

## Kinship

Kinship may be the most basic form of social organization, but the customs governing it differ widely. Such diversity is only possible because kinship is fundamentally social, not just biological. The family is an organization; kinship rules dictate its order. Because kinship is a product of human creativity rather than natural determinism, its roles and customs reflect society's most important beliefs and values. Human beings use kinship to project their ideals onto the template of basic social roles.

Nor does kinship function in isolation from other social organizations. By providing the individual with basic social roles such as "wife" or "son," kinship endows people with legitimate places in their society. Because kinship roles are so primary to human social organization, major forms of activity come to be organized around them. In early China, the roles of ritual, work, law, politics, education, and almost every other form of social activity were structured largely according to kinship.

In fact, kinship was particularly important in early Chinese society. As in other agricultural societies, the household also served as the major economic organization. Kinship stood at the very center of both society and economy. Moreover, compared to modern nation-states, the government of early China was fairly simple and its activities limited in scope. Many matters that today would be handled by large bureaucratic organizations, such as governments and corporations, were still organized around kinship. The customs regulating kin interaction were consequently the prime rules governing women's lives in early imperial society. In fact, the family came to be seen as a microcosm of the state, and the bond between husband and wife became a metaphor for the proper relation of emperor and minister. Kinship is an inherently conservative force. Although some kinship customs gradually changed during the early imperial era, for the most part people maintained the customs and ideas about family bequeathed to them by their ancestors. As a result, many of the statements we make about Qin and Han kinship were just as true for

the late Eastern Zhou.

To understand the past, we must try to reimagine the possibilities and limitations that ordinary people faced. Most people in Han China, both female and male, had few opportunities in life. The grave of a typical woman was probably not far from her place of birth. There were few chances to leave home and earn an independent livelihood. Given the lack of alternatives outside the family, most women's lives were structured by relationships with their immediate kin. A woman's role within the kinship network determined where she lived, how she spent her days, how others treated her, and even how she was mourned after she died.

This was not a world of simple gender dichotomies. Instead of an absolute patriarchy of all men dominating all women, the early Chinese kinship network enveloped women and men in a dense tangle of social roles that led them to interact in complex ways. A woman might play the roles of wife, mother, daughter-in-law, niece, younger sister, grandmother, and many other kinship identities, sometimes simultaneously.<sup>1</sup> Each person held multiple kinship roles. Some roles elevated a person's status in particular situations; others depressed it. A woman might be high-handed toward her son but turn meek and submissive when her father-in-law entered the room. The relationship between gender and behavior was both subtle and complicated.

These contradictory roles within the family formed the basic nexus that allowed a woman to interact with the wider world around her. These roles were not just abstract social categories. To a large extent, we *are* the social roles we play. It is difficult to say where social role-playing ends and the "real" person begins. So the kinship roles a woman assumed in relation to the people closest to her shaped both her general social identity and her overall sense of self. Defining these kinship roles is the starting point for understanding the women of early imperial China.