

The Gendered Politics of Socializing and the Emergence of the “Public Wife” in Late Qing Diplomacy*

Xia Shi **

Abstract

Studies of late Qing diplomatic history and its international relations still lack a gendered perspective. Meanwhile, the emergence of modern Chinese gender

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** Associate Professor, Department of History, New College of Florida

roles has rarely been examined beyond the perspectives of education and employment. This article explores the intersections of gender history and diplomatic history through examining the gendered politics of socializing in Chinese diplomacy. Late Qing envoys noticed that women were omnipresent in Western diplomatic and social functions, such as parties, receptions, and balls. Hence, even just to accomplish their official duties, they frequently had to deal with gender related issues, including not only learning how they themselves should interact with Western women in public, but also, more sensitively, deciding if they should follow Western etiquette and allow their wives, who were used to gender separation and domestic seclusion, to attend these events to shake hands with men, or converse with them over dinner table, or even dance with them. This article demonstrates how Qing elites gradually realized gender separation might be a liability in international diplomacy and began to adopt Western gender related etiquette in improvised ways, such as taking their concubines, a traditionally low-class category of public women, abroad to play the role of the public wife. Although these rapid adaptations were primarily done out of practical diplomatic concerns rather than new conceptualizations of gender relations, they facilitated the emergence of the role of the public wife, which opened a new officially-sanctioned public platform for Chinese women to appear and act.

Keywords: late Qing, socializing, public wife, concubine, diplomacy

When the first British envoy, Lord George Macartney (1737-1806), led a large British delegation to Beijing to open trade with China in 1793, whether he should kowtow to the Qianlong Emperor became a highly controversial issue. It is well-known that this incident highlighted the importance of ritual in both Qing and British diplomacy and foreign relations.¹ What is less known was that in a passage of reflections appended to the account of his embassy to China, Macartney included his comment on the absence of women from Chinese social occasions, and on the effects of that exclusion on social life:

Where women are excluded from appearing, all delicacy of taste and sentiment, the softness of address, the graces of elegant converse, the play of passions, the refinements of love and friendship must of course be banished. In their place gross familiarity, coarse pleasantry, and broad allusions are indulged in, but without that honesty and expansion of heart which we have sometimes observed to arise on such occasions among ourselves. Morality is a mere pretence in their practice, though a common topic of their discourse.²

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- 1 Robert Bickers, ed., *Ritual & Diplomacy: The Macartney Mission to China 1792-1794: Papers Presented at the 1992 Conference of the British Association for Chinese Studies Marking the Bicentenary of the Macartney Mission to China* (London: Wellsweep Press, 1993); and James Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).
 - 2 George Macartney, *An Embassy to China: Being the Journal Kept by Lord Macartney during his Embassy to the Emperor Ch'ien-Lung, 1793-1794* (London: Longmans, 1963), p. 223.

It was in this moral vacuum, according to Macartney, that Chinese men had developed two of their “cardinal vices,” their passion for gambling and their appetite for opium.³

Although it is difficult to prove a connection between the lack of women’s public presence and men’s supposed lack of moral principles, it is clear that Macartney saw women’s public presence as highly important and disapproved the Chinese lack of it in the late eighteenth century. In his gender ideal, Macartney particularly highlighted what he believed to be the refining influence of the female sex. What he expressed was likely not just his individual opinion but a view shared by many of his contemporaries in Britain, though more concrete evidence is needed to prove so and the topic itself is beyond the scope of this article. However, what is more relevant to point out here is that Chinese men had long similarly felt or noticed the need for this feminine influence. The fact that Chinese courtesans traditionally had long been active in social and public occasions, entertaining scholar-officials with their conversation skills, art, music performance, and other talents on social occasions is the best evidence of this, though their presence was perhaps not exactly in the ways that Macartney had in mind.⁴ However, Confucian gender norms require that a “good woman,” i.e. women from respectable families, should not show herself publicly, nor have any physical contact with men other than her immediate family members, since her chaste reputation was of

3 George Macartney, *An Embassy to China: Being the Journal Kept by Lord Macartney during his Embassy to the Emperor Ch'ien-Lung, 1793-1794*, p. 223.

4 Beverly Bossler, “Shifting Identities: Courtesans and Literati in Song China,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 62:1 (June 2002), pp. 5-37; Harriet Zurndorfer, “Prostitutes and Courtesans in the Confucian Moral Universe of Late Ming China (1550-1644),” *International Review of Social History* 56: 19 (August 2011), pp. 197-216.

paramount importance. Therefore, what Macartney did not realize was the crucial class status difference in terms of women’s public presence in Qing China. As we will see later, this class factor played a role in deterring some Qing officials’ wives, who were often from upper class respectable families, from accompanying their husbands abroad and appearing in public.

By the time of the mid-nineteenth century, after China’s defeat in the Opium Wars, it was forced to open for trade and diplomatically interact with the international world. The subsequent unequal treaties signed with Western powers opened not just certain treaty ports but also gradually the vast Chinese interior to foreign missionaries, officials, businessmen, and travelers, whose actions frequently caused disputes and sometimes even violence with local people. Consequently, the Qing government was repeatedly forced to deal with these foreign and domestic crises through diplomatic means. In 1861, a new institution to formally manage relations with the Western countries, the *Zongli Yamen* 總理衙門 (albeit conceived to be temporary), was created to meet the demands of the Western powers for diplomatic relations on an equal basis. It replaced the previous agencies, the Ministry of Rites and the Lifan Yuan, which had mostly dealt with affairs concerning tributary states and Inner Asia with a condescending and paternalistic attitude.⁵ In this way, China’s weakness in the face of Western military might have led to the Qing government’s first reluctant step to conduct diplomacy by a new “international protocol,” which, at the time, mostly meant Western criteria. As interaction with the West intensified, frequently the issue of ritual and etiquette caused concerns and debates in Qing official circles, as well as being contested by Western officials. Although the Qing court was forced

5 See Jennifer Rudolph, *Negotiated Power in Late Imperial China: The Zongli Yamen and the Politics of Reform* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).

to acknowledge its government's dramatically changed relationship with Western powers and hence the need for reform and flexibility on ritual matters, there was hardly any easy consensus on many important details such as the procedure, location, format, and the formal rituals involved in allowing Westerners to meet with Qing royalty and officials of different ranks.⁶

Meanwhile, as China continued to suffer from a series of military defeats toward the end of the century, including the humiliating Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) and the Boxer Uprising (1899-1901), a strong sense of urgent national crisis prompted intellectuals to do some soul searching on how to strengthen the nation. The so-called "woman's question" consequently became an issue of hot debate and women's domestic seclusion and footbinding gradually became symbols of China's backwardness. Over the years, as modernizing reforms unfolded, more and more women stepped out of their domestic sphere and engaged with the public world. Much scholarship has focused on the emergence of the "new women" type of gender roles, such as female students, female revolutionaries, and career women in the early twentieth century.⁷ Recently, I have challenged the familiar narrative of a

6 You Shujun 尤淑君, *Binli dao libin: waishi jinjian yu wanqing shewai tizhi de bianhua* 賓禮到禮賓：外使覲見與晚清涉外體制的變化 (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2013); He Xinhua 何新華, *Weiyi tianxia: Qingdai waijiao liyi jiqi biange* 威儀天下：清代外交禮儀及其變革 (Shanghai: Shanghai shehui kexueyuan chubanshe, 2011); Wang Kaixij 王開璽, *Qingdai waijiao liyi de jiaoshe yu lunzheng* 清代外交禮儀的交涉與論爭 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2009), and Tseng-Tsai Wang, "The Audience Question: Foreign Representatives and the Emperor of China, 1858-1873," *The Historical Journal* 14:3 (September 1971), p. 622.

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

radical transformation of modern Chinese gender roles by demonstrating how older married women without modern educations were able to reposition themselves to become active participants in urban public sphere by engaging in charitable and religious activities since the late Qing.⁸ Still, our understanding of the emergence of modern gender roles that enabled Chinese women to step into the public world through channels other than employment, education, or revolution remains limited.

From another perspective, so far, diplomatic history and international history of the late Qing still lack adequate attention to the gender factor involved in China’s foreign relations, except when an individual woman of extraordinary ability and special authority, such as the Empress Dowager Cixi (慈禧太后, 1835-1908) was evidently a major actor and decision maker.⁹ However, what role did gender related issues play in late Qing diplomacy? Few have explored this question so far.¹⁰ Historians studying European and American diplomacy and foreign relations have long ago realized

“Searching for the ‘New Womanhood’: Career Women in Shanghai, 1912-1945,” Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, Irvine, 2001; Christina Gilmartin, *Engendering the Chinese Revolution. Radical women, Communist Politics, and Mass Movements in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), and Hu Ying, “Naming the First New Woman: The Case of Kang Aide,” *Nan Nü: Men, Women, and Gender in Early and Imperial China* 3: 2 (January 2001), pp. 196-231.

8 Xia Shi, *At Home in the World: Women and Charity in Late Qing and Early Republican China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

9 On Cixi’s gendered diplomacy, see Daniel Barish, “The Emperor’s Classroom: Pedagogy and the Promise of Power in the Qing Empire, 1861-1912,” Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton University, 2017.

10 One exception is Ji Manhong and Lin Guangrong’s 2008 article, “Guo Songtao yu ‘furen waijiao,’” which discusses how Guo Songtao gradually learned to adopt the custom of “wife diplomacy” while socializing in Europe. Ji Manhong and Lin Guangrong 冀滿紅，林廣榮， “Guo Songtao yu ‘furen waijiao,’” 郭嵩燾與「夫人外交」, *Jiangxi shehui kexue* 江西社會科學 7 (July 2008), p.123.

the importance of including gender in historical analysis.¹¹ Kristin Hoganson, in particular, points out the importance of the perspective of gender in enabling historians to reveal and understand the cultural values, worldviews, and practices that shaped the actions of individual elite actors on state level.¹²

This article starts with this line of thinking and goes further by bringing a cross-cultural lens to show how gender-related Western social norms became essential etiquette that Chinese diplomats and officials had to learn to be able to carry out effective socialization in a late nineteenth century diplomatic world dominated by the West. It attempts to fill the scholarly gaps in both gender history and diplomatic history of the late Qing by tracing the emergence of the role of what I call the “public wife” in a variety of public functions that Chinese officials attended in the West, and how later the Western gendered norm and etiquette of socializing was borrowed by late Qing China and adapted to suit China’s particular cultural contexts. By public wife, I refer to a type of public role played by two types of Chinese women in social functions: an official’s wife who appeared in public occasions or an official’s concubine who appeared in public under the nominal name of the official’s spouse. Particular emphasis will be given to the second type to show how by playing this new public role, the concubine, a category of women of traditionally low status, were able to receive unprecedented public visibility and privilege, a phenomenon rarely seen in previous

11 Glenda Sluga and Carolyn James, eds., *Women, Diplomacy and International Politics since 1500* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 11; Emily Rosenberg, “Gender,” *Journal of American History* 77: 1 (June 1990), pp. 116-124.

12 Kristin Hoganson, “What’s Gender Got to Do with It? Gender History as Foreign Relations History,” in Michael J. Hogan and Thomas G. Patterson eds., *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 304-322.

Chinese history that directly upset existing class hierarchy and boundaries in Qing Confucian society.

Chahui and Women

In spite of the trend towards professionalization and bureaucratization in the mid-nineteenth century, diplomacy continued to be conducted to a large extent through sociability and talk.¹³ Historians, for instance, have examined how the salon remained a key site for the gathering and spreading of news in European society.¹⁴ Therefore, Qing envoys in Europe quickly realized the importance of attending various social functions such as banquets, receptions, and balls. Among these social functions, *chahui*, whose closest English translation probably was “party,” stood out as a unique format of social gathering that caught Chinese officials’ particular attention.

The term *chahui* was actually not a foreign loan word but rather one of strictly Chinese origin. For a long time before the late Qing, its actual format reflected the term’s literal meaning— a gathering to taste tea, as we can see from how literati used it in their writings as early as the Tang and Song dynasties.¹⁵ However, by the late Qing, in the journals of Chinese diplomats, the term was used

13 Helen McCarthy and James Southern, “Women, Gender, and Diplomacy: A Historical Survey,” in Jennifer Cassidy ed, *Gender and Diplomacy* (London: Routledge, 2017), p.23.

14 Glenda Sluga, “Women, Diplomacy and International Politics before and after the Congress of Vienna,” in Glenda Sluga and Carolyn James, eds., *Women, Diplomacy and International Politics since 1500*, pp. 120-136.

15 For an introduction of *chahui* 茶會(also called *chayan* 茶宴) in the Tang and Song Dynasties, see Chen Gangjun 陳剛俊, “Songdai chayan shulun” 宋代茶宴述論, *Nongye kaogu* 農業考古 5 (October 2016), pp. 68-71.

with new meanings, as if pouring new wine into an old bottle.

Liu Xihong (劉錫鴻, ? -1891), an assistant envoy to Britain in the 1870s, in his journal described what a Western *chahui* was according to what he had seen: “[hosts] brew coffee and tea, add sugar and milk, and put some cookies on the side. Then [hosts] decorate the living room and wait until guests arrive to drink. When many guests are present, people mostly stand and chat.”¹⁶ In the West, he adds, they are all planned and hosted by wives.¹⁷ Later, Zeng Jize (曾紀澤, 1839-1890), a Qing ambassador to Europe during the 1880s, also shared similar observations of some key differences between European *chahui* and traditional Chinese *chahui*. He often recorded “going to a *chahui* hosted by a certain Mrs.” in his journal. Clearly, he was aware that most of the *chahui* he attended were held in the names of the wives of officials, which differed from Chinese *chahui* where respectable women were not supposed to attend and mingle with men publicly. Moreover, like Liu, Zhang also mentioned that one central feature of *chahui* in the West was what he calls “stand and chat,” which was contrary to the Chinese traditional format of *chahui* where everybody sits down. This was especially true when the room was crowded, he noted.¹⁸

Compared to Liu and Zeng, Cai Jun (蔡鈞, 1850-1908), another Qing envoy, offered the most thorough explanation of *chahui*. Cai had extensive diplomatic experiences traveling abroad and thus became very familiar with Western etiquette.¹⁹ In 1885, he

16 Liu Xihong 劉錫鴻, *Yingyao siji* 英軺私記 (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 1986), p. 79.

17 Guo Songtao 郭嵩焘, *Lundun yu Bali riji* 倫敦與巴黎日記 (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 1985), p. 563.

18 Zeng Jize 曾紀澤, *Zeng Jize riji* 曾紀澤日記 volume 1 (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 1998) p. 842.

19 For more about Cai Jun, see Zhang Xiaochuan 張曉川, “Bingdang xuzhang shebian—Cai Jun yu wanqing difang duiwai jiaoshe” 擯擋須仗舌辯——蔡鈞與

published a short handbook in Shanghai, titled *Chushi xuzhi* (出使須知 *Things to Know As An Envoy*) for future Chinese envoys.²⁰ In particular, Cai introduces *chahui* and how to cope with them. He starts by stating that Western countries put the greatest emphasis on *chahui*. State balls (*chaonei chahui* 朝內茶會) are usually held twice or three times a year in the state palace. All major nobles, officials, wealthy merchants and envoys of different countries will be invited to attend. People all know that women will attend too according to Western social norms. Usually, each state ball can have as many as two or three thousand people and thus is a grand event. The King and the Queen usually start the ball by leading a dance. Afterwards, ambassadors and officials and their wives will follow with more dances.²¹

As for non-official *chahui*, Cai explains, there are usually two types: large and small. The purpose is not to seek pleasure but to “cultivate friendship.” Large *chahui* can have as many as hundreds or even thousands of people. Music and dance are usually included. They were usually held at night times and had no definite time to end.²² As for small *chahui*, the number of guests can range from dozens to over a hundred. They can be held as frequently as once a week. It originated from a type of entertainment in Western gentry and official families; later was adopted by envoys from various

晚清地方對外交涉, *Zhonghua wenshi luncong* 中華文史論叢 138: 2 (February 2020), pp. 117-146.

- 20 For more on Cai Jun’s publication of *Chu shi xu zhi*, see Quan Hexiu 權赫秀, “Wanqing zhongguo yu xibanya guanxi de yibu hanjian shiliao: Cai Jun zhu Chuyang suoji Hanguo cangben jiqi neirong pingjia” 晚清中國與西班牙關係的一部罕見史料：蔡鈞著《出洋瑣記》韓國藏本及其內容評介, *Shehui kexue yanjiu* 社會科學研究 3 (May 2012), pp. 154-162.
- 21 Chen Siyi and Mu Yi, 陳四益, 穆易 eds., *Cai Jun chuyang suoji* 蔡鈞出洋瑣記 (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 2016), p. 79.
- 22 Chen Siyi and Mu Yi, eds., *Cai Jun chuyang suoji*, p. 80.

countries to engage in social interactions to keep in touch. Although it might be not as lively as large *chahui*, a small *chahui* sometimes involves dancing as well. The hostess will surely introduce all the female guests. A guest should bow first and then shake hands with female guests. Women sometimes play piano and sing. Male guests could compose and recite poems to express themselves. In small *chahui*, guests usually arrive around 2 p.m. and leave around 6 p.m. Some *chahui* could be held between 5 and 7 p.m. as well. Guests mostly sit and chat, slightly using some refreshment.²³ To make sure his readers would not easily forget the importance of feminine presence in Western *chahui*, Cai further notes that to host a *chahui*, if the host has no female family members, he should ask a Western woman he is familiar with to act as hostess. To invite somebody to a *chahui*, his wife must be invited too. To attend a *chahui*, a couple must go and attend together.²⁴

As we can see from the above, compared to other formats of social gatherings, *chahui* were customarily hosted in the names of officials' wives rather than the officials themselves or the couples together, which uniquely highlights the important role of public wife. In addition, it seems that by the late nineteenth century, *chahui* had become part of the diplomatic protocol in Europe: upon an ambassador's arrival in the foreign country where he was posted, it was expected that a *chahui* would be hosted in the name of his wife to entertain the country's major officials as well as all the diplomats and their wives from other countries to demonstrate friendship and facilitate diplomacy.²⁵

No matter at *chahui* or other types of social gatherings, Qing

23 Chen Siyi and Mu Yi, eds., *Cai Jun chuyang suoji*, p. 81.

24 Chen Siyi and Mu Yi, eds., *Cai Jun chuyang suoji*, p. 83.

25 Ji Manhong and Lin Guangrong, "Guo Songtao yu 'furen waijiao'," *Jiangxi shehui kexue* 7, p.123.

officials all noticed that women were omnipresent in Western diplomatic socialization and they had an important and highly visible role in social public functions. Consequently, even just to accomplish their official duties by properly attending these social occasions, Qing envoys frequently had to deal with gender related issues, including not only learning how they themselves should interact with Western women in public, but also, more challengingly, deciding if they should follow Western etiquette and allow their own wives and daughters to attend these public events to shake hands with men, and/or converse with them over dinner table, and/or even dance with them.

How did these Qing officials cope with the new challenge? What were the controversies and politics involved? How did contemporary Westerners and Chinese perceive the public presence of Qing officials’ “wives”? As this article will show, one solution adopted by some officials was to bring their concubines, who were often former courtesans, the type of women who had long been active in elite social gatherings in China, to attend and host *chahui* as their public wives.²⁶ In other words, late nineteenth century China’s particular historical circumstances led to the development of a unique phenomenon, that is, several of the earliest daring public wives in its modern history were actually

26 Gail Hershatter has succinctly summarized the traditional logic behind choosing a principle wife versus a concubine: “Principal wives were usually acquired for a man by his family on the basis of matched backgrounds and with the aim of enhancing family assets and status, and a courtesan could not contribute much on any of these counts. Concubines, by contrast, were usually picked by the men themselves with an eye to sex, romantic attraction, and good conversation, as well as the production of male heirs.” See Gail Hershatter, “Modernizing Sex, Sexing Modernity: Prostitution in Early-Twentieth-Century Shanghai,” in Susan Brownell and Jeffrey Wasserstrom eds., *Chinese Femininities, Chinese Masculinities: A Reader* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p. 205.

concubines, a category of women of traditionally low status origin.²⁷ Subsequently, we see how through playing the novel gender role of the public wife, a concubine could receive an unprecedented degree of international visibility and public respectability. However, doing so also incurred politics and controversies in Qing court, in a time when court conservatives and reformers were still battling about to what degree China should be Westernized and the continued legitimacy of Confucian principle of gender separation.

Concubines playing the role of the public wife was a phenomenon rarely seen in Chinese history before this point. Even during the late Ming dynasty (1368-1644), a time when talented courtesans frequently associated with scholar officials and attracted broad public attention due to the cult of *qing* 情 (passion, love), becoming symbols of political loyalism, once they married into elite households and became concubines, they faded into the domestic world and were rarely seen stepping out of their inner quarters to play any public roles again.²⁸ Although some concubines during the

27 Many concubines were former courtesans/prostitutes, maid servants or entertainers and were often purchased outright into the household with barely any formality. The concubine was always aware of her inferior status. In every aspect of her domestic life, she was supposed to be subordinate to the principal wife. Even after the death of a man's principal wife, a concubine could not be elevated to the position of a wife, though this restriction was gradually lifted beginning in the Ming Dynasty. The children a concubine bore, had to address the principal wife as their legal mother (who could exercise full legal parental rights) and the concubine herself could only act as their birth mother. For more on concubine's legal rights in imperial China, see Kathryn Bernhart, *Women and Property in China, 960-1949* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 163-178.

28 Daria Berg, "Cultural Discourse on Xue Susu: A Courtesan in Late Ming China," *International Journal of Asian Studies* 6:2 (July 2009), p. 175. About the cult of *qing*, see, for example, Kang-i Sun Chang, *The Late-Ming Poet Ch'en Tzu-Lung: Crises of Love and Loyalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), pp. 9-18; Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in*

imperial period had provided company at private parties and played some sort of entertaining roles for their masters’ friends (since wives were not supposed to socialize with their husbands’ friends),²⁹ it is important to note that the role these concubines performed was not the same as that of a public wife. This is because the role of public wife comes with the social and public respectability, privilege, and recognition only associated with a man’s legal wife and her role was *not* an entertainer at those public functions. However, once the precedent of concubines acting as public wives had been set in the late Qing due to the need for diplomatic socialization, Republican China witnessed, as I have shown elsewhere, an increasing number of Chinese officials’ concubines playing this highly visible role in public functions at home and abroad, since many main wives still felt unwilling or uncomfortable to do so by themselves.³⁰

Also, around this period, as more Western diplomats and officials started visiting or residing in Chinese treaty ports such as Shanghai, how to properly receive and entertain them become a challenging issue for late Qing officials as hosts. By the end of the nineteenth century, as this article shows, some officials started summarizing their earlier experience in Western *chahui* and applying this new format to welcome Western dignitaries and their wives in China, gradually replacing previously condescending and cumbersome Chinese rituals and etiquette, which contributed on a personal level to fostering positive perceptions of Qing officialdom

Seventeenth-Century China (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 68-112; Richard Wang, “The Cult of *Qing*: Romanticism in the Late Ming Period and in the Novel *Jiao hong ji* 嬌紅記,” *Ming Studies* 33 (August 1994), pp.12-55.

29 Beverly Bossler, *Courtesans, Concubines, and the Cult of Female Fidelity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016).

30 Xia Shi, “Just Like a ‘Modern’ Wife? Concubines on the Public Stage in Early Republican China,” *Social History* 43:2 (February 2018), pp. 211-233.

and forging friendly relations with Western powers. However, rather than simply copy Western etiquette, adaptations had to be carefully made to not blatantly breach Confucian norms of gender separation, since court conservatives had once made it a political issue.

Overall, this article highlights three aspects of the public wife. First, it traces the emergence of the role of public wife by examining the sensitivity and significance of Western gender related etiquette in diplomatic socialization. Second, it highlights the little-known but pioneering public role that some concubines played in the diplomatic missions of late Qing. And third, it demonstrates how the cross-cultural exchanges surrounding diplomatic functions such as *chahui* taught Chinese elite men that gender separation might be a liability in international politics and that cross-cultural adaptation in terms of gender-related etiquette was integral to modernizing Chinese diplomacy and international relations. Although the rapid changes were adopted primarily out of practical diplomatic concerns rather than out of an embrace of new conceptualizations of gender relations, they facilitated the emergence of the role of the public wife, which opened a new officially sanctioned public platform for elite Chinese women to appear and act.

Concubines as the Public Wife

In September 1875, Guo Songtao (郭嵩燾, 1818-1891), a scholar-official from Hunan Province, was appointed by the Qing government as the first Chinese ambassador to Britain. Part of the reason for this action had to do with the Margary Affair earlier that year—the murder in the frontier province of Yunnan of a junior British official—Augustus Margary (1846-1875), who had been sent to Southwest China to explore overland trade routes between

British India and China’s provinces. After the lengthy negotiations between the Qing government and the British government, it was arranged that an embassy should be sent to Britain to apologize, as well as open a Chinese Legation in London, thereby marking an important stage in China’s foreign relations. Guo’s case is worth examining because it was the first well-known case of an imperial official bringing his concubine abroad and attending *chahui* with her during their two-year stay in London, which, as we will see, caused controversial domestic political reactions and debates for violating the Confucian codes of gender separation and domestic seclusion. Some scholars have pointed out that Guo’s case was the first in modern Chinese history in which a Chinese official conducted “wife diplomacy” (*furen waijiao* 夫人外交).³¹ However, my focus here is less about women’s impacts on Chinese diplomacy but more to trace the emergence of a new type of public role for Chinese women in the late nineteenth century—the public wife. This section will specifically show how the role of the public wife first appeared in the arena of Chinese diplomacy and that it was actually a Chinese official’s concubine who first played this role.

On December 1, 1876, Guo and his embassy sailed from Shanghai on this unprecedented mission. His entourage included assistant Envoy Liu Xihong, English interpreter Zhang Deyi (1847-1918), secretary Halliday Macartney (Chinese name: Ma Geli 馬格理, 1833-1906), a British citizen who worked for the Qing government, Guo’s concubine, and a retinue of another ten persons. On January 21, 1877, after fifty days at sea, Guo and his entourage arrived at Southampton. They quickly became a curiosity in the eyes of the British public, due to the differences of dress, manner, and appearance. People in London stared at and followed

31 Ji Manhong and Lin Guangrong, "Guo Songtao yu 'furen waijiao'," *Jiangxi shehui kexue* 7, 123.

them when they came out of the embassy. Meanwhile, most of the newspapers spared some space to introduce Guo, “the lion of the season,” and his activities in England.³²

Guo’s concubine, a woman surnamed Liang 梁氏, rather than his principal wife, accompanied him on the voyage. Sources did not mention why Guo did not take his main wife. Neither do we know much about Liang. One source believes that she was a maidservant of the former Guangxi governor, Su Fengwen (蘇鳳文, ? -1889), and was taken in as a concubine by Guo in 1871, however, I have not seen other sources to verify this.³³ According to J. D. Frodsham, apparently, Guo “had originally planned to take both his secondary wives to England with him, but must have been persuaded by Halliday Macartney that such an indiscretion would prejudice his being received in polite society.”³⁴ In addition, Frodsham adds, “the Western diplomatic community in Peking [Beijing] was aware that Madame Kuo [Guo] was not Kuo’s principal wife, as we may see from a report submitted by one of the Secretaries of the French legation in Peking...”³⁵ Liang’s concubine status can also be confirmed by the fact that the English interpreter of the Chinese Embassy, Zhang Deyi, referred to her as *ru furen* (如夫人 like a wife) in his journal, a polite term exclusively reserved to refer to concubines.³⁶

32 Owen Hong-hin Wong, *A New Profile in Sino-Western Diplomacy: The First Chinese Minister to Great Britain* (Hong Kong: Chung Hwa Book, 1987), p.134.

33 Jiang Ming 姜鳴, *Qiufeng baojian guchen lei: wan Qing de zhengju he renwu xubian* 秋風寶劍孤臣淚：晚清的政局和人物續編 (Hong Kong: Xianggang zhonghe chuban gongsi, 2016), p. 215.

34 J. D. Frodsham trans., *The First Chinese Embassy to the West: The Journals of Kuo Sung-T'ao, Liu Hsi-Hung and Chang Te-Yi* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. xlviii.

35 J. D. Frodsham trans., *The First Chinese Embassy to the West: The Journals of Kuo Sung-T'ao, Liu Hsi-Hung and Chang Te-Yi*, p. xlviii.

36 Zhang Deyi 張德彝, *Suishi ying'e ji* 隨使英俄記 (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 1985), p. 540.

As Madame Guo, Liang attracted particular attention in London media, not for any particular actions she did, but as a living representation of an oriental lady. The *Illustrated London News* commented: “Kuo-Ta-jên [Guo daren, Mandarin Guo] is accompanied by Lady Kuo, who may be said to be the first lady of position who has ever ventured beyond the shores of the Central Kingdom. During her voyage to England, in conformity with Chinese ideas of propriety she remained during the whole time in the strictest seclusion, never once having even taken a seat on deck.”³⁷ *Punch* called Madame Guo “the Tottering Lily of Fascination,” and depicted her “in the guise of simpering Japanese geisha in an outrageously décolleté kimono,” expressing the hope that her bound feet would not start a national fashion in Britain.³⁸ The *Standard* mentioned Guo’s possession of “two wives,” only one of whom was entitled to be Lady Guo, Liang’s small feet, and the slave girls who attended Liang.³⁹ Clearly, the British media was quick to identify all the oriental features of Madame Guo (ex. seclusion, footbinding, concubinage, and slavery) and make them into ingredients of sensational news.

Soon the news that Liang was not Guo’s principal wife but a concubine spread around. It is possible that Liu Xihong, the assistant envoy, was the one who disclosed this. While they were still in London, in March 1878, Liu impeached Guo to the Qing government for “ten misdeeds” in Britain. Some of these were: that

37 Originally from *The Illustrated London News*, February 24, 1877, p.171, quoted in J. D. Frodsham trans., *The First Chinese Embassy to the West: The Journals of Kuo Sung-T'ao, Liu Hsi-Hung and Chang Te-Yi*, p. xlviii.

38 “To the Tottering Lily,” *Punch*, Feb 17, 1877, quoted in J. D. Frodsham trans., *The First Chinese Embassy to the West: The Journals of Kuo Sung-T'ao, Liu Hsi-Hung and Chang Te-Yi*, pp. lxiv-lxv.

39 Originally from *The Special of the Standard* (quoted in *the London and China Express*, January 26, 1877), quoted in Owen Hong-hin Wong, *A New Profile in Sino-Western Diplomacy: The First Chinese Minister to Great Britain*, p. 134.

Guo “socialized everywhere obsequiously and adopted the etiquette of hand shaking;”⁴⁰ that he was keen to learn English, but, as he was too old to learn it, he told his concubine to learn it; and that he brought with him one of his wives to England and observed Western diplomatic protocols by bringing her to some of the official functions.”⁴¹

Indeed, the Guo couple socialized frequently in London. Liang, who was only in her twenties,⁴² studied English, attended some official functions, and visited wives of British officials, all of which were done under the approval of Guo. She even went to a public zoo and visited the “Embroidery House” by the invitations of some British officials’ wives.⁴³ Compared to Liang, Guo and his staff were more fully occupied by the hectic social life demanded of ambassadors. They attended numerous parties, formal receptions, balls, and banquets held by the wives of officials. Eventually, Queen Victoria herself gave the Guo couple a special audience at Osborne, shortly before the ambassador’s return to China in January 1879. This finally set the seal of respectability on concubine Liang in the eyes of British media and high society.⁴⁴

During these social interactions, the officials of the Chinese

40 Guo Songtao, *Lundun yu Bali riji*, pp. 810-811.

41 Qingsheng Tong, “Guo Songtao in London: An Unaccomplished Mission of Discovery,” in Elaine Yee Lin Ho and Julia Kuehn eds., *China Abroad: Travels, Subjects, Spaces* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), p. 8.

42 According to Guo’s family members’ recollections, in 1934, they celebrated concubine Liang’s eightieth birthday for her. This means that she was about twenty-four years old in 1878. See Wang Huan 王歡 and Zou Rui 鄒睿, “Hunan xianhe jiazu: xiangyin Guo Songtao houren jiangshu mousheng zhi jian” 湖南顯赫家族：湘陰郭嵩燾後人講述謀生之艱, <http://mjlsh.usc.cuhk.edu.hk/Book.aspx?cid=11&tid=2153> (accessed November 11, 2021).

43 Guo Songtao, *Lundun yu Bali riji*, pp. 100, 105, 135.

44 J. D. Frodsham trans., *The First Chinese Embassy to the West: The Journals of Kuo Sung-T’ao, Liu Hsi-Hung and Chang Te-Yi*, p. xlvi.

embassy particularly noticed, among other things, the British forms of social gathering and the prominent role that wives of British officials played in social functions and diplomatic circles. Liu Xihong commented in his journal on how different gender relations were in England and how when couples went out to parties, “the husband serves his wife much as the filial son in China serves his parents.”⁴⁵ Zhang Deyi shared similar observations: “in family regulations, the wife proposes and the husband follows.”⁴⁶ As J. D. Frodsham has pointed out, it seems that Liu confused deference with subservience in terms of the husband’s attitudes towards the wife in England.⁴⁷ Additionally, it seems that neither Liu nor Zhang had fully grasped the public-private dichotomy and its significance for British gender relations. In Victorian England, elite women were often viewed as “the angle in the house.” Therefore, for matters related to the domestic realm, it was not surprising to see women make decisions as the household manager. However, in no way did this mean that women had equal status to men. Wives in general were still expected to be devoted and submissive to their husbands. In the public realm, women were not allowed to become officials and they could only attend various salons and parties as the family members of the male officials.⁴⁸

After being repeatedly invited as a guest, Guo decided to

45 September 4, 1877, from Liu Xihong’s journal, English translation quoted from J. D. Frodsham trans., *The First Chinese Embassy to the West: The Journals of Kuo Sung-T’ao, Liu Hsi-Hung and Chang Te-Yi*, pp. 148-149.

46 Undated, from Zhang Deyi’s journal, English translation quoted from J. D. Frodsham trans., *The First Chinese Embassy to the West: The Journals of Kuo Sung-T’ao, Liu Hsi-Hung and Chang Te-Yi*, pp. 171-172.

47 J. D. Frodsham trans., *The First Chinese Embassy to the West: The Journals of Kuo Sung-T’ao, Liu Hsi-Hung and Chang Te-Yi*, pp. 148-149.

48 Joan Perkin, *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

follow the British custom and host a *chahui* in the name of Madame Guo to return all the hospitality showered to him and his staff. In April 1878, he told Zhang Deyi to prepare a guest list and print invitations. However, Zhang expressed his reservations: “According to Western customs, *chahui* indeed should be held in the names of wives, however, this time, when hosting a *chahui*, the Chinese ambassador can be more flexible, and does not have to strictly follow British local customs.” This is because, he further explains, “In the Western countries, if you host a party in the name of your concubine, naturally it violates no rules. However, if this news spread into China, I am afraid that people will criticize you.” After hearing this, Guo thought for a while and decided to listen to Zhang’s advice.⁴⁹

However, soon Guo changed his mind. On June 19, 1878, in London, a grand reception was held in the name of “Madame Guo” at the Chinese embassy. The event was widely reported both in Britain and China. What happened that made Guo no longer afraid of domestic criticism? The short answer is that by then, Guo had already determined to resign from his post and therefore no longer cared if his activities followed Chinese gender propriety. Guo’s relationship with Liu had deteriorated to the point that they attacked each other in several memorials to the Zongli Yamen. Their personal conflicts were also entangled with the struggle between reformers and conservatives in the Qing court. After reading Liu’s memorial about Guo’s “ten misdeeds” in Britain, Zhang Peilun (張佩綸, 1848-1903), an Attendant Reader at the Hanlin Academy who made a name for himself as an uncompromising critic of fellow officials, wrote a memorial titled “Embassy Officials Should Not be Allowed to Take Family Members Abroad.” He argued that Western customs do not

49 Zhang Deyi, *Suishi ying'e ji*, p. 560.

separate men and women, who do not avoid each other in social interactions. Guo Songtao took his family abroad to take his post. While being there, Zhang continued, Guo insisted on imitating barbarians’ customs, made gender-mingled trips, and blatantly sought publicity to please foreigners. After news about what he did spread, he had been widely criticized. Therefore, Zhang petitioned that in the future when Chinese officials travel abroad, the government should not allow them to take their family members with them so as to “preserve our propriety and respect the honor of our country.”⁵⁰

It seems that even before Guo had the idea of hosting a party in the name of his concubine, he was already being criticized domestically for violating the Chinese custom of separating men and women and keeping women secluded. What further disappointed Guo was that the domestic court’s reactions towards the conflict between him and Liu did not show much sympathy towards him, for many officials felt that Guo sent too many official memorials of criticism and had too strong opinions on many issues. Seeing this, Guo was determined to resign and go back to China and had sent memorials to court to ask permission to do so.⁵¹ This also made him care less about whether his activities during the remaining months of his term were contradictory to Chinese ideas of propriety or not. Consequently, he decided to go ahead with the party he originally planned.

It seems that the *chahui* held at the Chinese embassy in London in the name of Guo’s concubine was a major success, with

50 Zhang Yuquan 張宇權, “Wanqing waijiao shi shang de yidian yiwen: Lun Guo Songtao yu Liu Xihong de guanxi” 晚清外交史上的一點疑問：論郭嵩燾與劉錫鴻的關係 Shekewang 社科網, November, 2010, p.9, <https://www.sinoss.net/uploadfile/2010/1130/4913.pdf> (accessed December 24, 2021).

51 Zhang Deyi, *Suishi ying’e ji*, p. 8.

over 600 guests in attendance. *The Times* reported the details of the party the next day:

Last night the Chinese Minister and Madame Kuo [Guo] had a reception at the Chinese Legation, 45, Portland-place, the first time the representative of the Celestial Empire has given such an entertainment in Europe. The Minister had caused his residence to be arranged in accordance with English taste and usage. The entrance-hall and staircase were covered with crimson carpeting, and in every disposable place beautiful flowers were grouped in tasteful forms. The two principal saloons and ante-rooms were brilliantly lighted, the balcony fronting the mansion being enclosed and arranged with flowers and lighted with Chinese lanterns. The Chinese Minister and Madame Kuo received their guests in the usual European manner in the drawing-room, the hostess being dressed in the toilette of a lady of rank in her country. *The reception was especially interesting from the fact of its having been the first occasion on which a Chinese lady had appeared in general society, where gentlemen as well as ladies were present.* The dining-room and connecting apartment on the ground floor were thrown open for refreshments. The company invited numbered about 800, and about three-fourths of that number were present, including all the principal members of the Corps Diplomatique. Raimo's band was retained, and during the assembly played a selection of music. [emphasis mine]⁵²

We can see that the report particularly highlighted how unusual it was (“the first occasion”) for Mme. Guo, a Chinese lady, to appear in public, receiving men as well as women.

52 “The Chinese Legation,” *The Times* (London), June 20, 1878, p. 9.

Different from Chinese court’s critical reactions, some domestic press, in particular, the highly influential *Shenbao* (申報, 1872-1945) one of the earliest modern Chinese newspapers, reported the event in a positive tone. Three articles published in *Shenbao* in the second half of 1878 not only expressed their approval of Guo’s activities in Britain but also seemed to be defending Guo against domestic criticisms. This probably had to do with, among other things, the fact that the newspaper was founded in Shanghai (in 1872) and owned by an Englishman, Ernest Major (1841-1908). The first short report, published on August 6, 1878, was titled “Imperial Envoy Gives Reception.” It first gives a sketch of the London event on June 19 by detailing the dazzling arrangement of flowers, lights, and carpets. Then it continues: “The Ambassador and his concubine (*ru furen* 如夫人), with the British advisor [to Guo] Mr. Ma[cartney], entered the reception hall to welcome the gentlemen and ladies.” Here, the use of the exact Chinese term “*ru furen*” to address Liang rather the more general term like the one British media used, “Mme. Guo,” shows that *Shenbao* did not try to cover up Liang’s concubine status. After listing the types of illustrious guests gracing the reception, the report further described the “banquet” (*yan* 宴) (clearly, the reporter had not learned to use the term *chahu*). It said that the banquet offered a variety of delicacies with musical accompaniment, and the hosts and guests exchanged toasts, all of which implied that Guo’s concubine sat down with the guests and interacted with them. The report ends: “We note that this [type of reception] is a firmly established way of social intercourse for ambassadors stationed in other states; that in this case Ambassador Guo has also done it along these lines. It is definitely the way of friendly and cordial relations.”⁵³

53 “Qinshi yanke” 欽使宴客, *Shenbao* 申報, August 6, 1878, p.1.

Three days later, *Shenbao* added an editorial, “On the Ritual Rule of Separating Men and Women,” to further praise Guo for adopting Western customs to host banquets in London and receive British gentlemen and ladies together with his concubine. It further laments that Guo could only have done this in London and was much appreciated by his British guests for this reception and his hospitality. These moves, the editorial claims, would be impossible at home because China emphasizes the ritual rule of segregating men and women. Furthermore, the editorial traces back to the history of the Spring and Autumn period (770-476BC), arguing that Chinese women with both talent and virtue then had never been sequestered in the inner quarters; instead, they often received guests and officials. This had been the original ritual rule of previous kings; however, people of later times have been merely attending the trifles to the neglect of essentials, belittling women’s talent and separating them from men.⁵⁴ Therefore, through reinterpreting Chinese gender tradition, the editorial found further rationale to support Guo and his concubine’s co-hosting the reception. Guo’s action became praiseworthy not only from the perspective of daringly adopting established Western ways of social interaction when needed, but also for demonstrating that he truly grasped the ritual essence of Chinese sage-kings.

Despite the positive media evaluations of Guo’s action both abroad and domestically, on August 26, 1878, both Guo and Liu were recalled by the Qing government. Guo was ordered to return and be replaced by Marquis Zeng Jize, the eldest son of the well-known official Zeng Guofan (曾國藩, 1811-1872), who played a leading role in suppressing the Taiping Rebellion and restoring the stability of the Qing Empire. In September or October of 1878, rumors must have reached the *Shenbao* that Guo lost his position

54 “Lun libie nannü” 論禮別男女, *Shenbao*, August 9, 1878, p.1.

because he had been attacked in court for not following the Chinese rules for keeping men and women apart and for aping the Westerners. On November 15, we see that the *Shenbao* reacted with another long editorial “On the Proper Rules of Men and Women Interacting.” It defended Guo by pointing out that the reception had been a diplomatic success. Since no one sits down at a *chahui* (note the use of this term) in London, his critics who accused him of having allowed his concubine to sit down with male guests at the banquet were just being ignorant.⁵⁵ Clearly, the author of this editorial was more familiar with the differences between a *chahui* and a traditional Chinese banquet.

The case of Guo Songtao and his concubine demonstrates to us not only a Chinese diplomat’s frequent need to adjust and adapt to Western formats of social interaction, but also the particular tensions and politics involved in having a Chinese official’s “wife” appear on an international stage following Western customs during the late Qing. The visibility of Liang in the public eye brought not only an unusual degree of respectability to her as a concubine, but also intense cultural controversy and political struggle surrounding the Guo couple’s actions abroad. It is notable that throughout the controversy, the domestic criticisms were mostly centered on Guo breaking Chinese standards of propriety by not keeping men and women apart, rather than on the fact that he took his concubine instead of his principal wife abroad, and thus lost face for the Qing empire internationally. By contrast, as I have shown elsewhere, some progressive Chinese elites in the 1920s (when concubinage

55 “Nannü xiangjian lijie bian” 男女相見禮節辨, *Shenbao*, November 15, 1878, p.1. For a discussion about the conflict between *Shenbao* and Guo Songtao, see Rudolf Wagner, “The *Shenbao* in Crisis: The International Environment and the Conflict Between Guo Songtao and the *Shenbao*,” *Late Imperial China* 20: 1 (June 1999), pp. 107-143.

was under vehement attack as a backward traditional institution) reacted with a rather strong and sensitive sense of shame and humiliation to the public presence of a Chinese concubine rather than a main wife on the international stage.⁵⁶ As for the British media and high society in the 1870s, they only briefly paid attention to the fact that Liang was not Guo's main wife (and possibly thought it inappropriate and even scandalous). However, mostly, they were more fascinated by the exotic oriental gender customs per se, rather than dwelling upon the issue of Ambassador Guo's morality.

In addition to Guo, we know of at least one other Qing official, Hong Jun (洪鈞, 1840-1893), who took his concubine, Sai Jinhua (賽金花, 1874-1936), rather than his main wife abroad with him for official duties. Sai met Hong, then a metropolitan degree holder, when she was a courtesan in Suzhou, Southern China. She married him soon after and moved with him to Beijing in 1887. Before long she accompanied him on a diplomatic mission to Russia, Germany, Austria and Holland and spent three years in Europe, visiting St. Petersburg, the Hague, Vienna, Paris, London, and Berlin. She lived longest in Berlin (from 1887 to 1891) where she met Emperor Wilhelm II of Germany, Empress Augusta and Chancellor Bismarck.⁵⁷ It seems that Hong learned from the lessons of Guo and took extra precautions not to allow his concubine to mingle with men. Hong's journal during this period only mentioned Sai's activities a couple of times: on one occasion entertaining female guests upstairs (thus gender-segregated) at the Chinese embassy during a New Year's party held by Hong;

56 Xia Shi, "Just Like a 'Modern' Wife? Concubines on the Public Stage in Early Republican China," *Social History* 43:2, pp. 211-233.

57 Lily Xiao, Hong Lee, Clara Lau, and A. D. Stefanowska eds., *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Women: The Qing period, 1644-1911* (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2015), pp. 182-184.

celebrating Hong’s promotion with several diplomats’ wives by drinks; and going for tea at a German official wife’s house. It seems that she never attended any formal public receptions as the public wife of a Chinese envoy, as Guo’s concubine did, though we do not know if Hong deliberately omitted in his journal (which would be reviewed by the Qing government) any public activities of Sai that might be deemed “inappropriate.”⁵⁸

In Hong’s case, although we do not have sources that directly explain why he took Sai abroad instead of his principal wife, we can speculate from the revealing descriptions in a best-selling late Qing novel *Niehai hua* 孽海花 (*Flowers in a Sea of Retribution*), which fictionalizes the travels of Hong (as Jin Wenqing 金雯青) and Sai (as Fu Caiyun 傅彩雲). Although it was first published in 1905, about two decades after their actual journey, the story was set in the 1880s. The novel provides fictional examples of the principle that was in operation of a wife calling on a concubine to accompany a husband on a trip abroad, which, at the time, was a more common practice than a wife herself taking on the duty.⁵⁹ One scene is particularly illustrative. On the eve of Jin’s journey abroad, Fu “steps out of the wedding sedan in the official garb ... of the principal wife.”⁶⁰ Friends and relatives standing in the hall immediately notice this disorder and start whispering. Sensing their doubts, Jin’s principal wife steps forward and speaks:

58 Zhong Shuhe 鍾叔河, “Sai Jinhua zai Bolin” 賽金花在北京 *Luxun yanjiu yuekan* 魯迅研究月刊 11 (November 2002), pp. 76-77.

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

60 Hu Ying, “Re-Configuring Nei/Wai: Writing the Woman Traveler in the Late Qing,” *Late Imperial China* 18:1 (June 1997), p. 77.

“Dear friends and senior relatives, you may find today’s ceremony and the costume of the bride surprising. Please allow me to explain. It stands to reason that I should accompany Wenqing when he goes abroad. However, because of my physical indisposition, I will be unable to travel. The new bride of today will take over my responsibilities. Since the wife of an ambassador becomes the visible representation of the whole country, no attention to detail should be spared. Therefore, I am willing to lend her my power and my official costumes. When they return from abroad, of course, she will then return them to me.” When her clear voice died down, everybody murmured praise.⁶¹

The public excuse used here by the principal wife was “physical indisposition.” However, as Hu Ying has pointed out, in an earlier scene in the novel in which the main wife was “talking to her husband behind closed doors,” she stated her resolve not to go abroad as a result of her principles based on “cultural difference”: “I have heard that, following foreign customs, an ambassador’s wife is also expected to receive guests, attend parties, even shake hands and kiss foreigners. Having been brought up properly in a distinguished household, not in a thousand years would I ever get used to this sort of business.”⁶² Clearly, the main wife viewed traveling abroad and interacting with foreigners in public as an outright transgression of the Confucian norms of gender separation and domestic seclusion. In contrast, the concubine was chosen as the appropriate candidate for the role of an ambassador’s wife on

61 Quoted in Hu Ying, “Re-Configuring Nei/Wai: Writing the Woman Traveler in the Late Qing,” *Late Imperial China* 18:1, p. 78.

62 Quoted in Hu Ying, “Re-Configuring Nei/Wai: Writing the Woman Traveler in the Late Qing,” *Late Imperial China* 18:1, p. 78.

display, a public wife, because she had already violated the boundary between the domestic and the public by her previous position as a courtesan.

Zeng Jize’s Family’s Adjustment to Western Gendered Norm of Socializing

Succeeding Guo, Zeng Jize was appointed minister to Britain, France and Russia in 1878 and lived in Europe for seven years. Just like Guo, Zeng followed the court’s order and kept a journal detailing his activities abroad. A review of his journal further calls our attention to how a Chinese official observed and participated in various Western formats of socializing and how his family members gradually became more engaged with these occasions.

The term *chahui* showed up very often in Zeng’s journal, indicating how frequently Zeng socialized with European officials through this format.⁶³ During the first two years while Zeng was in France, almost every couple of days, his journal entry records that he attended a *chahui*. Sometimes he went to several in a single night. In January 1879, Zeng, for the first time in his life, saw “the ritual of men and women dancing together.”⁶⁴ At first, he shared Liu Xihong’s ridicule towards this,⁶⁵ but one month later, he attended another ball and began to observe and understand the purpose of it, especially appreciating the fact that some were held for the purpose of charity. Consequently, he not only watched the dance for a long time but also donated funds to the charity.⁶⁶ By

63 Guo Songtao, *Lundun yu Bali riji*, pp. 563, 565, 571.

64 Zeng Jize, *Zeng Jize riji* volume 1, pp. 841-842.

65 Liu Xihong, *Yingyao siji*, p. 132, pp. 201-202.

66 Zeng Jize, *Zeng Jize riji* volume 1., pp. 841-842.

April 19, 1880, when he went to a ball at Buckingham Palace, his journal entry for the day not only described in details the features of the ball, but it also notes that the men and women who danced together “had dignified deportment and noble expression.”⁶⁷ Such positive remarks suggest that gradually Zeng had adjusted his original view of women and men dancing together.

In the beginning of his journey to Europe, it seems that Zeng clearly learned from Guo’s “mistakes,” and was determined not to allow his women to mingle with men. We know that Zeng took his wife (surnamed Liu; Zeng did not have any concubines then), two daughters, and a sister to Europe with him.⁶⁸ According to his journal, before he and his family members boarded their ship to France, he wrote a letter and let his interpreter forward it to the French government. In this letter, he explained that due to the Confucian gender code, Chinese women are not allowed to mingle with men. Despite the current friendly relationship between China and Western countries (and the personal friendships he had cultivated), he could not allow his women to follow Western etiquette to mingle with men, shake their hands, or worse, dine together with them, which would be regarded “a great shame in their lives.” Female family members of Chinese envoys, however, could be allowed to meet Western female guests.⁶⁹ In November 1878, Zeng’s ship arrived at Hong Kong, and there the Zeng women faced their first challenge in attending public functions. Hong Kong Governor Sir John Pope Hennessy (1834-1891) came to welcome them. Zeng immediately informed the governor that Chinese

67 Zeng Jize, *Zeng Jize riji* volume 1., p. 984.

68 Lin Weihong 林維紅, “Miandui xifang wenhua de zhongguo nüxing: cong Zeng Jize riji kan Zeng shi funü zai Ouzhou” 面對西方文化的中國女性：從《曾紀澤日記》看曾氏婦女在歐洲, *Zhejiang xuekan* 浙江學刊 4 (July 2007), p. 213.

69 Zeng Jize, *Zeng Jize riji* volume 1., pp. 803-804.

etiquette were different from those of the West, and therefore the Zeng women could not meet male guests, and they especially could not dine together with them. The Governor showed his understanding and the next day ordered two separate banquets to welcome them, having arranged the Zeng women dine in a gender segregated room, with female servants forwarding mutual greetings etc.⁷⁰

Soon after their arrival in Europe, the Zeng women became very busy meeting with Western women, mostly officials' wives calling on them. Each year, Zeng spent about half his time in France and half in Britain as ambassador to both countries. Later, after he was also appointed as ambassador to Russia, he sometimes would also stay there for extended periods of time. His family members accompanied him each time when they needed to move. The second year when he stayed in Britain, he had to set aside a separate room in his house, designating it as “female reception room” to facilitate these social interactions, which also indicates that he was still upholding the Confucian gender separation principle in practice. Sometimes, the Zeng women would meet ten to twenty Western women in a single day.⁷¹ Zeng himself also played the role of interpreter in these meetings whenever he could, until after about two years when the Zeng women (especially his young daughters) had learned sufficient English to carry out conversations with the guests on their own.⁷²

Soon, Zeng, just like Guo, realized that after attending so many *chahui*, he and the Chinese embassy should do something to reciprocate the hospitality. In January 1880, his journal entry shows that he and his subordinates discussed in great length several days in

70 Zeng Jize, *Zeng Jize riji* volume 1., pp. 812-813.

71 Zeng Jize, *Zeng Jize riji* volume 1, pp. 1319-1320.

72 Zeng Jize, *Zeng Jize riji* volume 1, pp. 1086-1298.

a row on how to organize a *chahui*. On February 4, a *chahui* was held at the Chinese embassy with over 1200 guests in attendance. It started with a banquet and finished with dancing. The entire procedure, including time, format, and content, followed Western custom.⁷³ Despite his earlier disapproval of men and women dancing together, this time, to entertain Westerners, he had to follow the local custom by incorporating dancing into his own *chahui*.

Did the Zeng women appear in public and dance in the *chahui* that Zeng organized? Zeng's journal did not reveal these details. However, it is difficult to imagine that the Zeng couple, as the host and hostess of the *chahui*, did not follow Western etiquette to appear publicly to welcome all the guests, just as Guo and Liang had to do when they hosted their *chahui*. From then on, we see that the Zeng women began to attend more *chahui*. One journal entry reveals the pressure Zeng gradually felt and the eventual compromise he had to make. On May 22, 1880, for the first time, he took his wife and sister to Buckingham Palace for a concert. His journal entry for that day explained why he decided to do so: Since the beginning of that year he and his family had received invitations from Buckingham Palace twice for balls and twice for concerts. The first three times, he did not take his family members with him. However, for the fourth time, his secretary Halliday Macartney advised him to take his family, for Macartney thought that it was important for the Zengs to accept the British monarch's great generosity.⁷⁴ Upon hearing this, Zeng decided to take his family with him. Zeng's struggles suggest that the longer he stayed in Europe, the harder he found it to continue to strictly forbid his family members to attend any public occasions where men were

73 Zeng Jize, *Zeng Jize riji* volume 1, p. 963.

74 Zeng Jize, *Zeng Jize riji* volume 1, p. 993.

also present. From 1880 to 1881, the Zeng family together attended around four to five *chahuis*. On June 3, 1883, Zeng wrote that he even took his wife to Buckingham Palace to attend a ball.⁷⁵

We do not know in these public occasions if the Zeng women mingled or shook hands with men, or if they dined and or danced with them. Zeng's journal left out all the relevant details. We can imagine that he must have known that his journal was going to be reviewed one day by conservatives at court and therefore, he must be very careful to not mention any gender "inappropriate" activities related to the Zeng women. It is also possible that he meanwhile felt that these were trivial details that should not be dwelled upon in the journal of an ambassador. In addition, he often reexamined his journal to transcribe, delete, and revise its content. On the other hand, none of the Zeng women left their own voices in writing, and therefore we do not know how they felt about these experiences, either.⁷⁶

Zeng's case, in addition to demonstrating the gradual process of adopting the gendered etiquette of attending *chahui* by a Chinese

75 Zeng Jize, *Zeng Jize riji* volume 1, p. 1258.

76 Lin Weihong, "Miandui xifang wenhua de zhongguo nüxing, cong Zeng Jize riji kan Zeng shi funü zai Ouzhou," *Zhejiang xuekan* 4, p. 212. Lin Weihong suggests that the Zeng women's encounters with Western cultures and societies were not only frequent, but also more comprehensive than we might expect. Lin points out that before he headed to Europe, Zeng tried to familiarize his family members with Western social etiquette and cultures with the help of the female family members of his Western friends, to get them better prepared for the trip. As a very "family oriented" man, Zeng, Lin shows, while in Europe also liked to take his family out to visit parks, zoos, museums, circus, beach and other public places for sightseeing when possible (he still tried to pick days when there were less people in these places). This is not to mention that the Zeng family members frequently needed the treatment of Western doctors, most of whom were men. In all of these occasions, they also learned more about common people's lives in the West.

official and his family, shows that sometimes a Qing official's wife did accompany her husband for official duties abroad and serve as his public wife. The decision seemed to depend on individual situations. In Zeng's case, he did not have a concubine at the time when he needed to leave for Europe. Zeng himself was also relatively flexible and open minded towards Western cultures and customs. It did not take him long to realize that having his wife strictly adhere to rigid Confucian rules of gender separation and refuse to accommodate to Western ways of socializing while living in Europe for seven years (1879-1886) would not be beneficial and practical for Chinese diplomacy. Nonetheless, he was careful enough to avoid mentioning all the details of his wife's public presence in his journal and, particularly if she mingled with men, to avoid any controversies in the Qing court. He was also fortunate enough to not have a hostile subordinate like Liu Xihong who reported in detail what Guo and his concubine did publicly to the Qing court. Consequently, although Zeng's wife and daughters probably attended many *chahui* while in Europe, people in China generally knew nothing about it. Hence, their reputations as respectable women were basically kept intact.

In addition to Zeng's wife, we know that later another Qing diplomat's wife, Shan Shili (單士厘, 1856-1943), accompanied her husband, Qian Xun (錢恂, 1853-1927), on several of his trips abroad. However, I have not seen any sources showing if she ever played the role of a public wife. It seems that Qian did not have any concubines then, either. Unlike Zeng's wife, Shan herself later wrote two works about her experiences abroad. The first is a travelogue *Guimao lüxing jì* (癸卯旅行記, *My Travels in the Guimao Year*), which is a record of the author's eighty-day trip through China, Japan, Korea, and Manchuria en route to Moscow and Saint Petersburg in 1903. The other is a ten-volume *Guiqian Ji*

(歸潛記, *Writings on Returning to a Life of Seclusion*) of 1910 concerning Italy and ancient Greece, Roman art, and cultural exchanges between China and the West. Hu Ying has pointed out that Shan skillfully justified her activities abroad not as a transgression against propriety but as fulfilling family obligations and broadening knowledge.⁷⁷ This suggests an important potential way for respectable women like Zeng's wife and daughters to justify their trips to Europe if needed. Although Shan acquired a general knowledge of Western civilization through these trips, there was no mentioning in her work if she hosted parties and entertained foreign officials as a diplomat's wife was supposed to do in the West. Chances are that even if she did, she would wisely avoid writing about it.

Hosting Chahui in Late Qing China

If Chinese ambassadors living in Europe frequently received invitations to socialize following Western etiquette with European officials and their wives, what of the Western diplomatic corps residing in China? What were their expectations? How did the Qing government and officials welcome and entertain them? This section focuses on several cases to illustrate the gender and etiquette dimensions of this issue.

Until the end of the Second Opium War (1856-1860), the Qing government basically upheld the diplomatic policy of "*renchen wu wajiao*" 人臣無外交 (Officials in private have no

77 Hu Ying, "Re-Configuring Nei/Wai: Writing the Woman Traveler in the Late Qing," *Late Imperial China* 18:1, pp. 90-91. About Shan's travel, also see Widmer, "Gentility in Transition"; Hu Ying, "'Would That I Were Marco Polo': The Travel Writing of Shan Shili (1856-1943)," *Journeys* 5:1 (January 2004), pp. 119-141.

diplomatic power). It refers to the traditional principle issued at the beginning of the Qing dynasty that officials as the ruler's subjects, without direct orders from the ruler, should not carry out social and diplomatic interactions with foreigners, either in the form of writing, or meeting, or exchanging gifts. Otherwise, they could be suspected of colluding with foreigners privately, as well as blurring the traditionally established boundaries between Chinese and "barbarians."

However, after Qing's defeat in the First Opium War (1839-1842), government officials gradually realized that this policy of simply refusing to meet and communicate with foreigners could not continue. Officials often had to meet with Westerners as their duties demanded and dared not to refuse to exchange gifts with them as tokens of good will.⁷⁸ After another defeat in the Second Opium War, the Qing government, according to the newly signed unequal treaties, finally allowed Western countries to dispatch resident ministers in Beijing and interact on equal standing with Qing officials. It was also then that the Qing court started to send envoys to Western countries. On June 29, 1873, the Tongzhi Emperor himself received Western ministers on his court. From that point on, the old principle of *renchen wu waijiao* was almost dead.⁷⁹ Despite this, many Qing officials still felt hesitant ideologically to break this rule themselves and venture into its uncharted territory. They were aware of previous cases that the officials who had no choice but to accept Westerners' gifts, or

78 Wang Kaixi 王開璽, "Lüelun 'renchen wu waijiao' sixiang zai jindai zhongguo de lishi mingyun" 略論「人臣無外交」思想在近代中國的歷史命運, *Beijing Shifan Daxue xuebao* (shehui kexueban) 北京師範大學學報(社會科學版) 215: 5 (October 2009), pp. 62-70.

79 Wang Kaixi, "Lüelun 'renchen wu waijiao' sixiang zai jindai zhongguo de lishi mingyun," *Beijing Shifan Daxue xuebao* (shehui kexueban) 215: 5, p. 66.

attended their banquets, or allegedly allowed their female family members to meet with Western officials were punished by the central government or impeached by their fellow officials.⁸⁰

In this context, we can fully appreciate the importance of the following major breakthrough. In 1897, Chinese officials in Shanghai, then a major treaty port where many foreigners resided, for the first time hosted a ball for Westerners in China. On November 4 of that year, Shanghai *Daotai* 道台 (intendant of circuit), the aforementioned Cai Jun, used the occasion of the birthday of the Empress Dowager Cixi to host a grand Western-style ball at the Bureau for Foreign Affairs. The premises had been specially arranged for a dancing ball: the ceiling was decorated with bunting while a hardwood floor had been laid down for dancing.⁸¹ It sent out 600 invitations to the Consular body and about 500 Western guests attended, including "the British, French and German Admirals and the Captains and officers of all the foreign men-of-war in port, and to the leading and representative residents of Shanghai."⁸² The event's Western style is clear from the facts that almost all the guests attended with their female family members; Chinese officials adopted Western style hand shaking as a way of greeting, instead of the traditional Chinese way of shaking their own hands; the banquet served Western food; and a band led by a Western conductor played Western music. It played through the twenty dances on the program.

The ball also broke the Confucian gender rule of domestic

80 Wang Kaixi, "Lüelun 'renchen wu waijiao' sixiang zai jindai zhongguo de lishi mingyun," *Beijing Shifan Daxue xuebao* (shehui kexueban) 215: 5, pp. 67-68.

81 "The Taotai's Ball," *The North-China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette*, November 12, 1897, p. 871.

82 "The Taotai's Ball," *The North-China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette*, November 12, 1897, p. 871.

seclusion by allowing Chinese officials' female family members to attend. However, it improvised by setting aside a separate room for these women, who did not participate in dancing but watched in the room through curtains, dressed in their most formal and elegant clothes. In this way, this improvised compromise allowed respectable Chinese women to attend public occasions without breaking the Confucian strictures on men and women mingling and touching.

The ball seemed to have successfully impressed Westerners and achieved other friendly effects. *North China Herald*, one of the most influential English newspapers then based in Shanghai, not only sang high praises of Cai personally but also highlighted the significance of the birthday celebration with great enthusiasm. The newspaper lauded the event as “a new departure” and the dawn of “a new era,” for finally an “enlightened Chinese official” “broke down the barrier” of “cumbersome” and “exclusive Chinese etiquette” and started entertaining and interacting with Westerners following their etiquette and style, such as through hosting a ball.⁸³ Clearly, the type of social etiquette adopted by Chinese officials in this ball was no small matter for the Westerners but indicated how open and inclusive Chinese officialdom was becoming in treating Westerners as equals.

Once Cai set the precedent in hosting official events following Western practice to entertain Westerners, more Qing officials followed his lead, particularly in Shanghai. In mid-April 1898, Prince Henry of Prussia (1862-1929) came to visit Shanghai. Then Jiangsu Provincial Governor Kui Jun (奎俊, 1843-1916) and Treasurer Nie Qigui (聶緝槩, 1855-1911), with the help of Cai Jun, hosted “a brilliant reception” for the Prince. Due to the limited

83 “The Taotai's Ball,” *The North-China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette*, November 12, 1897, p. 871.

space, 150 invitations were issued with the great majority of those present being German residents. It was after midnight when the gathering dispersed, “the function having been highly gratifying to all concerned,” according to *The North-China Herald*.⁸⁴

In October 1907, William Howard Taft (1857-1930), Secretary of War and U.S. President elect, and his wife visited Shanghai. For the first time, the leaders of the foreign concessions and those of the Chinese city collaborated to welcome and entertain them. Previously, when former U.S. President Ulysses Simpson Grant (1822-1885) and his family visited Shanghai in May 1879, the concession leaders held a ball for Grant with only foreign guests present;⁸⁵ whereas the Chinese officials on a separate occasion entertained them mostly in Chinese ways: a Chinese opera performance and a grand Chinese banquet with some Western drinks such as coffee. Although Chinese officials also arranged for some Chinese women to accompany Western women to watch the opera together, no cross-gender mingling happened and no Chinese officials’ wives appeared publicly for the events.⁸⁶

In contrast to Grant’s visit to Shanghai, the welcoming banquet held for Taft was attended by prominent Chinese officials, gentry, merchants, and foreign concession leaders together. With 230 guests in total, it was said to be the largest reception ever held in Shanghai to that point in time. Chinese and foreign guests also sat and mingled together at the seven dining tables.⁸⁷ It is noteworthy that about 20-30 Chinese female students from the *Tianzu hui* 天足會 (Natural Feet Society), an anti-footbinding society founded in 1895 in Shanghai by

84 “Prince Henry of Prussia in Shanghai,” *The North-China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette*, April 25, 1898, p. 718.

85 “Wuhui jisheng” 舞會紀盛, *Shenbao*, May 23, 1879, p.3; and “General Grant in Shanghai,” *The North-China Herald*, May 27, 1879, p. 515.

86 “Ji Mei gongzi guanju shi” 紀美公子觀劇事, *Shenbao*, May 22, 1879, p. 3.

87 “Step in Women’s Emancipation,” *The New York Times*, October 9, 1907, p. 1.

Mrs. Alicia Little (1845-1926) from Britain, attended.⁸⁸ Two female students also presented Taft with a “handsome silver punch bowl”— “a magnificent specimen of the Chinese silversmith’s art” at the conclusion of his address. The female students then placed it on a table and bowed low to Mr. and Mrs. Taft. The presentation took place amidst tremendous applause.⁸⁹ *The New York Times* did not let the appearance of these Chinese girls in such a public event go unnoticed and later particularly singled it out to comment:

This reception marked an epoch in the matter of the status of women in China, for to-day Chinese women of aristocratic families were present at the reception and even presided at tables, where they served refreshments. This was the first time such a thing had happened in China. This Chinese welcome to the American visitor was most significant...⁹⁰

The commentator was impressed by Chinese elites’ willingness to even break the rule of gender separation and allow their daughters to appear in a public reception to welcome Westerners. Clearly, Chinese women’s public presence in this new style of social interaction was taken as an important symbol of progress and even honor by the commentator. In 1907, the Qing government had just officially approved Chinese women’s public-school education. Therefore, female students were still very rare and their families tended to be more socially progressive.⁹¹ Furthermore, these

88 Xiong Yuezhi 熊月之, “Daikē zhīdào: cōng wàishì huódòng kàn Shànghǎi huájie yú zūjīe guānxì” 待客之道：從外事活動看近代上海華界與租界關係, *Xueshu yuekan* 學術月刊 7 (July 2004), p. 54.

89 “Secretary Taft’s Visit to Shanghai,” *Journal of the American Association of China*, November 1907, p. 12.

90 “Step in Women’s Emancipation,” *The New York Times*, October 9, 1907, p. 1.

91 Paul Bailey, *Gender and Education in China: Gender Discourses and Women’s Schooling in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 21.

students were members of an anti-footbinding society, which suggests that they were already challenging traditional gender norms. Despite that these girls might be of a special cohort, the public appearance of these girl students in this reception did signal that at least by 1907, near the end of the Qing dynasty, the rules against respectable Chinese women attending *chahui* and interacting with men in these public occasions had begun to relax.

By 1912, the year the new Chinese Republic was founded after the Xinhai revolution overthrew the Qing Dynasty, we can see another important further shift on this matter. On March 10 of that year, its first President, Yuan Shikai (袁世凱, 1859-1916), who viewed himself as a modernizer, brought out his secluded illiterate main wife, Lady Yu, as the First Lady of China, to officially receive greetings from foreign diplomats and their wives in Beijing during a Chinese New Year celebration. However, on that occasion, when a foreign envoy walked towards her and intended to shake hands with her, unable to understand what the envoy was trying to do, the main wife panicked and immediately withdrew her hands behind her back, which stunned and embarrassed the envoy.⁹² Annoyed, from then on, Yuan meticulously prepared for important occasions that Yu had to attend to avoid any mistakes. He ordered two of his modern-educated daughters to accompany his main wife to show up in public functions, answering questions and acting on behalf of her.⁹³ Sometimes, he would also let his first concubine (among his

92 Patrick Fuliang Shan, “Unveiling China’s Relinquished Marital Mode: A Study of Yuan Shikai’s Polygamous Household,” *Frontiers of History in China* 14:2 (June 2019), pp. 185-211.

93 Liu Yunxing 劉運興, “Yuan Shikai de yiqi jiuqie” 袁世凱的一妻九妾, in Cui Chenglie and Jiang Debian eds., *Xiangcheng wenshi ziliao* 項城文史資料 8 (Xiangcheng Xian: Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi Xiangcheng Xian weiyuanhui, 2000), p. 90. Also see Hou Yijie 侯宜傑, *Yuan Shikai quanzhuan* 袁世凱全傳 (Beijing: Qunzhong chubanshe, 2013), p. 452.

nine concubines), a former courtesan in Suzhou, accompany him on diplomatic occasions and she allegedly “charmed many foreign officials.”⁹⁴ This instance suggests that by the Republican period, Chinese officials’ wives finally began to be formally allowed to appear in public with their husbands. However, sometimes concubines continued to play the role of the public wife, particularly when sequestered main wives, just like Lady Yu, were unskilled or uncomfortable in performing their duties on the public stage.

Conclusion

We have seen in this article how it was none other than the need to attend occasions of diplomatic socialization following Western social etiquette that forced the Chinese officials in the late Qing to break the Confucian stricture of gender separation and brought their concubines/wives to public functions. The rapid changes in diplomatic practices should not be merely understood as a story of progress. As I have shown above, the daring actions of the Chinese officials did not result from them rejecting Confucian gender norms and accepting new egalitarian models of gender relations. This is not to mention that even in the West during the late nineteenth century, women were still viewed as primarily belonging to the domestic sphere, despite not being required to adhere to domestic seclusion. Instead, the new changes were adopted out of practical diplomatic necessity in the context of the

94 Janey Sheau Yueh Chao, and Kachuen Yuan Gee, “Early Life of Yuan Shikai and the Formation of Yuan Family,” paper presented at the 5th International Conference of Institutes and City University of New York Libraries, https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1011&context=bb_pubs (accessed December 24, 2021).

Qing empire's military defeats and national crisis, for Chinese elites gradually realized gender separation might be a liability in international politics. It had not been a light matter and easy process for the officials and their family members involved, as we can see from their initial resistance and hesitation, and their eventual compromise and adaptation. It had not been an issue outside of the domestic political sphere either, as we have seen how ambassador Guo was punished for his daring actions abroad. Eventually, it was only with the iconoclastic New Culture Movement (mid-1910s to 1920s), the so-called Chinese enlightenment, that we begin to see progressive Chinese intellectuals systematically attacking Confucian gender doctrines and calling for gender equality and women's rights based on Western gender ideals, leading to a broader-scale intellectual awakening.

It should be also pointed out that this process of adaptation included not only simply passively copying Western gender related etiquette, but also improvising based on longtime Chinese traditions and customs. The most notable example of this was the solution of temporarily bestowing the low-class concubine the authority and status of an official's main wife to represent China abroad. Since many concubines were former courtesans with much public experience of interacting with men, they tended to act more comfortably in various *chahui* than those hitherto sequestered main wives. Meanwhile, by using concubines as substitutes, their wives' reputations as “good women” under Confucian definition could also be preserved. We see other examples of improvisation, too, such as how Cai Jun set aside a separate room for Chinese officials' wives to appropriately watch a *chahui* through curtains without engaging in social dancing. Another solution, as time moved to the 1900s, seems to be allowing modern-educated Chinese girls (rather than older women with Confucian upbringings) to appear at *chahui* to

provide the refining influence of the female sex as Lord Macartney desired to see, representing a new generation of Chinese women. Through these indigenous adaptations, by the end of the Qing Dynasty, *chahui* and women's public role in it were gradually becoming integral ingredients of modern China's diplomacy.

Overall, although attention to gender in diplomacy may not always yield a simple new interpretation of any particular familiar diplomatic event, this article's use of gender as an analytical framework has shown that it may provide substantial help in illuminating, for example, the little-known cross-cultural exchanges and adaptations that took place in the process of diplomatic socialization, a topic that has been largely overlooked in late Qing diplomatic history.⁹⁵ Without due attention to these historical issues, we are not able to fully understand what it entailed in the complex process of modernizing China's international relations. On the other hand, this article has also shown that despite the lack of sources on these women's own voices to examine their agency, we can still find new productive angles, such as through the lens of gendered norm of socializing, to utilize existing sources to bring new discoveries in Chinese gender history, such as the emergence of a novel type of gender role in modern China, the public wife.

95 A more recent exception is Jenny Huangfu Day's book, *Qing Travellers to the Far West*, which examines how the process of Qing envoys establishing legations in the West created a new type of information order, since these diplomats had to navigate through the conceptual and physical space of a geographical region that was unexplored in Chinese intellectual tradition. However, this book is not focused on diplomatic socialization such as the importance of *chahui* and the role of the public wife. Jenny Huangfu Day, *Qing Travellers to the Far West: Diplomacy and the Information Order in Late Imperial China*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

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晚清外交中的社交性別政治與 「公眾夫人」的出現

施 霞*

摘 要

目前晚清外交和國際關係史的研究仍然缺乏一個性別視角。同時，學界對現代中國女性性別角色的出現的探索還多局限於教育和就業等途徑。本文試圖通過外交界社交的性別政治視角來探索晚清性別史與外交史的交集。晚清駐歐公使注意到西方婦女在外交、社交圈中無處不在。因而，公使們即便就是為了完成他們的官方任務，也經常要面對與性別有關的問題，包括不僅學會如何與西方婦女在公共場合中交往，而且更為敏感的是決定是否讓他們深居簡出的妻女出來公共場合參加這些活動，與男性握手，晚宴交談，甚至共舞。本文意圖展示晚清官員是怎樣逐步意識到傳統的性別分離成為國際外交中的負擔，並開始靈活的採用和改造西方與性別有關的禮節，包括讓他們的妾隨行國外扮演公眾茶會的夫人。雖然這些改造主要是基於實際外交需求而不是源於對新的兩性關係的接受，這些新

* 美國佛羅里達新學院，歷史學副教授

禮節的採納有助於「公眾夫人」這一新性別角色的出現，從而為中國女性提供了一個新的官方允許的展示和行動的舞台。

關鍵詞：晚清、社交、公眾夫人、妾、外交