune-tellers, and midwives. Such women regularly entered the inner quarters of strange houses for professional purposes. Except for the matchmakers, without whose help no marriage could be arranged (and whose role was sanctioned in orthodox liturgies), orthodox males viewed all of these women as a threat to the morality of their wives and daughters; they also feared that they would swindle money out of them for nefarious purposes. These women peddled wares and knowledge of which such men had no need or of which they actively disapproved: fertility drugs and abortifacients, religious comfort and promises of salvation, charms, and fortune-telling. In fact it seems probable that many of the herbal remedies and other services for which respectable women paid were much less seductive than the men liked to think. Probably one of the greatest attractions of these women’s visits for the ladies was that they brought in news from the world beyond the walls of the inner quarters.

Although it was easier for well-off families to follow the stricter rules of gendered segregation, the majority of ordinary women in late imperial China shared the commitment of ladies to demure behavior. Even in the Song dynasty poor women seem to have done their best to dress modestly and keep out of men’s view whenever possible (Ehre 1993). Poor families were just as jealous of their women’s respectability as gentry, but apart from the seasonal farm tasks mentioned above, their women routinely left the home to buy fresh food at the market, to get water from the well, or to do washing at the river. These were the places where poor women could chat to other women and exchange the gossip that Chinese men condemned so strongly—perhaps because, as Margery Wolf (1968) argues, it often operated as a powerful form of social control over people abusing their authority, whether it was a man who beat his wife or a woman who mistreated her daughter-in-law.

Some outings were permissible for women of all classes. Many women looked forward to a visit to the opera put on in villages and cities all over China to celebrate festivals or lineage commemorations. Some opera, usually those chosen by elders for lineage celebrations, told morally exalted tales of successful sons and virtuous daughters-in-law; others had plots of romantic love or featured young women who won fame as warriors or who triumphed (albeit disguised as men) in the imperial examinations (Tanaka 1985). Women of all classes also liked to visit temples and to go on pilgrimages, if their husbands would give them permission. Childless women offered incense to the Goddess of Mercy, Guanyin, or to the many other deities of the late imperial period associated with fertility. Old women, as

Francesca Bray

The Inner Quarters
death approached, wanted to pray for salvation or reincarnation in a better life. Elite men, even when they studied Buddhism and visited temples, affected to be free of vulgar religiosity and the emotionality that went with it. They regarded women's participation in such outings with deep suspicion: in operas and in novels, Buddhist and Daoist temples were depicted as promiscuous places where love affairs were likely to occur (Figure 11.12) (Leung 1983). And when women grouped together for a pilgrimage, even if no worse mischief occurred, they were sure to lose all sense of decorum and start behaving like spendthrift hoydens, casting dignity to the wind and literally kicking up their heels in unaccustomed physical freedom. A typical male view of these pious expeditions is conveyed in the scene depicted by a seven-

teenth-century novelist where "like a pack of wolves and dogs, the whole herd of women stamped on their donkeys, overtaking one another turn by turn" (Dudbridge 1991, 52).

Elite women probably had the fewest opportunities to venture beyond their own walls. Dorothy Ko (1994) discusses various forays outside the walls of the house that some women might make: scenic outings, boating and picnics, drinking and poetry parties with women relatives and friends, or long journeys accompanying a husband to official duties in a new part of the country. But only a privileged few had this degree of freedom, and their more secluded friends often envied their exposure to broad horizons and dramatic nature. The only travels most ladies experienced were proxy journeys, made by reading, looking at paintings, or sending letters to other women equally confined.

What effect did female seclusion have on women's ideas about themselves? In the case of gentry women, Dorothy Ko argues that seclusion provided freedom and dignity:

In Ming-Qing households, the innermost realm of the private sphere was the prerogative of women. The women's quarters, tucked away in inconspicuous corners of the gentry housing compound, were off limits even to adult men in the family. In facilitating the development of her self-image and identity as a woman, this cloistering had a positive effect on women's culture. Mothers and housewives, who took pride in their calling to be the guardian of familial morality, welcomed the identification of women with domesticity. Hence women did not feel the need to challenge the age-old ideology prescribing the functional separations between the sexes. (1993, 14)

Ko argues that gentry women in this period were "oblivious" to the hierarchical dimension of this doctrine of separate spheres. In my opinion, it is more likely that they were conscious of it but accepted it as a natural fact.

The evidence from the merchants who contributed accounts to Shinsuzu kihon tends to confirm Dorothy Ko's revisionist interpretation, except that they portray an agreeable intimacy between men and women. They describe a train of life in which they pass perhaps the most relaxed and agreeable hours of the day in the inner quarters. After the household head had washed and combed his hair in the mornings, we are told, he would repair to the women's quarters to drink tea and smoke a pipe, and then the whole family would sit down to breakfast together (Shinsuzu kihon, 155). The merchants describe the lives of their wives as cloistered
but do not mention moral inferiority or the perils of coquetry. Poor women’s lives they portray as necessarily less confined. Though many neo-Confucians railed against the moral perils of embroidery, the merchants speak of it as a charming and companionable occupation. Though they do say that of course girls cannot leave the house to go to school, they do not condemn educating daughters at home. The sequestered quarters of the women emerge in these descriptions as the most pleasant and relaxed part of the house, the place for family parties and cheerful evenings, cool in summer and well warmed with braziers in winter.

The monogamists, however, commonly represented women as emotional, willful, and likely to quarrel among themselves. Was this true, and if so, was it a natural outcome of seclusion? Were women the worst enemies of other women, or did they see each other as friends and allies, as Ko’s work suggests? Here I think it is essential to distinguish between women who were related by birth and those who were thrown together by marriage—as an experience of alienation to which Chinese women were never exposed. The fictional literature that depicts women as quarrelsome and selfish focuses on the tensions among women related by marriage, and they were undoubtedly considerable.

Incoming brides had no preexisting ties to their new family, and relations between insiders and outsiders were often very difficult. In gentry households a new bride was unlikely to receive physical ill treatment, but she would still find herself outside her own home for the first time, as a very junior member of the hierarchy. Many families struggled to provide their daughters with good dowries so that their new family would treat them with respect and kindness. Sometimes poor families would drown newborn girls because they knew they would not be able to afford decent dowries. Local magistrates tried to ban this practice, which they regarded with horror; sometimes they even attempted to raise money to provide small dowries for poor families (T’ien 1986, 26). Even with a dowry, in poor households a new bride was likely to be treated as an unpaid servant and set to do all the unpleasant chores. Pious mothers taught their daughters lengthy songs of despair that were part of the wedding ceremony: torn from her mother, aunts, and sisters, as she set off for her new home, the young woman felt as if she had died and was making the descent into hell (Johnson 1988).

Relationships among women brought together by marriage were fraught with structural difficulties, and this was undoubtedly exacerbated by the fact that seclusion threw these women into each other’s company with few opportunities for avoidance or escape. In many poor families the relationship between mother- and daughter-in-law, at least before the birth of a son, was that between tyrant and slave, and it was common for unmarried sisters to despise and exploit their brothers’ new wives. Another source of friction was the rivalry between a wife and her husband’s concubines and any of the maids he might choose to favor with his sexual attentions. It was not unknown for a wife to beat a concubine or maid to death; since she was mistress in her own domain of the inner quarters, her husband was often unable to intervene effectively (Ebrey 1993, 167–168). Once a woman bore a son (Figure 11.23), she became a full ritual member of her marital family; she was now the mother of a member of the patriline, a future ancestor entitled to worship by her male descendants when she died. So a new bride’s hopes lay in the future—in becoming a respected wife and mother and eventually a matriarch, mistress of her own household living in the best quarters, with daughters-in-law of her own under her control and grandchildren to dandle on her knee (Figure 11.24).

Yet there was another side to relations among women: the attachments between female relatives—far less prominent in monastic writings, jokes, or proverbs—were
pleasant and loving. Ko (1994) proposes that the inner quarters were a place where women forged strong bonds of affection and companionship—and it turns out that the women concerned were usually kinwomen, mother and daughter, sisters, cousins, or other blood relatives. In the case of the women writers from seventeenth-century Jiangnan that Ko has studied, poems between mother and daughter express not just tenderness but a bond of intellectual and aesthetic sensibilities. While she acknowledges that few women of the period were as well educated as her subjects, Ko believes it is likely that the mother-daughter bond shaped social experience, at least in the gentry families of late imperial China, just as much as the father-son bond, to which Confucian male scholars gave pride of place, or even the mother-son bond (the "uterine family") that Margaret Wolf (1972) saw as providing the strongest emotions in the lives of Taiwanese peasant women and that Hsiung Ping-chien (1994) has argued formed the emotional and moral focus of many elite men’s lives in late imperial times.

Among women of lower social status, too, evidence for a female society of solidarity is emerging. In her ethnographic study of social practices in Shandong, Ellen Judd (1986) documents a long tradition of continuous visits between a mother and her married daughters; in some cases newly married women even returned home to have their first child. The astonishing collection of letters in "women’s script" [t'ai shu] recently brought to light in southwestern Hunan reveals the intensity of affection that could develop among young women of relatively humble families who became close friends, vowing eternal friendship, staying in each other’s houses, learning embroidery patterns together, and singing the same songs until they were torn apart by marriage and could communicate only by the occasional heart-stirring letter, written in the form of a long poem (Silver 1994). The studies of girls’ houses and marriage avoidance or delayed marriage in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Guangdong also show that sharing a space created enduring bonds among women (Stockard 1989; Topley 1985).

The bonds between mother and daughter, aunt and niece, sisters, or girl cousins growing up under the same roof were bonds of tenderness and devotion made bitter-sweet by the threat of marriage. The emotional bond between sister and brother was very strong too, and brothers were often treated as the guardians of their sisters’ interests after marriage. Married women clung to such friendships as best they could. Letters were one way to cross the forbidden spaces between their husband’s house and their natal home, to invite their dear ones into their own secluded quarters and cultivate the precious friendship. A few women were accomplished literary writers, and the poems and letters they exchanged have been preserved; they were able to maintain friendships with other female writers and acquaintances, as well as with their own relatives. Ordinary women’s scope was more limited, and exchanges of gifts, especially of embroidered objects such as slippers, handkerchiefs, or fans, were often important in cementing such bonds. Very few women received formal schooling, and the "women’s script" of Hunan was an anomaly. Even so, it is possible that letters played a greater role in women’s lives than is usually supposed, permitting them to exchange news with their natal family and friends. Guides to letter writing had been in popular demand since early times, separately published or included in household encyclopedias. Such books "included many letter forms for use between relatives on both the male and female side and across three generations, between friends and between business associates... The female side is more prominent in these books than might be expected" (Hayes 1985, 80). "Basically a woman has no business writing," concludes the 1960 edition of a popular encyclopaedia—after a long section describing exactly what forms of address a woman should use when writing to her natal relatives, friends, and other correspondents (Julius Biyou, x: 87-84).

In conclusion, men and women in China had very different ties to domestic space and correspondingly different experiences of identity and personal ties. A man was born, grew up, and died within the same walls and with the same male kin around him. He never had to leave his parents or his home, he knew to which lineage and which landscape he belonged from the time he began to understand the world. His house was his home for life, and yet he could walk outside the family compound whenever he pleased. He lived in a kind of commune of shared patriarchal goods, in which his first loyalty was supposedly to the group. A girl grew up on borrowed time. When she married, she had to leave the house of her birth, her mother, and her sisters, whom she loved and depended on, to move into an unknown house and a new group of women, many of whom might regard her with hostility. She would have to be self-reliant until she built up alliances and, as a mother, became an acknowledged member of her new family. Few wives questioned the system, because as time passed, they gained power and authority. Such resistance to neo-Confucian patriarchy as there was seems to have hinged on privacy and property. A married woman was virtually a prisoner within her husband’s compound, and yet within this space she had freedoms that her husband did not. She had a room of her own where she could retreat with her children and where she kept her dowry in locked trunks under her own control.
Chinese texts are adamant that the ideals of a successful family can be expressed in phrases such as "co-residence and common property" (tongji gongyi) and "five generations under one roof" (wushi tongfang). They cite examples of families that indeed survived for five generations undivided, living under the same roof and holding in common, so to speak, the family properties. By all reports, instances of such families were extremely rare. The rarity of successful families living together within an extensive dwelling, however, does not nullify the prevalence of the ideal. Therein lies the problem for the social historian: in what sense would clusters of houses occupied by people of a common surname claiming a common ancestor constitute a "family"?

A starting point for an answer could be the succinct discussion by Shiga Shazo (1978, 109–110) on the development of Chinese family law. He dwells on living together in the same house as an objective and stresses the importance not of co-ownership of all properties, but of operating through common budgets. He argues that inheritance is predicated upon the continuation of the ancestor's person, represented in ritual terms in sacrifice to the deceased by his offspring. While Shiga's reinterpretation of the family ideal provides the insight needed for any venture into Chinese family history, the insight is helpful only if there is documentation concerning co-residence and budget sharing. It is unfortunate that we know next to nothing regarding the historical context of how space was used in Chinese houses over time or about budget sharing, especially in terms of the relationship of the very few family accounts still extant to the family structures of the account holders.

A focus on residence and budgets is obviously so fundamental to family life that it is certain that changes in house style and budget keeping have implications on families. Such changes can be documented in southern China's Pearl River Delta in Guangdong province. For example, the use of bricks for building houses was introduced into the area from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, along with the spread of Chinese writing, official practices, schools, and the literati ideal. As practices such as those spread, the local population in turn generally abandoned living in boats or bamboo sheds on stilts for houses made of bricks, sometimes on