

## Qu Dajun and His Polygynous Relationships

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Over the course of his married life, Qu Dajun produced substantial works about his spouses and children. This article is a case study of early Qing elite polygynous life and self-representation that uses Qu's writing as a primary source. It demonstrates that, while he appeared to adhere to the rule of abstaining from taking a concubine until the age of forty for the purpose of procreation, polygyny was a vital and multi-purpose device that Qu used to fulfill his needs and desires to expand his prestigious ancestral line, satisfy sensual and sexual appetite, and enhance his bodily vitality through the arts of the bedchamber. The case points to the deeply seated ideal of a harmonious family that contained multiple spouses and many children. This ideal was integral to the Confucian family ideology Qu embraced, but it also was what defined happiness for Qu. The reality, however, was likely less sanguine than what Qu presented, and his desire for family harmony was likely complicated by a range of problems that were not limited to status hierarchy and competition among the concubines. In the Qu household, though, concubines appeared to enjoy close relationships with their children, inviting us to reexamine the assumption of weak ties between concubines and their children.

**Keywords:** Family, Marriage, Gender, Polygyny, Qing, Concubinage, Arts of the bedchamber

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Over the course of his life, Qu Dajun (1630-1696), a renowned poet, scholar, and staunch Ming loyalist, took nine women as his wives or concubines. He was unabashed about his behavior, admitting that he was “fond of women.”<sup>1</sup> To his contemporaries, he was particularly known for the love of his second wife, Wang Huajiang. A prolific writer, Qu preserved a wealth of works about Huajiang, other spouses, concubines, and children, making it possible for us to have an intimate glimpse into his polygynous life.

Qu Dajun’s case is worth special attention. For one, despite his being one of the most studied seventeenth-century figures, his personal life has drawn far less interest than his literary and scholarly contributions or political endeavors. Only recently have scholars in gender and masculinity studies begun to change that by doing research to understand the relationship between his marital life and his political identity, as a Ming loyalist, as well as the gendered meaning of his works.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ou Chu 歐初 and Wang Guicheng 王貴忱, *Qu Dajun quanji* 屈大均全集 (hereafter *QDJQJ*) (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe 人民文學出版社, 1996), 1:670.

<sup>2</sup> For examples of this scholarship, see Liu Zhenggang 劉正剛, “Qu Dajun de nǚxing guan: ji yu qi jiating shenghuo kaoca 屈大均的女性觀：基於其家庭生活考察,” *Guangdong shehui kexue* 廣東社會科學, no. 6 (2013), 116-126. Liu Weizhi 劉威志, “Qu Dajun de Huajiang qingyuan yu ziwo jianguo 屈大均的華姜情緣與自我建構,” *Tsinghua Journal of Chinese Literature* 清華大學中文學報, no. 3 (December 2009). Zhang Zhichang 張智昌, “Nanfang yingxiong de licheng: Qu Dajun (1630-1696) zi wo xingxiang shidu 南方英雄的歷程：屈大均 (1630-1696) 自我形象釋讀,” (Master’s thesis, National Tsinghua University 國立清華大學碩士論文, Hsinchu, 2008). Wang Defang 汪德方, “Ming Qing yi dai zhi ji nǚ yimin xingxiang de shuxie jiangou 明清易代之際女遺民形象的書寫建構,” (Master’s thesis, National Taiwan University 國立臺灣大學碩士論文, 2015). Martin Huang, *Intimate Memory: Mourning and Gender in Late Imperial China*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018. In these studies, Qu’s relationship with his second wife Wang Huajiang receives most attention, but the relationship is primarily examined through the lens of Qu’s political endeavor and self-representation. Zhang’s well researched thesis pays close attention to Qu’s

Second, Qu's case offers a fresh perspective on polygyny in late imperial China. While the narrative condemning concubinage as an evil practice of women's oppression lingers to some extent, demonstrating the lasting impact of the May-fourth critique, scholarship on late imperial concubinage has grown substantially in scope and perspective.<sup>3</sup> One issue that has gained attention concerns the personal and relational, rather than the institutional or representational, aspects of concubinage as disclosed in personal writings.<sup>4</sup> How did individuals—wife, husband, and concubine—from the polygynous family experience concubinage?

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personal history (in chapter five of the thesis) and his emotive relationship with Huajiang. However, he faults Qu for not mentioning his spouses and children often.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Guo Songyi takes a sociological approach to focus on issues such as the background, the functions, and status of concubines. Guo, "Qingdai de na qie zhidu 清代的納妾制度," *Zhongguo jindai funushi yanjiu* 中國近代婦女史研究, no. 4 (1996). Francesca Bray focuses on the hierarchy between wife and concubine in reproduction. Bray, *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 351-368; Concubines' social status in the late imperial period is also a main subject in the studies by Kathryn Bernhardt and Yue Du. See Bernhardt, *Women and Property in China, 960-1949* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 161-178; and Du, "Concubinage and Motherhood in Qing China (1644-1911): Ritual, Law, and Custodial Rights of Property." *Journal of Family History* 42, no.2 (2017), 162-183. For historical evolution of concubinage, in particular in relation to commercialization and entertainment culture, see Beverly Bossler, *Courtesans, Concubines, and the Cult of Female Fidelity: Gender and Social Change in China, 1000-1400* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2013). For male memorial writing on deceased concubines as self-expression, see Martin Huang, *Intimate Memories*, 113-133.

<sup>4</sup> A concubine's different relationships with other female members of the family is examined in Susan Mann's *Talented Women of the Zhang Family*, 141-142, 187-189. In his recent book, Martin Huang devotes an entire chapter on how men mourned and remembered their concubines. See *Intimate Memories*, 113-133.

How did they speak about and understand it? How did they negotiate their relationships? Obviously, intimate accounts are indispensable if we are to have a nuanced appreciation about what polygyny meant for the people at that time who actually lived in the system. Qu's writings offer a glimpse into the often veiled, real-life polygynous world of the literati which allows historians to go beyond the stereotypical or generalized characterization to contextualize the experience. They are important for another reason: Qu was a prolific writer on the subject, but he was nonetheless not unique. Writing in memory of a spouse and concubine in various genres, including poetry, epitaph, biography, and sacrificial litany, grew unprecedentedly popular in the seventeenth century, and his works served as examples from the era.<sup>5</sup>

As will be shown in the pages that follow, the writings of Qu Dajun leave rich traces of a literatus' relationships with his spouses, concubines, and children along with his concerns, emotions, and self-representation. Qu took a great interest in polygyny, but this was not simply a story about male sexual indulgence and gratification, nor was it an account of neglect and abandonment or a rosy tale of husbandly and fatherly love.<sup>6</sup> The complexities of practicing polygyny were on display in his accounts that touched on an array of emotions and a particular perception of pleasure and happiness that defined the life he pursued. The Qu Dajun case also illuminates how the seventeenth-century cultural environment, for example the captivation of *qing* and conjugal love, made its mark on the ways Qu pursued and managed his polygynous relationships.

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<sup>5</sup> See Huang, *Intimate Memory*, which draws primarily on commemorative prose men wrote for their wives and concubines.

<sup>6</sup> In his "Nanfang yingxiong de licheng 南方英雄的歷程," Zhang Zhichang argues that Qu did not care much about his spouses and children, and his pursuit of political cause was responsible for the many deaths in the family. Liu Zhenghang, on the other hand, portrays Qu as a loving husband and father who practiced gender equality. See Liu, "Qu Dajun de nǚxing guan 屈大均的女性觀."

### *The Nine Women in Qu's Marriage*

Qu Dajun's first marriage happens to be related to a well-known custom of the Canton Delta studied by anthropologists.<sup>7</sup> According to the *Qu Lineage Genealogy* 屈氏族譜 and the story passed down orally in the Qu family, Qu's mother arranged his marriage to Miss Liu of Xianling 僊嶺, Guangdong upon his resuming his identity as a Confucian after spending years in a Buddhist monastery, which was a means of political resistance to the Manchu conquest. The bride was said to have found embarrassing the idea of marrying a former monk and a much older man, so she chose to follow the local custom "not entering the family" (*bu ru jia* 不入家), under which the bride returned to reside with her natal family after the wedding.<sup>8</sup> This marriage was concealed completely in the Qu family's genealogy and, except for a vague reference, Qu Dajun never mentioned it in his writing.<sup>9</sup> It appears that Miss Liu had already died by the time he married his second wife Wang Huajiang 王華姜 if we take literally the terms *jishi* 繼室 (successor wife) and *xuxian* 續絃 ("retie a broken string"—a metaphor for a widow to marry a new wife) that he used

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<sup>7</sup> The custom of *bu ru jia* (or *bu luo jia* 不落家) is described in Marjorie Topley's "Marriage Resistance in Rural Kwangtung," in *Women in Chinese Society*, ed. Margery Wolf and Roxane Witke (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), 67-88. Also see Janice E. Stockard, *Daughters of the Canton Delta: Marriage Patterns and Economic Strategies in South China, 1860-1930* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989).

<sup>8</sup> "Qushi zupu" 屈氏族譜, in *Qu Dajun quan ji* 屈大均全集 (hereafter *QDJQJ*), 8:2115; Wu Qinshi 鄔慶時, *Qu Dajun jianpu* 屈大均年譜 (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 2006), 88.

<sup>9</sup> A poem that Qu wrote included the line "the wife of Hongjing who did not come home." It alluded to Tao Hongjing, a famous Daoist from the Jin dynasty who was never married. Qu was at the time interested in being a Daoist recluse, and was called by friends a "Daoren 道人." The line, therefore, hints at his own marital situation. See Wu, *Qu Dajun nianpu*, 11; *Guangdong xinyu* 廣東新語, in *QDJQJ*, 4:321.

to describe his marriage to her.<sup>10</sup> Of course, the terms may not be taken literally and they could simply suggest that, as far as Qu was concerned, his first wife, Miss Liu, no longer existed even if she was still alive.

Wang Huajiang was introduced to him while the thirty-seven-year-old Qu was on a major sojourn in Northwest China during the 1660s, a move associated with his Ming loyalist agenda, where he socialized extensively with like-minded men. During a visit to the iconic Mount Hua in Shaanxi, Qu composed a series of one hundred poems. These poems won him such admiration from a noted literatus, Li Yindu 李因篤 (1632-1692), that he presented Qu with a marriage proposal. The young woman was Miss Wang, an orphaned daughter of a Ming general who, along with a young son, died a martyr. Raised by her widowed mother, and, later, an uncle, Miss Wang grew to be an exceptionally refined young woman. The uncle entrusted a relative, who was a military officer in Shanxi and a friend of Li Yindu, to be on the lookout for an excellent match for her. In 1666, with Li acting as a match-maker, a splendid wedding was arranged by local officials and Qu's friends. In the military residence of Miss Wang's relative, the newlyweds enjoyed a couple of years of comfortable and even extravagant life.<sup>11</sup>

Miss Wang, 15 years Qu's junior, was the love of his life. He was dazzled by her intelligence, beauty, as well as her youthful energy and athletic ability, exotic qualities that Qu would not have seen in the genteel ladies of South China. She was skilled at playing the instrument pipa, riding a horse, shooting arrows, playing on a swing, and kicking balls.<sup>12</sup> But, equally as important for Qu, he found in his bride a soul mate who understood him and shared his loyalist commitment. Her being a descendent of a martyred Ming general loomed large in Qu's fashioning of their

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<sup>10</sup>For "jishi," see *QDJQJ*, 3:114. "Xuxuan" appears in his poem "Shu hun 述昏," written at the time of his marriage to Huajiang. *QDJQJ*, 1:249.

<sup>11</sup>See, for example, *QDJQJ*, 1:23.

<sup>12</sup>*QDJQJ*, 3:116.

relationship. Seeing no hope of restoring the fallen Ming, Qu resigned himself to be a recluse. He planned to live in the northwest with his bride, and make a home near the majestic Mount Hua. He even adopted a new courtesy name, Huaifu 華夫 (man of Mount Hua), for himself, and named his bride Huajiang 華姜 (woman of Mount Hua).<sup>13</sup>

He did not carry through with that plan, however, because of his intense desire to be with and serve his mother at home in Pangu 番禺, Guangdong.<sup>14</sup> In 1668, after a strenuous yearlong cross-country trip, Qu brought his bride and their infant daughter named Yan back to Pangu. The joy of the reunion with his mother and a happy life with his beautiful wife, however, was cut short. Only five months later, Huajiang died of an illness following a miscarriage and difficult adjustment to the humid weather of the Canton Delta. The devastation set Qu on a very public show of sorrow for, and remembrance of, his beloved wife, and turned himself into one of the era's greatest wife mourners.

Mourning for a beloved wife or concubine with *daowang* 悼亡 writings had been becoming a cultural fad since the mid-Ming, as Martin Huang demonstrates.<sup>15</sup> New forms of mourning writing (for example, the genre “yiyu” 憶語, or “words of remembrance”) were invented while *daowang* poetry, the traditional genre for mourning a deceased spouse, became lengthier, as if the length was an essential gauge of the sincerity of the husband's grief. Grieving was no longer a private matter, but a public event that brought the friends and colleagues of the bereaved together with their works of sympathy and condolence. Qu Dajun, the great poet and writer, played his part in the spread of this culture.

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<sup>13</sup> *QDJQJ*, 3:115.

<sup>14</sup> Although it was his decision, Qu presented, in some of his writings, the decision as that of his wife, whom earnestly wanted to serve her mother-in-law. *QDJQJ*, 3:115.

<sup>15</sup> See Huang, *Intimate Memories*.

If the number of poems a man wrote to and for his wife before and after her death represented the depth of a husband's love, then Qu made a special effort to outperform anyone that came before him. Qu, explicitly pointed out that none of the greatest masters of *daowang* poetry—Pan Yue 潘岳, Jiang Yan 江淹, or Yuan Zhen 元稹—had written as many poems as he did for Huajiang. This included a set of one hundred *daowang* poems in the *qijue* 七絕 style and another set of thirteen poems in the *qigu* 七古 style, written after her death, as well as a total of forty-three poems he wrote for her while she was alive.<sup>16</sup> The poems, in fact, represented only a portion of his record-breaking mourning works on Huajiang. Qu wrote prolifically in prose forms for various occasions, among them “a brief record of conduct” (*xinglüe* 行略), a sacrificial litany (*jiwen* 祭文), another sacrificial litany written on the first birthday after Huajiang's death, a third litany delivered on the sacrificial ceremony offering lychee to Huajiang's spirit, and an inscription for a “garment and hairpin tomb” (*yi ji zhong* 衣笄冢) of Huajiang. The first two were standard mourning writings, but the latter three commemorated something special in their brief marriage. Huajiang was born on the “human's day” (*renri* 人日, the seventh day of the first month of the lunar calendar). In the litany, the grieving Qu contrasts the funeral-like scene with which the family commemorated her birthday with the joy of the celebration just a year previous. Lychee was a Guangdong delicacy that Huajiang, a northerner, had long wanted to savor but never got a chance to taste—she died before the fruit season arrived. Qu held a special sacrificial offering of lychee when the lychee season finally arrived to invite her soul to come enjoy them. He laid in front of her portrait the two best kinds of lychee, and then recited a series of poems he had written and shown to Huajiang when she was alive.<sup>17</sup> According to the litany, the “garments and hairpin tomb” was to be built in Mount Hua in Huajiang's native northwest. As will be recalled,

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<sup>16</sup> *QDJQJ*, 3:173.

<sup>17</sup> *QDJQJ*, 3:221-322.



the couple had wanted to live as recluses near the mountain when they first married. Qu assembled a few of Huajiang's personal items and sent them to a friend there. He entrusted him to bury them between the peaks of Bright Star and Jade Maiden 明星玉女, a location Huajiang loved. He promised that when he died he would make a "literary tomb" between the peaks of Songkuai 松檜 and Lianhua 蓮花 so that the two tombs would face one another as if they were "sharing one tomb."<sup>18</sup>

Apart from the large number of *daowang* writings, Qu Dajun distinguished himself in yet another regard. He called on his relatives, friends, and colleagues to mourn with him by way of contributing memorial essays and poems, something others only had done on a small scale. Thanks to his stature, writings in memory of Huajiang in all kinds of genres poured in from famous people across the empire. He also mobilized the esteemed members of his highly acclaimed lineage—the Qus were the descendants of the icon of political loyalty, Qu Yuan—to contribute works in Huajiang's honor, a befitting act given her proud identity as a daughter of a martyred Ming general and a daughter-in-law of the Qu lineage. Qu then compiled all the essays he received into a volume titled *Dao li ji* 悼儷集 (In mourning of my wife), burned a copy in front of her tomb, and planned to erect a shrine by it to house the memorial collection and an embroidered portrait of her (though we do not know if he carried out that plan).

Mourning for a wife on this scale and in this format was unprecedented. Qu stressed that his *Dao li ji* was the first of its kind ever compiled. In his preface to *Dao li ji*, he professed his satisfaction, emphasizing that Huajiang's soul should be happy too and that she would feel no regret that she died young. She was, after all, only a woman, he wrote, yet she was honored with magnificent works from "virtuous people and talented men from all over the country."<sup>19</sup> Qu presented his endeavors as a natural outcome of his love for Huajiang and their deep conjugal

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<sup>18</sup> *QDJQJ*, 3:150-151.

<sup>19</sup> *QDJQJ*, 3:220-221.

bond. “[My] various essays in *Dao li ji* pay tribute to our relationship as husband-wife. I found my words were not enough; therefore, I invited people from under heaven to write about it. Alas, isn’t it because I was forced by *qing* (love) and I couldn’t allow myself not to do it because of *yi* (duty)?”<sup>20</sup> His actions were indeed unprecedented and extraordinary, he implied, but what could he do when he was overwhelmed by the powerful emotion of *qing*? As a husband who was fortunate to marry such a perfect woman, he was compelled also by the principle of *yi*, or, in this context, husbandly duty, to commemorate her death in this unprecedented fashion. Should anyone consider what he had done excessive, he could assure them that his unprecedented show of sorrow and affection did not breach the bounds of propriety.

In putting up this grand show of love, Qu was seeking to build an image of himself as a brilliant writer/mourner, as Martin Huang points out.<sup>21</sup> We could, however, still take Qu at his word that he was devastated by Huajiang’s death. Yet he did not wait long to get remarried. After little more than a year passed, Qu married Li Jingqing 黎靜卿 (courtesy name Lümei 綠眉), a talented poet from Dongguan 東莞. The marriage appeared to be initiated by Miss Li herself, who was deeply touched by Qu’s mourning poems dedicated to Huajiang.<sup>22</sup> Qu described Li as having a remarkable “disposition of a virtuous lady of antiquity.”<sup>23</sup> She was an impeccable daughter-in-law and an intellectual companion worthy to be his “soul mate of the inner chamber” (*gui zhong xingming zhi you* 閨中性命之友).<sup>24</sup> He had

<sup>20</sup> *QDJQJ*, 3:221.

<sup>21</sup> See Huang, *Intimate Memories*, chapter seven.

<sup>22</sup> This was implied in Qu’s account. He described that Li Jingqing was deeply saddened by the daowang poems he wrote on Huajiang’s death and thought “they were superb in both emotion and writing.” Then a matchmaker from her family came to propose marriage. See “Jishi Lishi ruren xinglüe 繼室黎氏孺人行略,” *QDJQJ*, 3:116.

<sup>23</sup> *QDJQJ*, 3:117.

<sup>24</sup> *QDJQJ*, 3:118.

believed that with Huajiang gone he could never enjoy marital happiness again, but the marriage exceeded Qu's expectations. However, in the five years of their marriage, Qu was constantly away fighting for his political cause with the Ming loyalists against the Qing government. This put his family in grave danger, often forcing them to flee to escape the relentless pursuit of the government. Nursing two infants (born less than two years apart) and taking care of Qu's ailing mother while often sick herself, Li died from physical and mental exhaustion at the age of 31. The guilt-ridden Qu wrote,

Considering my wife's virtue and literary talent, she could be my soul mate of the inner chamber for life. Yet, I left behind my family, and went far away to participate in battles. We separated for three years, causing her many hardships. Isn't this against the way of human beings? Fortunately I left [what I was doing] and came home not too late, and was able to be by her side for forty-four days and say our final goodbye.<sup>25</sup>

However, even as Qu enjoyed blissful marriages with his two wives and was devastated by their premature passing, he began taking concubines. Liang Wenji 梁文媿, at 16, became Qu's first concubine shortly after he returned home with Huajiang from northwest.<sup>26</sup> Qu took his second concubine, Chen Xiyi 陳西姨, soon after Huajiang's death. A native of Shanxi, Chen was Huajiang's personal maid who accompanied the couple on their long trip from Shanxi to Guangdong. Bringing along a maid or a sister into a marital home to be a concubine of the groom was a practice of antiquity, and a concubine of this type was called "ying"

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<sup>25</sup> *QDJQJ*, 3:118-119.

<sup>26</sup> Qu stated in Liang's epitaph that she served Huajiang "for a year." Here Qu was giving a rough estimate. Huajiang actually lived with the Qu family in Panyu for five months. This suggests that Qu took Liang almost immediately after returning home from northwest China. See "Wang qie Liangshi muzhiming 亡妾梁氏墓誌銘," in *Wengshan wenwai* 翁山文外 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), 1412:153.

媵。Qu made it clear that Chen was not a regular concubine, but a “ying.”<sup>27</sup> We have no reason to believe that Huajiang brought Chen along with the intention of making her a concubine of her husband, but clearly her death provided a convenient opportunity for Qu to increase the number of his concubines. His action, in the meantime, could even be seen as a gesture of love for his deceased wife: Chen was, after all, the only link he had with Huajiang’s natal family. In the meantime, elevating Chen’s status from maid to concubine would secure and improve her livelihood.

A few years later, another young woman, Liu Wuji 劉武媿, joined the ranks of Qu’s concubines. Qu acquired her while he was in Guangxi participating in the Wu Sangui rebellion against the Qing.<sup>28</sup> At the time, we may recall, his third wife Li Jingqing was suffering the many hardships which Qu later described emotionally in the “Record of Conduct” he wrote for her. Li died only four months after Qu came home in 1676 with his new, and third, concubine.

Upon the death of Chen Xiyi, his second concubine, in 1679, Qu acquired his fourth, Qiu Pihan 丘辟寒. Qu called her a “little concubine” (*xiao ji* 小姬), reflecting her junior status.<sup>29</sup> She was the only concubine who was not mentioned in the Qu genealogy, most likely due to her childlessness. With no surviving child, a concubine was customarily excluded from family records.

Somewhere between 1680 and 1686, Qu made Liu Wuji, the third concubine, his wife, and thus filling the vacancy left by the death of Li Jingqing. Shortly after, he lost Liang Wenji, his first concubine.<sup>30</sup> The following year, at the age of 58, Qu took his last two concubines simultaneously, Lu Moxi 陸墨西 and Shi Xiangdong 石香東. He jokingly explained that because Lu came from a village very near

<sup>27</sup> It was indicated in the title of Chen’s epitaph. *QDJQJ*, 3:151.

<sup>28</sup> Wang Zongyan, “Qu Dajun nianpu,” in *QDJQJ*, 8:1928.

<sup>29</sup> *QDJQJ*, 2:1406.

<sup>30</sup> Wang Zongxian, “Qu Dajun nianpu,” 1964. Also see Wu, *Qu Dajun nianpu*, 236.

Duanxi 端溪, a creek famous for its ink stone, he named her Moxi (literally, Ink West), and had her take charge of the task of grinding ink. Shi, whom Qu “got” a few days after Lu, was named Xiangdong (literally, Incense East), and was assigned the task of “taking care of the incense.”

Qu died nine years later in 1696 at the age of 67. Somewhere before his death he changed the status of Liang Wenji, then deceased for about ten years, from that of concubine to wife. His fourth concubine-turned-wife Liu Wuji would have died by then.

To sum up, Qu Dajun married three times in succession and took six concubines, two of which were elevated to the status of wife, including one (Liang Wenji) posthumously. A total of nine women became his wife or concubine. The number of concubines he had most of the time was three. Obviously, it was not his plan to take up five wives (including the two concubine-turned-wives), but rather a result of bad luck. His wives, except Miss Liu, whose fate was unknown, all died young. However, when it came to the question of whether to take a concubine and how many concubines to take, it was entirely up to Qu. Evidently, Qu’s interest in having multiple concubines persisted throughout much of his married life.

### *Duty, Pleasure, and Qing*

This record of Qu’s polygynous life raises the question of what might have set him on a path to taking multiple concubines. According to dynastic law, acquisition of a concubine was justifiable if a man did not have an heir (a son) by the age of forty. This was also common advice given in late-imperial family instructions. Concubines were for reproductive purposes only. The age of forty represented a crucial juncture for male fertility at which time a man must maximize his ability to produce an heir by engaging more legitimate sexual partners than just his wife, who had now passed the prime years of childbearing. In Qu Dajun’s case, he could hardly justify his actions with this rationale. His two wives, Huajiang and Li

Jingqing, were much younger than he was, and both were fertile when he took his first three concubines, Liang Wenji, Chen Xiyi, and Liu Wuji.<sup>31</sup> But Qu's own age was a different story.

He was 40-years-old and heirless when he took his first concubine, Liang Wenji, which suggests that age could have been a major factor in this decision. The fact that Qu refrained from taking a concubine earlier suggests that it was a morally guided decision intended to comply with the orthodox rule. But once he reached the magic age of forty, he wasted no time. He needed a son to carry his line. In mourning his first-born daughter Yan, who died soon after her mother Huajiang's death, Qu lamented: "I am now 42-years-old and I have only myself. I do not dare to wish I would be blessed by heaven to have a son, and I have considered it lucky to have a daughter."<sup>32</sup> There was a sense of frustration in these words. At forty-two, the pressure was increasing for Qu to beget an heir. Besides age, we could also imagine that the uncertainty associated with his own dangerous political involvement added to his anxiety and sense of urgency. These concerns might have played an important role in his taking multiple concubines when Huajiang and Li Jingqing were well and giving birth.

Qu's preoccupation with procreation was also revealed in the naming of his first and third concubines, Liang Wenji and Liu Wuji. The character *ji* 媿 in antiquity was considered an auspicious surname for a bride. According to *The Spring and Autumn Annals*, the consort of Houji 后稷, ancestor of the Zhou royal house, came from the Ji clan. "Taking the daughter of the *Ji* surname to be a spouse, the Zhou clan therefore prospered."<sup>33</sup> By the time Qu Dajun took Wuji, he had one

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<sup>31</sup>They arrived at his home in Panyu in the 8th month of Yiyou (1669), and Huajiang died from complications of a miscarriage five months later (first month of the following year). See "Jishi Wang shi ruren xinglüe 繼室王氏孺人行略."

<sup>32</sup>*QDJQJ*, 3:222.

<sup>33</sup>*Chunqiu zuozhuan zhengyi* 春秋左傳正義, in *Shisanjing zhusu* 十三經註疏, comp. Ruan Yuan (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), 1869.

son by his wife Li Jingqing, and Li as well as two other concubines—Weiji and Xiyi—were at prime childbearing age, but he needed her to bolster the chances of fathering more sons quickly.

It is likely that, with this urgent hope in mind, Qu named a pavilion in his home “*Nongchuxuan*” 弄雛軒 meaning “playing with little children.”<sup>34</sup> Qu hoped that if he was blessed by Heaven and his ancestors he would have eight sons.<sup>35</sup> He indeed fathered eight boys in his lifetime. The boys were born when he was 44, 48, 49, 53, 54, 58, 61, and 64 years old,<sup>36</sup> but he lost the eldest two to illness. The death of Mingdao, who was born to his third wife Li, and died at age nine, dealt a devastating blow to Qu. The boy, conceived after he had prayed to the God of Nanhai (Southern Ocean), was a blessing from the divine. To thank the God, he presented the temple with four big-character tablets in his own calligraphy, “God of the Southern Ocean.”<sup>37</sup> By the time of his death at age 66, he was survived by eight children, six sons and two daughters.

However, procreation cannot fully explain Qu’s successive acquisitions of concubines. At the time he acquired his last two concubines, he had five surviving

<sup>34</sup>The name of the pavilion appears in a poem’s title, “Renzi chunri nongchuxuan zuo 壬子春日弄雛軒作,” written in 1672. Qu, *Wengshan shilüe* 翁山詩略 (Beijing: Beijing shubanshe, 2000, *Siku jinghuishu congban* 四庫禁燬書叢刊), 集 184: 26.

<sup>35</sup>“Zi ba zi shuo 字八子說,” in Qu, *Wengshan wenchao* 翁山文鈔 (Beijing: Beijing shubanshe, 2000, *Siku jinghuishu congban* 四庫禁燬書叢刊), 集 120:223.

<sup>36</sup>Qu, *Wengshan wenchao* 翁山文鈔, 集 120:223. For some reason, Liang Wenji, Chen Xiyi, and Liu Wuji failed to produce a son for many years. Both Liang Wenji and Chen Xiyi gave birth to their first son after having been married to Qu for ten years. See “Wang qie Liangshi muzhiming 亡妾梁氏墓誌銘,” 1412:153; “Wang ying Chenshi muzhiming 亡媵陳氏墓誌銘,” in *QDJQJ*, 3:151-152.

<sup>37</sup>“Ku wang er Mingdao 哭亡兒明道”, in *QDJQJ*, 1:575.

children, including three sons (by Wenji and Wuji) aged between five and ten.<sup>38</sup> Pleasure, in fact, had been the other part of the equation all along. Qu admitted that he was “fond of women” (*haose* 好色): “Fond of women is a problem in my life, but what can I do as [I am a man] of profound feelings (*qing shen* 情深)?”<sup>39</sup> Admitting he did not feel proud of his penchant for sensual and sexual pleasure, he nevertheless tried to rationalize it. He seemed to argue that “fondness for women” was not necessarily a flaw if it stemmed from deep feelings. In other words, *qing* justified a man’s decision to acquire concubines when it was not justifiable in ritual terms. *Qing* was a badge of pride for Qu. It was his “abundance of *qing*,” he wrote, that allowed for his deep attachment to all of his wives, concubines, and children (*qing duo ernü yi liulian* 情多兒女易流連).<sup>40</sup> *Qing* allowed Qu to expand upon his cadre of concubines without feeling guilt; it also relieved him of any discomfort that he otherwise might have felt when taking very young concubines. The young age of his concubines precipitated a deeply ingrained self-consciousness. Not unaware of the abnormality, he felt a bit of uneasiness, alluding jokingly to the ancient metaphor for an old man taking a young wife, “withered willow grows a new shoot,” (*ku yang sheng ti* 枯楊生稊).<sup>41</sup> But the uneasiness was insignificant in comparison to his overall joy, satisfaction, and even pride about his lifestyle. In one poem, he describes his joy when drinking with his young son Minghong and his teenage concubine (*zhi qie* 稚妾) Xiangdong.<sup>42</sup> Qu was settled into a pattern of having two or three concubines around, and, when one of them died, he wasted no

<sup>38</sup>At time of Liang Wenji’s deaths, the children were aged between 9 and 4. See “Wang qie Liangshi muzhimin 亡妾梁氏墓誌銘,” 1412:153.

<sup>39</sup>“Ai Liangshi Wenji 哀梁氏文姑,” in *QDJQJ*, 1:670.

<sup>40</sup>“Du ling zeng guiren 度嶺贈閨人,” in *QDJQJ*, 2:845.

<sup>41</sup>See his poem “Zeng Liangshi Wenji 贈梁氏文姑,” in *QDJQJ*, 2:865. This old metaphor is originated in the *Book of Changes*. See *Zhouyi zhengyi* 周易正義, in *Shisanjing zhusu* 十三經註疏, 41.

<sup>42</sup>*QDJQJ*, 2:715.



time filling the vacancy. As a result, he maintained a steady number of spouses while at the same time the concubines became increasingly young relative to his age.

He regularly sensualized the concubines (not the wives) in his poetry, taking pleasure in describing their moves and gestures, often in the teasing tone of a happy old man. “Getting a beauty at an old age, my body grows stronger,” he wrote in a poem to Liu Wuji.<sup>43</sup> If Qu was frank in speaking about sexual pleasure from the beginning of his relationship with concubines in his 40s, then he grew even more comfortable describing his indulgence in his old age as if to boast of his vitality. By then, he had given up his political activities against the new dynasty and settled into a quiet literati life. Upon acquiring his last two concubines—Moxi and Xiangdong—he composed two sets of poems for each of the girls that were replete with sensual tropes and images. In “For Fragrant East”, for example, he describes his first night with the girl:

The melon is freshly broken,<sup>44</sup> and the love is insane,  
 She emerges from a bath in fragrant water,  
 Like a half-opened blossom of a red nutmeg,  
 or a moon that just breathes out its first ray.<sup>45</sup>

In these not so suggestive lines, one senses not only Qu’s sexual appetite, but also his gratification about his sexual prowess. At the age of 58, he retained his vital energy, and was capable of performing his role and enjoying intense pleasure from it. However, his relations with the young concubines, Qu suggested, were also emotional or even spiritual. In the poem “For Moxi,” he employed the famous love metaphor from the Tang poet Li Shangyin 李商隱 to imply they were like a pair of

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<sup>43</sup> *QDJQJ*, 2:864.

<sup>44</sup> Here, “breaking the melon” is a metaphor about the girl’s virginity.

<sup>45</sup> *QDJQJ*, 2:962.

butterflies flying side-by-side, and they had longed for one another even before they were together.<sup>46</sup> They were in love, and also there was something else.

There is indication that Qu practiced the bedroom techniques of the Plain Maiden (*Sunü* 素女), the legendary teacher who specialized in teaching about how to use sexual intercourse to prolong life for men, with his concubines. In the same poem, Qu went on to write,

Magnificent peach blossoms fruit in three years,  
The old tree grows flowers, fitting the season of spring.  
In one voice we sing whole-heartedly songs of love,  
The sexy Plain Girl is my teacher.<sup>47</sup>

Here two distinct threads of thought are detectable. The metaphor of the vibrant peach blossom, in the first line, indicates Qu's continual wish for having more sons. The blossom will bear fruit in three years, and his concubine, he predicts, will give him a son in three years' time as well. The second line continues the metaphor of a flower, but turns its focus to himself. Bearing a son at an old age aside, Qu is simultaneously seeking to benefit from sex with the young concubine to prolong his life. Like an old tree that grows flowers again, having the young concubine as his sexual partner revitalizes his body.

### *The Ideal Family*

It should be pointed out, however, that Qu's sense of pleasure was not defined principally in sensual and sexual terms. Sensual and sexual service of young concubines only filled one part of the bill for a life of enjoyment. Qu's happiness was, in the meantime, firmly grounded in the ideal of a big family with his mother as the matriarch, himself the filial son and caring husband, his spouses filial

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<sup>46</sup> *QDJQJ*, 2:961.

<sup>47</sup> *QDJQJ*, 2:961.

daughters-in-law, and his children well taken care of. The occasions on which he rejoiced most were when the family all gathered for holidays, such as this moment of celebration of the new year when “children, happy and joyful, fill the inner courtyard; dressed colorfully they cheer the elderly.”<sup>48</sup> It was a tightly bound, loving family which formed the core of an extended family that also included his brothers and their offspring.<sup>49</sup> This ideal was crucially important to his social identity and manhood. He sought to project an image of a man capable of supporting a large family; keeping it in harmony by providing for the needs of his spouses and children and giving them love. Qu’s obsession, in a sense, was natural because it confirmed the multi-generation extended family ideal in premodern Chinese society. But, he seemed to have personal reasons for wanting a big family with many children, for he lamented that he did not have many siblings (even though he had brothers and sisters).<sup>50</sup> This regret, coupled with his pride as a descendant of the great ancestor Qu Yuan, might explain his persistent effort to reproduce and establish a huge household despite his complaint of fiscal penury.

His ideal of a happy family, structured around a wife, multiple concubines, and children, is illustrated most vividly in his essay “Zi ba zi shuo” 字八子說 (on giving courtesy names to my eight children) where Qu found a great metaphor for his large family in the image of Mount Weng, located in Wengyuan county, which had eight hot springs. He recalled a dream he had at age 20 in which he saw a man sitting cross-legged, with his hair down, reading a book. He then heard someone calling the man “Wengshan.” Qu took Wengshan as his courtesy name, and, in the essay, he explains, “Because I am called Mount Weng (*Wengshan* 翁山), all my wives and concubines are Weng waters (*Wengshui* 翁水). When the mountain and

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<sup>48</sup>“Xinwei yuanri zuo 辛未元日作,” in *QDJQJ*, 2:1004.

<sup>49</sup>The same poem, for example, indicates that his two brothers were also present for the celebration.

<sup>50</sup>“Ku neizi Wang Huajiang 哭内子王華姜,” in *QDJQJ*, 1:22.

waters converge, eight springs are created.” He assigned the name of the eight springs to each of his children, six sons and two daughters. He would have assigned all eight names of the springs to sons, but, unfortunately, he only had six surviving sons at the time which left him no choice but to allow his two daughters to temporarily share the honor. His plan was to take back the names from the daughters, and give them to his sons once they were born.<sup>51</sup> Qu was then in his mid-60s. Clearly, he had not given up hope of fathering more sons.

In Qu’s ideal family, the wives, Wang Huajiang, Li Jingqing, Liang Wenji, and Liu Wuji, took a special place. They were ritually his equals (*diti* 敵體), but his presentation of their relationship consistently focused on their intimacy and emotional attachment. His sentimentality was shaped by one crucial fact: they all died premature deaths. He could not make sense of the misfortune of having lost all his wives at a young age. “Wang was only 24-years-old, and Li was just 30. Liang married me at 16, and she died of illness at 18 years. The longest living was Liu, who grew weak and ill at 40. There was no ‘bring-back-soul incense’, and together with the three beauties, I also lost her.” Whether they died a long time ago or more recently, Qu’s affection for each of them did not fade. Not long before his own death, Qu commissioned a painting of the four deceased wives. He was planning to embark on a long journey, and, since it would be too cumbersome to take four individual portraits, he opted to have them painted on one scroll so that he could “place them in a cloth case, and unfold them to take a look when leaving or returning. ... When they were alive, they accompanied me day and night; when I die, the portrait will be buried with me.”<sup>52</sup>

Qu’s personal writing reveals a genuine affection for his concubines. He wrote about each of his concubines, including the least-favored, Pihan.<sup>53</sup> If the tone and

<sup>51</sup>“Zi ba zi shuo 字八子說,” 集 120:223.

<sup>52</sup>*QDJQJ*, 3:257-258.

<sup>53</sup>*QDJQJ*, 2:1406.

frequency revealed his differentiated fondness toward them, then he clearly favored Wenji and Wuji, who were promoted to the status of wife. He was clearly fond of the last two young concubines—Moxi in particular—as well, so much so that he wrote two poems on her relatives and another inscribed on her old residence.<sup>54</sup> His relationship with his children, on the other hand, appears to be less discriminative than with their mothers. Not surprisingly, sons held a preeminent place in his mind (as we see in the above case about naming the springs of Mount Weng). Yet, genuine fatherly affection shone through in the poems and elegies he wrote, often repeatedly, about his children—on enjoying having them around and watching them play. Infants and young children seemed to have a special place in his heart, as is evident in the titles of poems such as “Farewell to My Little Daughter,” “My Old Son,” “My Children Are Happy,” “Births of Daughters,” “My Sons,” “My Small Child,” “My Young Son,” “My Little Son,” and “My Little Son and Little Daughter.”<sup>55</sup> He was fond of daughters despite his earnest hope of having more sons. For example, his collected works contain four poems and an elegy written for his eldest daughter Yan, who died at age four.<sup>56</sup> For another daughter, Yue, who was born to Qu’s least-favored concubine, Pihan, and died just forty-nine days after her birth, Qu wrote a series of five poems and an elaborate elegy in addition to including her in the collective epitaph for his four deceased children.<sup>57</sup>

Concubines were solidly integrated into the household. They were part of his “qinu” 妻孥 (wives and children) to whom he owed love, and to whose wellbeing

<sup>54</sup> *QDJQJ*, 2:1343, 2:1344, 2:1015.

<sup>55</sup> *QDJQJ*, 1:368, 1:406, 1:431, 1:513-514, 2:655, 2:759, 2:870, 2:911, 2:1095, 2:1110, 2:1147, 2:1517.

<sup>56</sup> *QDJQJ*, 1:368, 1:406, 2:1215, 2:1419, 2:1517, 3:222.

<sup>57</sup> “Si shang zhongzhiming 四殤冢誌銘,” in *QDJQJ*, 3:153; “Shang nü Yue aici 殤女說哀辭,” in *QDJQJ*, 3:240; “Ku shang nü Yue 哭殤女說,” in *QDJQJ*, 1:661-662. Qu wrote another epitaph for daughter Duan, who died at age six. See *QDJQJ*, 3:153.

he was responsible for looking after.<sup>58</sup> In 1679, Qu took all of his concubines, Chen Xiyi, Liang Wenji, and Liu Wuji, and their children along with him when he traveled for two years to avoid political “troubles.” While in Hubei, Chen succumbed to the heat of the summer and perished. Qu buried her on Dabie Mountain with a beautiful view, and wrote an epitaph.<sup>59</sup> Two months later her four-year-old son Asui died of illness in Nanjing. Qu lamented the two losses in this poem:

Having no mother, who will love you?  
 You cried when your mother no longer nursed you.  
 Carrying and holding you, my two concubines labor hard,  
 The turmoil of the time brings suffering to my orphan child.  
 In Dabie Mountains, the soul (of your mother) embraces you,  
 Your bones are not being carried with me from Nanjing.  
 Abundant tears have been shed in the boat returning home,  
 All because of my sorrow for the two graves (left behind).<sup>60</sup>

Qu’s sadness rested not only on the deaths, but also on the guilt he felt for having to leave his concubine’s and child’s graves in a strange and faraway place. Keeping family together, even in the event of death, was his duty as the head of his big household, and that made these two deaths all the more painful.

This idea—that death separated the dead from the living, but his family was unbreakable spiritually—was a central theme in his memorial writing. “In the underworld, the spirits (of the deceased) live together; in the human realm, the family is separated,” wrote Qu in his poem “Weeping for my deceased son Mingdao.”<sup>61</sup> Having departed from this world, his wives, concubines, and children

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<sup>58</sup>For the term “qinu,” see, for example, *QDJQJ*, 2:848.

<sup>59</sup>“Wang ying Chengshi muzhiming 亡媵陳氏墓誌銘,” in *QDJQJ*, 3:151-152.

<sup>60</sup>“Ai shang 哀殤,” in *QDJQJ*, 1:547-548.

<sup>61</sup>“Ku wang er Mingdao 哭亡兒明道,” in *QDJQJ*, 1:575.

nevertheless dwelled in one place as a family. A pattern marks Qu's elegiac writings for his spouses and children: in his mourning for each death, Qu routinely brought into his elegies the deaths of those who came before, turning the fresh sorrow into another moment of re-grieving for the ones who had long died. Speaking with the voice of a household head as well as a husband/father, he saw each death not simply a loss of a beloved family member, but another tragedy in a string of misfortunes that took the lives of his "qinu."<sup>62</sup>

In that underworld, Qu stressed, his deceased loved ones continued to play their parts looking after one another. He consoled the souls of his deceased children by telling them that they did not need to be afraid because they would be with their loved ones. In nearly every elegiac text he wrote for them, he specified the proximity in the spatial relationship between the tombs of the newly and previously deceased. For example, Mingdao's grave is by his mother's side; in the front was the grave of daughter Yan, and above was the grave of Huajiang.<sup>63</sup> The infant daughter Yue's grave is beside her late sister Yan and her late brother Mingdao; nearby were her two *dimu* (principal mother 嫡母, i.e. Wang Huajiang and Li Jingqing).<sup>64</sup> For Asui, whom Qu had no choice but leave behind in Nanjing, he performed a ritual so that he, too, could reside with the rest of the deceased family members:

Alas, how sorrowful! Asui 阿遂 was born in Shating of Panyu. Together with Mingdao, he followed me to Hanyang. After reaching Nanjing, he died in the boat on the Yangzi River. He was buried above the Shangxin River. I called home his soul and buried it here. His bone and flesh were left in Nanjing's soil, but his soul arrived at Yongkou Mountain. With his three siblings—an older brother and two sisters—he leans on his two principal mothers on the left and

<sup>62</sup>For examples, see *QDJQJ*, 3:151-154.

<sup>63</sup>*QDJQJ*, 3:151-154.

<sup>64</sup>“Shang nǚ Yue aici 殤女說哀辭,” in *QDJQJ*, 3:240.

his concubine mother on the right. He should no longer feel startled or afraid. The two principle mothers were Wang and Li, the concubine mother is my concubine Liang Wenji. [Asui's mother] Xiyi was buried by the Dabie Mountains, and I haven't had a chance to call home her soul to bury it here. For the time being, Asui is dependent on the three mothers to care for him.

This was excerpted from a collective tomb inscription he wrote for his four deceased children who ranged from nine to one-month and 19 days at the time of their deaths. He ends it with the following words: "My two sons and two daughters, died as young as this. Your lives were as short as that of an ephemerid (*fuyou* 蜉蝣), heaven deceived you! Having three mothers in the underworld, I am not worried that the youngest one will not have milk to suck. If the elder one [Mingdao] wants to study calligraphy, he can learn from Li."<sup>65</sup> Concerned about their needs, the caring father and the head of the family made sure that they would not suffer from hunger and would receive continual education from the mothers. This was his chief way of comforting their souls and alleviating his own pain.

Not only did the deceased mothers care for the young in the underworld, but the mothers who were alive would also look after the children of the deceased. In this loving family, death ended their collective responsibilities to their children in neither place. Qu wrote in the tomb inscription for Liang Wenji:

Alas, Liang has a son whom she could not nurse, but her mistress [Liu Wuji] is nursing him, and so she can rest in peace. As for her burial site, it is located on Yongkou Mountain. The grave is against southwest and facing northeast. To the right lay her former mistresses Wang Hujiang and Li Lümei (Jingqing), and she lay to the left. In the past, Liang served Wang for a year and Li for six years. Now she is sharing the tomb with them, taking care of Wang's daughter Ayan and Li's son Mingdao, while her mistress Liu is taking care of her two sons for her to repay her (service in the underworld). Liu has a son born

<sup>65</sup>“Si Shang zhongzhiming 四殤冢誌銘,” in *QDJQJ*, 3:153.



herself named Mingyong who is younger than Liang's elder son and older than her younger son. The three sons from now on are like [brothers] by one biological mother and will be raised and instructed the same way. Liang can rest in peace!<sup>66</sup>

In the face of tragedy, Qu tried to take comfort in believing that the women and children stayed close despite being separated by death.

Two points are worth noting. First, the function of the concubine is framed in terms of her service to the wife. Qu stressed the number of years that Liang had served her two wives, and emphasized that, even after their deaths, she would carry on her duty of service to them. The purpose of the concubines, in other words, was for the service of the wives as well as for the husband's pleasure and the family's continuity. By emphasizing the concubines' domestic role as assistants to the wives he seems to dilute the perception of a unique association between concubine acquisition and pleasure seeking that benefited men alone. The point, as we may recall, was not only Qu's. In persuading elite wives to accept concubines into their homes, his contemporary Chen Que, for example, argued that concubines, in the end, "labored" on behalf of the wives.<sup>67</sup> Second, Qu's portrayal of his loving family placed great emphasis on the mother-child bond between concubines and their biological children. The sadness brought about by the concubines' untimely deaths was spoken of through the sadness of the permanent separation of the deceased and her child, and he consoled the souls of his deceased concubines, typically, with the assurance that their children would be well taken care of. Not being able to continue to care for one's child, or losing the nurturing love of a mother, was central to Qu's laments on the deaths of his concubines and children. This display of empathy for the concubine-mother and the underlying idea stressing the natural

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<sup>66</sup>Qu, *Wenshan wenwai*, 153-154.

<sup>67</sup>Chen Que 陳確, "Xinfupu bu 新婦譜補," in *Nǚjie: Funú de guifan* 女誡：婦女的規範, comp. Zhang Fuqing 張福清 (Beijing: Zhongyang minzu daxue chubanshe, 1996), 113.

bond between concubines and their children contrasts with the common assumption about a concubine's weak claim to her relationship with her own children.<sup>68</sup> Children born to a concubine called the wife their *dimu* 嫡母, and she was theoretically permitted to take away a concubine's child to raise as her own. Yet, the focus on a wife's rights tends to overlook the effects of emotion and the internal dynamics regarding the household on domestic arrangements. Qu's emphasis on the natural bond between concubines and children, along with the ideal of household harmony that he strived to achieve, apparently worked to secure the concubines' relationship with their children.<sup>69</sup>

### *Disharmony in the Qu household?*

Qu Dajun's works on his spouses and children, to be sure, were not "tell-all" tales. Often written at times of disturbed emotion, moments of joy or sadness, for instance, they conceal as much as they reveal. Although they were not primarily for the eyes of public, such works were not meant to be absolutely private, and negative representations were self-censored, consciously or not. Thus, unsurprisingly, one finds no mention of relationship problems in Qu's writings.

Qu was tight-lipped about any disharmony in his household, but, as was often the case, polygyny meant he would have had to manage his relationship with each of the women, as well as the children, and mediate tensions among them. The happy family that Qu tried to present also might have been complicated by the

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<sup>68</sup>See, for instance, Bray, *Technology and Gender*, 353; Sommer, *Polyandry and Wife-selling in Qing Dynasty China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 8.

<sup>69</sup>Using Qing legal documents, Yue Du in a recent study shows "that bearing or raising sons or daughters helped concubines achieve upward social mobility recognized and protected by law and that motherhood remained the major source of power and security for concubines in the Qing." Du, "Concubinage and Motherhood," 162.

presence of his mother, to whom Qu Dajun was deeply attached. Lady Wang regularly appeared in Qu's writing about his wives, concubines, and children. He described how his marriage to Huajiang cheered up his mother, signaling her approval, which weighed significantly in that decision, and also how the death of a concubine saddened his mother, indicating her approval of the younger woman's performance as a concubine. There was little question that his mother held sway in the Qu household.

This would mean that the wives and concubines had to work extremely hard to ensure their mother-in-law's satisfaction. One thing that would surely secure it was bearing a son. This was what happened to Chen Xiyi, the maid-turned-concubine from Shanxi. In Chen's tomb inscription, Qu recalled his mother "began to like her" after she gave birth to a son ten years after she became a concubine.<sup>70</sup> What was her life like before Lady Wang "began to like her"? It was not difficult to imagine. As a Northwesterner, she neither spoke Guangdong dialect nor was familiar with its customs. Having lost her mistress, she was all alone in a strange place. If all women in the Qu household were at the mercy of the mother-in-law to some extent, she was in a particularly marginal place to compete for favor with the others, that is, until the birth of her son.

Perhaps the most intriguing question concerning the relationships in the Qu home was Wang Huajiang's reaction to Qu's speedy acquisition of the 16-year-old concubine Liang Wenji immediately following their return to Panyu. Was Huajiang consulted? Was she prepared? The general silence on household disharmony in Qu's records leaves us with only a few clues for speculation. One of Qu's mourning poems wrote:

I do not forget the huge favor you did for me,  
You do not think of the small resentments.  
Since you entered our home,

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<sup>70</sup>“Wang ying Chenshi muzhiming 亡媵陳氏墓誌銘,” in *QDJQJ*, 3:151.

You had to be urged to drink and eat.  
 Earlier when we traveled through Taiguan,  
 I felt increasingly joyful.  
 My hometown was closer by the day,  
 while your hometown was farther distanced.  
 I comforted you with gentle words,  
 That we would return to Shayuan (in Shaanxi) before long.  
 That we would wait upon your white-haired mother-in-law,  
 Together live a life of recluse by Mount Hua.  
 A life in poverty has many worries and annoyances,  
 At times maids and servants acted arrogantly.  
 They did not obey all the time,  
 But I relied on your kindness and gentleness [to keep things going].<sup>71</sup>

...

The poem is extraordinary because it reveals something that Qu avoided mentioning elsewhere in his writing. It appears that at a moment of despair and profound guilt, Qu opened up briefly about an aspect of their relationship that was not as rosy as he tried to present. Apparently, Huajiang was unhappy and resentful at times, and she even refused to eat when she was in bad mood. Qu repeatedly portrayed in his writing that returning to his hometown was Huajiang's idea since she eagerly wanted to serve her mother-in-law. If there was indeed some truth to that claim, the reality of being far from her natal home and suffering from the many problems with the relocation did finally catch up on her. Qu had proposed that they would be going back to the Northwest along with his mother to make a permanent home there, a plan he probably had no intention of carrying out. Could this be one underlying reason for her unhappiness?

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<sup>71</sup>“Ai neizi Wang Huajiang 哀内子王华姜,” in *QDJQJ*, 1:25.

There are at least three other factors that caused Huajiang to feel dispirited. For one, the family's financial constraints limited what Qu could do to help her cope with the new life in Panyu. Having been brought up well taken care of, Huajiang could not be fully prepared for a living in a modest household in a totally strange place. Secondly, from elsewhere in Qu's writing, we know that she had a hard time adjusting to the hot and humid weather and a smaller house, and that they were finally able to move into a more spacious garden house in Dongguang in the winter right before her death.<sup>72</sup> If Huajiang's transition in life was not already drastic enough, she was simultaneously dealing with another issue. Not long after their arrival in Qu's home, she became pregnant with their second child. She would have had to deal with the discomfort associated with pregnancy while struggling with all those other problems. Moreover, she could not get sufficient help from the servants. The servants were disrespectful, and Huajiang was not forcefully defending herself due to her gentle personality. One may reasonably assume that the tensions between Huajiang and the servants may have, in part, stemmed from the language barriers and other regional cultural differences.

There was one more factor that Qu conveniently, or deliberately, avoided speaking about, and that is the entrance of the 16-year-old concubine Liang Wenji into their lives. Having waited for years to get his first concubine, Qu was overjoyed. His instant attraction to Wenji can be read in all his writings where she was mentioned over the years. Did Huajiang welcome her? Unlikely. If she did, we could reasonably expect Qu to sing her praises for not being jealous, a standard reference in *daowang* writings. After all, Qu spared no efforts to honor her in the wake of her death, and to immortalize her and her virtue. But nothing praiseworthy along those lines appeared in his writing. It is still entirely plausible that she did not object, or object vehemently, but it is also possible that she did object, but was unable to dissuade him. At a time when Huajiang was coping with the awful

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<sup>72</sup>“Jishi Wangshi ruren xinglüe 繼室王氏孺人行略,” in *QDJQJ*, 3:115.

weather, new people, and novel environment, including disobedient servants and pregnancy, Qu was enjoying his newfound pleasure with the young girl. Huajiang no longer enjoyed undivided love from her husband.

Understanding this background allows us to infer what Qu might be referring to in the first two lines. What was the favor Huajiang did for him and what resentments did Huajiang harbor? The meaning of the favor could be one or both of the following with regard to Qu's two major undertakings: she was willing to leave her very comfortable life behind to endure with him in an alien place; and she was willing to support his acquisition of a young concubine, or at least yielded to him in that decision. Whatever Qu might be referring to, he did not successfully ease her resentment. Huajiang's resentment was multifaceted and complicated. She likely was struggling mentally as well as physically which might have contributed to her untimely death just five months after her arrival in Panyu.

In a polygynous household, managing relationships with and among the spouses was a constant challenge. Although Qu barely touched upon this issue, there is one intriguing fact that leaves one to speculate. After Li Jingqing's death in 1676, Qu left the position of wife vacant for several years before filling it by elevating Liu Wuji to the position.<sup>73</sup> At the time, he had three concubines to choose from for this promotion: Liang Wenji, Liu Wuji, and Qiu Pihan. Qiu was likely never considered given her junior status and lack of a son. Wenji and Wuji, on the other hand, were both favored by Qu. Qu's naming of the two women suggested a sister-like relationship that Qu would have liked them to have (Liang was one year older than Liu), and Qu appeared to have tried to maintain impartiality in his treatment of them. He called them collectively "er ji" (二姑), and in one case, he

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<sup>73</sup>It is unclear when Liu Wuji was promoted to be a wife, but it had been done by the time of Liang Wenji's death in 1686.

sent two separate poems to each using the same title.<sup>74</sup> Three circumstances would give Wenji an advantage toward being promoted: she was senior in age; she arrived at the Qu household earlier than Wuji; and perhaps more importantly, she was the mother of two sons, including Qu's eldest, Minghong, while Wuji had just one son at that point. However, none of these rational points prevailed in this case. Qu picked Liu Wuji over Liang Wenji to be his wife. How did Qu come to his decision and what impact would it have on the relationships among the three? There is hardly any source that would explain the seemingly odd act on Qu's behalf, but one could imagine what Wenji might have been feeling in those days. Wenji, in fact, died of illness shortly after.

But, sometime before Qu's own death, he had a change of heart. Liang appeared in two texts Qu wrote in the last years of his life, and both addressed her unequivocally as a "deceased wife." She was one of his four "late wives" (*xianshi* 先室) along with Wang Huajiang, Li Lümei, and Liu Wuji.<sup>75</sup> Little is known about the circumstances that led to the reversal of the decision. There are two possibilities. Liu was likely deceased at that time, and instead of marrying another woman, Qu

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<sup>74</sup>"Ye zuo you huai er ji 夜坐有懷二姑" in *QDJQJ*, 1:577; "Zeng Liushi Wuji 贈劉氏武姑" and "Zeng Liangshi Wenji 贈梁氏文姑," in *QDJQJ*, 2:864, 2:865. The change of status of Liang and Liu has been a confusing issue. Wu Qingshi, for example, stated that Liang's promotion comes before that of Liu. See Wu, *Qu Dajun nianpu*, 12-13. Wang Zongxian mistakenly identifies Liu as a concubine when she died. See Wang, "Qu Dajun nianpu," 1992. There is ample evidence pointing to Liu's promotion, which took place while Liang was still a concubine. Qu, for example, consistently addressed her as "neizi 內子," "furen 夫人," and Liang as "qie 妾." The most direct evidence comes from Qu's epitaph for Liang Wenji, titled "Wang qie Liangshi muzhiming," in which he called Liu "nūjun 女君" ("mistress") and praised Liang for her service to Liu as a concubine.

<sup>75</sup>See "Si yi huaxiang fu 四一畫像賦," in *QDJQJ*, 3:257; "Qu men si shuoren muzhiming 屈門四碩人墓志銘," in *QDJQJ*, 3:474.

might have felt uneasy about his earlier decision of choosing Liu Wuji over Liang Wenji and used the opportunity to right a wrong. After all, he was very fond of Liang. The other reason could be her children. Liang gave birth to two of Qu's six sons, including Minghong. Minghong was the only son who was married and was a county student by the time Qu rectified Liang's status. Even if Minghong did not push for the change of his mother's status, Qu probably did it for the sake of his future. Legally, sons born to concubines maintained the same status as those by wives. However, in the reality of social life, the stigma of being the son of a concubine can carry a stain that can be hard to remove.

### *Conclusions*

Over three decades of married life, Qu Dajun produced substantial works on his spouses and children. He left behind important materials that allow historians to reconstruct aspects of his family life and the ways in which polygyny was practiced in his household. Qu, obviously, was not just a writer and political activist; he was a husband and father, and these roles carried tremendous weight with him. His writings, especially those on Wang Huajiang, were significant not just as a foil to his Ming loyalist ideals and sentiments, but they are immensely valuable because they allow us to go beyond the familiar critique of polygyny as an institution of male privilege, and provide us with a personal and intimate voice that has been lacking in the research on polygyny while enabling a fuller understanding of Qu's biography.

His writing illuminates the intricacy in literati men's drive to acquire multiple concubines. polygyny, in a sense, was a vital and multi-purpose device Qu used to fulfill different objectives simultaneously, including producing male heirs (lots of them) to carry his prestigious ancestral line, meeting his needs for sensual and sexual pleasure, and enhancing his bodily vitality through the arts of the bedchamber. Perhaps most importantly, the case points to the deeply seated ideal



about a harmonious family that contained multiple spouses and a large number of children. This ideal was integral to the Confucian family ideology Qu embraced, but it also was what defined happiness for Qu. The reality was likely less sanguine than what Qu presented, and his desired harmony was likely complicated by problems that were not limited to status hierarchy and competition among the concubines. In the Qu household, however, concubines appeared to enjoy close relationships with their children which invites us to reexamine the assumption about the weak tie between concubines and their children.

本文於 2017 年 12 月 14 日收稿；2018 年 10 月 29 日通過刊登

責任校對：柯靖銘(Timothy Clifford)

*I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers of this article for their helpful comments and suggestions.*

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## 屈大均和他的妻妾

盧葦菁\*

屈大均一生著述豐富，其中有關他妻妾孩子的作品為數不少。這些私人的記錄，為我們提供從微觀的男性個人視角，研究妻妾歷史現象的珍貴材料。本文根據他的詩文記載和線索，建構屈大均的婚娶、家庭、情感生活和自我再現。屈一生有九位女性成為他的妻妾。他一方面似乎遵從了四十無子方能娶妾的規範，但娶妾也是他追求享受和利用房中術延年益壽的工具。但更主要的是，他的婚娶行為，體現了他建築於儒家家庭觀念之上，以妻妾和子女成群為幸福的生活觀。然而，他書寫中期望展現的和諧大家庭，其實並不那麼和諧，其中原因，並不限於妻妾間的等級地位競爭。此外，屈大均的妾和其子女保持密切關係，此亦有助於未來我們重新檢視妾與所生子女關係的課題。

關鍵詞：家庭、婚姻、性別、一夫多妻制、情、妾、房中術

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