
Persons and Powers of Women in Diverse Cultures

*Essays in Commemoration of
Audrey I. Richards, Phyllis Kaberry and
Barbara E. Ward*

Edited by
Shirley Ardener



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Women and Ideology in Hierarchical Societies in East Asia

Caroline Humphrey

I want to look in this paper at the role of women in certain hierarchical societies of East Asia, primarily in China and Mongolia. I call this study 'Women and Ideology' for two reasons. First because hierarchy itself, as I use the word, is an ideological notion. 'Hierarchy' is not simply an observed range of economically based differentials, for which I use the word 'class', but is a culturally defined notion of status which might or might not coincide with class (for example, one might find in these societies groups of people who are high in the status hierarchy but relatively poor in economic terms). The second reason for my title is that, as we have all been made aware by recent work on gender, the idea of what women are or should be in any particular society is not totally, or even primarily, natural or given; rather it is culturally determined. In other words, the notion of 'women' is symbolic or ideological too. I want to integrate this perspective with certain general anthropological theories relating to this part of the world, in particular those of Lévi-Strauss in *Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1969), and those of Goody, Tambiah and others on bridewealth and dowry.

I start with a contrast between women in traditional China and Mongolia in the period of the Ch'ing Dynasty from the 17th to the early 20th centuries when Mongolia and China were included in one polity under the Manchu Emperors. This contrast in what one might call their 'expected temperament' can, I think, be explained not so much by psychology as by that conglomeration of unordered 'reasons for' something which we call anthropology. We learn from Margery Wolf (1974: 159-60) that Chinese women were 'exceedingly repressed' and according to her were 'uterine pawns in a male system'. Nevertheless, they had a weapon at their disposal: their anger. This was particularly true of the women of the peasant class. Indeed women's violent

paroxysms of fury were a threat to more than domestic tranquility. They were attributed with a semi-mystical power. Householders sometimes pasted paper charms on their doorways to protect themselves from 'violent women'. It was by skill in combining ostensible and flattering submission with well-directed, fluent fury that women maintained authority in their families. Now compare this with Mongolia. In Mongolia women could likewise be regarded as 'pawns in a male system', but they were never secluded or subject to physical repression such as foot-binding. They were expected to be silent and competent. They maintained authority by actions rather than words. Several Mongol men have said to me about their wives something along the lines of: 'We never quarrel. No-one says anything, but I know *exactly* how far I can go.'

Now in explaining this I want to step back a long way and look at some of the 'grand theories' I mentioned earlier. Here Barbara Ward had a very important insight. In her paper in *The Relevance of Models for Social Anthropology* (1965: 113–138) she introduced the idea of the 'variety of conscious models' as a way of analysing the fact that when people from different parts of China, from different class and occupational groups, explain some action of theirs by saying 'I do it because I am Chinese' they actually have very different notions of what it is to be Chinese. Any one community may have at least three models, one of their own group, one of what they understand of the high literati system, and one of their own neighbours who differ from themselves (1965: 135). Here we have a very sophisticated idea which is capable of dealing with the wide range of marriage and property relations observed in this huge civilisation. It has been rightly taken up since by anthropologists of China such as Rubie Watson (1981). It also requires us to look again at certain of the 'grand theories', in particular those of Goody.

Goody (1973) suggested that there are two major types of marriage-property relations, based on economic production. One identified with Africa involves payment of bridewealth, which circulates in an essentially egalitarian society. This type is founded upon the control of labour, especially that of women. The other, identified with Eurasia, involves the payment of dowry. It is based on intensive agricultural production which excludes women but which generates wealth to support hierarchies which ensure the status of women. Ortner (1981) extends this analysis to suggest that hierarchy, not systems of production or kinship, is the most fundamental datum. Kinship systems play a variable role. She contrasts hierarchical societies in which the emphasis is on marriage and dowry (as found in China and India) with hierarchical societies that emphasise natal family kin relations and fe-

male inheritance (as in Polynesia). In the former, hierarchy raises women's position while the emphasis on marriage lowers it; in the latter both hierarchy and kinship raise women's status. Both authors identify mainland Asia with hierarchy, the presence of dowry, the seclusion of women and the importance of virginity for maintaining status.

I want to see if we can go further. Two very important facts are brought to mind by Barbara Ward's idea of the 'variety of conscious models'. First, the Goody/Ortner theory can only be properly applied to a tiny fraction of the population of Asia, not to speak of Eurasia, only, that is, to the very pinnacle of these hierarchies. The lower classes of both India and China, the great majority of people, pay brideprice rather than dowry and have a range of marriage patterns which are arguably quite different from that of the higher strata. In some regions up to 80 per cent of people pay neither dowry nor bride price but give their daughters as children to be brought up in the future husband's home. Despite vigorous enquiry Wolf and Huang failed to discover any purely economic reasons for the *distribution* of this type of marriage (Wolf & Huang 1980). Secondly, there is a range of hierarchical societies from the Manchus in the north, through Mongolia and Tibet, to many peoples in the Himalayan and Burma regions in the south, which have what I shall argue is yet another pattern. The marriage-property system of these societies, which I shall call 'Inner Asian', as opposed to the great civilisations of India and China, has both bridewealth and dowry, and it is not simply a variation on, or sub-category, of the Goody model but has in many aspects a different rationale altogether.

This leads to a more fundamental objection to Goody and Ortner: marriage-property systems, whatever they are, do not simply 'arise' on some productive base, but are implicated in cultural values (or 'conscious models') which determine the direction of production itself. This is often quite one-sided given the ecological opportunities available. To focus simply on social structures and forms of organisation at a high level of generalisation may tend to provoke unjustified assumptions about the meanings which structural features have for the people in different cultures (cf. Cohen 1985: 70-1).

Thus, for the great Asian civilisations we have to take into account the *varieties* of kinship ideology which coexist not only in different economic classes, but also in different regions, in the city and countryside, and in various occupations, as Barbara Ward shows for her 'water-people' of Hong Kong. We also have to put back on the anthropological map the range of Inner Asian, hierarchical societies whose cultural manipulations of brideprice and dowry differ from those of either

India or China. Here I shall attempt to show how features of the Inner Asian periphery differ from some of the major patterns discernable in the literature for China and India.

Although it might seem at first that the 'brideprice with dowry' pattern of the Inner Asian periphery could be likened to the situation in the lower classes of the great civilisations, this is in fact not so. Not only do ideological/cultural differences preclude such an interpretation, we also have to recognise that the role of kinship structures as such is different in the two cases. For all classes of society in China and India kinship structures are to a large extent independent variables in relation to the institutions which make up hierarchy. This is true whether these be bureaucracies, systems of taxation, examinations, honorific ranks, castes, or whatever. This means that kinship can take a wide range of forms. It does not even enter the ideology of hierarchy in north India where none of the prevailing images of society, of the Brahmins, the kings, or the ascetics uses kinship as the articulating principle (Burghart 1983). This is perhaps less true of China where, in the Confucian model at least, society is seen as 'built out of' patriarchal kin groups. For millenia actual social organisation in China has diverged from this ideology, however.

In the Inner Asian societies, on the other hand, both kinship structures and ideology are much closer to, and in some cases even identified with, the organisation of hierarchy. Office is hereditary and many centrally important social ranks are defined by reference to kinship categories. Although it would be difficult, perhaps, to conceive of a truly hierarchical society based entirely on actual kinship categories and although the peripheral states we are discussing certainly contained structures constituted in other ways (most importantly by kinship, by rank defined by Buddhist religious categories, and by status in relation to tax and labour exacted by the state), yet nevertheless kinship was central in them. In Mongolia, certain clans were categorised as 'sons-in-law' of the emperor, and this category was established as a rank, below that of the imperial clan but above that of commoners. In time the kinship base was petrified and sub-divided, so that there were four ranks within each of the imperial and 'son-in-law' groups and at least five different kinds of commoners or serfs. But all of these statuses continued to be recruited by birth (Jagchid & Bawden 1970). In Tibetan culture widely used metaphors 'map' kinship categories with inherent status differentials directly onto rank differences in the wider society. In a text concerning funeral rites, for example, landscape is used as the medium: heaven and earth are seen as king and people; a mountain's bright side and dark side as husband and wife; right and left as maternal uncle and sister's son; and the upper and lower parts of a valley as master and disciple (Stein

1972: 43). The father's brother/ brother's son relationship is used both metaphorically and in fact, as the principle of spiritual succession in those Buddhist sects with celibate lamas (1972: 106).

In many ways the values of the great civilisations and the Inner Asia regarding women seem, nevertheless, very similar. All of them had patrilineal kinship systems and patriarchal ideologies in which men dominated women. Throughout the area we find the notion that the father provides the 'bone', which is enduring, while the mother provides the 'flesh', which disappears. The idea of 'bone' is identified not just with the father but with the patrilineage; for example, the aristocratic and commoner lineages of the Mongols are called 'white' and 'black' bones respectively. Female pollution is identified with blood, birth and menstruation. In all of these societies marriage – not kinship, friendship or occupation – is the main locus of the cultural definition of female gender (cf. Ortner & Whitehead 1981). Women pass between groups of men and in the exchange are weighed against *things*, not against people (cf. Strathern 1985). However, these generalisations, which appear as similarities, actually mask essential differences between the civilisations and the periphery.

The starting point from which to explore this distinction is Lévi-Strauss's *Elementary Forms of Kinship* (1969). As Lévi-Strauss pointed out, in the whole region we have an underlying pattern of 'generalised exchange' (marriage with women in the category mother's brother's daughter) predicated on the exchange of women for bridewealth by exogamous groups. In many cultures of both Inner Asia (for example, Tibet) and the great civilisations (such as China) the term mother's brother is the same as that for the father-in-law. Repeated marriage alliances over the generations create a wide ('generalised') movement of women going one way and bridewealth goods the other. For the men operating it, generalised exchange is dangerous. Given that women are not and never can be equivalent to goods, in generalised exchange men are always both creditors and debtors and the risk is endemic that the next generation will not play. The grand pattern of generalised exchange is compromised by the risk-free alternative of 'restricted exchange' (direct exchange of a woman for a woman). So, over the whole region, in practice each society works out marriage customs which are some combination of the two, and only at the most northern and southern points of Inner Asian peripheries (for example among the Gilyak of Siberia and the Kachin of Burma) do we find pure examples of the generalised exchange type. However, Lévi-Strauss is convinced that generalised exchange is the underlying rationale, revealed by preferential marriage with the mother's brother's daughter category, even in societies where

restricted or random marriage may be statistically the most common. And it certainly is the case that the 'bone'/'flesh' distinction must be linked to generalised exchange. Such a distinction does not make sense with restricted exchange, where any group becomes both 'flesh' and 'bone' for the other (Lévi-Strauss 1969: 393–405).

Now the differences that exist between the Inner Asian peripheries and the great civilisations stem not from the generalised/restricted distinction – which fights it out, as Levi-Strauss would see it, in both regions – but from alternatives within 'generalised exchange'. These alternatives are hypogamy and hypergamy, or in other words whether, to take the male point of view, you marry down or up. Generalised exchange can hardly be egalitarian for the reason that no society values women as such as equal or equivalent to goods, even if the transfer of rights in aspects of women's value (labour, sex, child-bearing capacity and the like) are paid for in goods. A group which is permanently in debt to another for women cannot stand in equal relation to that group. Thus, as Levi-Strauss points out (1969: 241), it is a misunderstanding to see hypogamy as simply a reflection of existing class relations. Hypogamy, and its alternative hypergamy, are 'immense structural phenomena' inherent in the marriage system of 'generalised exchange' itself.

What follows from these two structures? In a patrilineal system, Levi-Strauss continues (1969: 240), hypogamy, where males marry higher status brides, is a sign of an unstable structure, while hypergamy, where they marry down, is stable. This is because in patrilineal societies with differentiation of wealth, hypogamy is characteristic of lineages which seek alliance through marriage as a means of affirming their positions *vis-à-vis* other male kin (agnates). Affinal relations through women become a means towards maintenance of political alliances. This creates instability because for each man there will be a tension between ties to affines and ties to patrilineal kin. On the other hand, hypergamy assumes that affinal ties are subordinate or not relevant. The effect on the role of women is that in the hypogamous case the wife must be a pivot in relations with her own higher standing group – while in hypergamy this is not so. In this case, where women marry up, the wife is taken in to bear children for the husband's group and her natal kin being of lower status can be either ignored or used as clients. Thus they do not threaten the dominance or coherence of the wife-taking group.

So the distinction between hypogamy and hypergamy in the Asian systems entails important differences for the role of women. It is this which we start with in distinguishing the great civilisations from the Inner Asian periphery: hypergamy (women marrying up) is found in India and China, whereas the periphery has a pattern of hypogamy

(where women marry down). In both regions the ideal was put into practice mainly in the middle and upper classes. The poorest people in both India and China had other, simultaneously held models, and tended in actuality towards more egalitarian marriages and restricted exchange.

The hypergamy/hypogamy distinction is not simply an accident, nor, I think, can it be derived directly from differences in productive systems. Repeated attempts to show such a derivation have always failed (see summary of arguments in Parry 1979: 198–200). Rather, it appears in each case among a whole constellation of other social values. Such values may arguably act back on production systems rather than derive from them. Certainly, it means that 'bridewealth' and 'dowry', while at first sight appearing similar, actually had different meanings in the two systems.

I want to leave marriage now and rapidly survey the constellations of values in which it has a part. Let us look at the examples of China and Mongolia. In China a huge, wealthy and varied society was held together by a bureaucracy recruited by examinations for which many years of preparation were necessary. The values of the 'literati' were an ideal for many groups, such as, for example, Barbara Ward's fishermen, who knew them only incompletely and could not possibly attain them. Nevertheless, the 'literati' model was for them the best way of 'being Chinese', and their own Kau Sai way, though also 'Chinese', only approached excellence in so far as it approximated to the 'real Chineseness' of the 'literati' (Ward 1965, 123–4). Among the 'literati' values, education of a particular and elaborate type was the highest, and trade, agriculture, soldiering and craftsmanship were explicitly lower. Women were taken out of productive work if wealth permitted. Of course, for the vast majority of the population wealth did not suffice for this. Indeed, women worked hard. Nevertheless, from the status point of view their work was invisible, and this applied whether women were occasionally openly seen at work in the fields, as in south China, or were working out of sight at home, as tended to be the case in the north. It was the devaluation of the work which women were permitted to do, rather than the material nature of the production system, which created this situation. The presence of the plough did not in fact end the need for women's work; rather, wealth permitted the removal of some women from work which was in any case despised.

To maintain status women had to appear as though they never did physical work (hence foot-binding), and production exigencies did not necessarily make a dent in this. In the spring wheat area of north China, where a harvest demanded all available labour, women with feet bound so tightly they could hardly walk did work on their knees (Davin 1975:

248). 'Small feet are a mark, not of wealth, for the poorest families sometimes have their daughters' feet bandaged, but of gentility.' (Doolittle 1868: 492).

In Mongolia, on the other hand, the main social values were military, or what one might call 'outdoor pursuits', high status being given to hunting, horsemanship, wrestling and archery. The state, rather than being bureaucratic, was run by hereditary officials relying on civil dues in labour and in kind from their subjects. The economy was based almost entirely on nomadic pastoralism, with great extremes of wealth and poverty. It was not that agriculture, mining, artisan production and other activities were impossible for ecological reasons (they are all practised today). Rather, the Mongols *valued* the military – pastoral ideal and simply refused other alternatives. Domestic production was not ideologically separated from the military life, but was regarded as a means towards it. Women had to be capable of carrying out *all* the productive tasks because the men were often away for long periods. There is a real sense in which the major production of wealth rested on the work of the women. In times of peace it was possible for a large proportion of the men (perhaps one-quarter of all males in Mongolia) to take up permanent and un-productive life in monasteries. But Buddhist values coexisted with military values rather than replacing them. Mongol monks loved to take part in wrestling and to watch the races. The ideal spread to everyone: women too were encouraged to become expert in archery and horsemanship.

So the main point is that physical activity itself was not despised; there was no concept of 'work' as such. All over Asia, obviously, the richer you were the more servants you could have, and the less wives and daughters were *required* to do things. But in both China and India physical labour was despised. Some high castes in northern India even forbade either men or women to work in the fields under threat of exclusion from the caste (Parry 1979: 240). Similar though less stringent ideas existed in China (Davin 1975: 250). But in Mongolia, although there was no shortage of labour, the richer you were the more your women were likely to work. Extra wives might be married to cope with the management of dispersed herds (Banchikov 1964). Even though rich women brought maids and other servants with them in their dowries, a wife who was not active brought censure from everyone.

The situation was not unique to Mongolia, and nor did it depend on pastoralism as the system of production. In Tibet, as Stein (1972) has convincingly argued, agriculture, with use of the plough, has always predominated over livestock raising, both culturally and in terms of the number of people employed in it. The economy was much more complex than in Mongolia, but again we find that fundamental pursuits took men

away from the home farm for long periods – for labour service for ‘feudal’ lords, trading expeditions, and the exploitation of different environments. Warrior traditions were highly valued (1972: 118). Different regions of Tibet had their own patterns, but a common one, even in agricultural regions, was for men to leave their farms and move with the livestock to highland pastures for the whole summer. To some extent the problem of absent men was solved by polyandry (which permitted a woman to marry several men), but even so it was expected that women should be able to carry out all basic tasks (1972: 111–4). The house-dwelling, farming, sedentary population was remarkably mobile by preference: pilgrimages, trading and visiting were all regular activities. Women, too, might set off on their own pilgrimages. To a large extent authority consisted in trying to keep or persuade people to stay in one place in order to ensure the regularity of their services (1972: 122).

In Himalayan societies, even those totally engaged in settled intensive agriculture, we can see something of the same values. To take the example of the Limbu, who had a small kingdom in eastern Nepal, here again both men and women worked in the fields, military occupations were popular and took men away for long periods, and the women had great, often decisive, responsibility for the generation of wealth (Jones & Jones 1976).

A military and mobile ethos is not a sufficient explanation for the difference in values concerning gender, however. After all, the Rajputs, dominant in large tracts of north India, had martial values but still rigidly secluded their women. Attitudes to gender itself were different in the civilisations from the Inner Asian periphery. Let us look at what happened to the female deities of Mahayana Buddhism. It is significant that the peripheral cultures of Tibet and Mongolia supported and enormously elaborated this religion, while it died out entirely in India and was of only limited significance in China. The earliest Mahayana texts, composed in India, denigrate women as not only physically impure but also psychologically defective, permeated with greed, jealousy and emotional attachment. However, the religion as developed over the centuries in Tibet transformed two important images of the female, and both in a positive way. The Dakinis – the partners of yogins who are essential for psycho-sexual rites – although originally obscene witches, entered Tibet in a gentler form. They are disembodied, and become the bestowers of mystical doctrines, though iconographically they retained their gruesome forms (Beyer 1978: 46). But more important still was the loving goddess Tara whose cult was perhaps the most beloved and widespread in all Tibet and Mongolia. Tara was a personal deity, worshipped not so much in occasional grand rituals in the monasteries, but constantly, daily, by everyone. Tara was the epitome of compassion,

and both men and women placed trust in her for all major decisions and dangers. This contrasts with the essentially ambivalent north India mother-goddess whose fortune-bringing aspect (for example, Laksmi) was inseparable from her dangerous, bloodthirsty counterpart (for example, Durga). The goddess was particularly dangerous when she was not controlled; without a consort her malevolence was virtually assured (Wadely 1975: 121). Tara can be contrasted with the main female deity of Buddhist China, Kuan-Yin, who is sometimes identified with her. Kuan-Yin was a goddess, or god, of mercy, but her/his cult was far more limited. Kuan-Yin was essentially concerned with granting male children to infertile women (Paul 1979: 251; Doolittle 1868: 205). It is in Tibet and Mongolia that we find among both men and women the widespread cult of an unambiguously female deity who is entirely and simply compassionate and powerful.

Let us look now at some further ramifications in these constellations of values: at seclusion and concepts of beauty. Mongol values are completely incompatible with the seclusion of women. Nomadic pastoralism *per se* as a productive practice would not entirely preclude a symbolic seclusion. The Mongols have always lived in tents which are clearly divided into notional spaces. They have developed acute feelings as to the proper distance between people. In the huddle of bodies in the tent they can create privacy by the turn of a shoulder. But it is a matter of cultural values that women are not secluded. There is a women's area in the tent, but this is a matter of right, not of repression. To quote Riasanovsky (1965: 92), himself citing a Mongol law code:

where a woman sits in her usual place in the yurt, on the right of the entrance near the hearth at the foot of her husband's bed, nobody can touch her; but she can abuse a stranger and even throw a log or any utensil at him if she likes. But if she dares leave her place and step outside the yurt she loses her rights and may be punished for insult.

In all of northern Asia the joint family was an ideal, but in Mongolia it was never physically realised as a large communal dwelling. Even the most junior of brides normally had her own tent. This meant that the occasions when she had to kowtow to her husband's kin were only intermittent. But in upper-class China and India, on the other hand, living space was constructed in such a way as to incorporate secluded women. The Chinese compound and the north Indian *haveli* were both enclosed courtyards with specific women's quarters.

During the Ch'ing dynasty the Manchu rulers of China often gave Manchu aristocratic women to Mongol princes as their wives. Soon Siniticised, the Manchus' concept of female beauty was one of delicacy and fragility: beauty is 'weakness to be blown over by the wind', as the

Chinese saying goes. A Mongolian novel written earlier this century gives a precise picture of mutually incompatible perceptions of seclusion and female beauty from the Mongolian point of view (Rinchen 1969: 63-4). A Manchu princess whose Mongol husband has died is lying in bed behind a curtain in the yurt:

It seemed as though someone was gently untying the rope of the smoke-hole cover, which was attached to the belt of the tent at the left side of the door. Although the person holding the rope was taking care to be quiet, there were a few pit-a-pats on the roof as the rope swung over. The princess did not open her eyes, but lay there listening.

Mongol people of the great, wide desert steppe, both princes and ordinary herdsmen, are accustomed to get up at the crack of dawn. Even though she was a daughter of the Holy Emperor of the Manchu Dynasty . . . the princess did not break this Mongol custom. She lay and listened, and it seemed to her that someone was soundlessly peeling open the silk-covered woolen door and coming inside. The shar-shar sound which soft-soled Mongol boots make on felt mats penetrated clearly to the princess's ear . . . and she already knew that it was her beloved Mongol maid-servant, Suvd.

And then, for a moment when there was no sound at all, the princess heard the sound of her own breath and the sound of Suvd standing lightly and breathing. As she thought of the free, deep, breathing of her servant, she said to herself, 'A person with such a good, broad chest must have a long breath', and there came to her ear, which was lying closely on the pillow, the tug-tug, tug-tug-tug, the irregular beating of her own heart. As the princess thought of her own poor, weak, suffering heart and compared it to the healthy heart of Svud, the latter seemed like the beating of a huge drum, a kind of pulsating, lug, lug, lug.

'Is that Svud's energetic, healthy heart beating?', she thought, imagining the cleanliness, lightness and beauty of this Mongol girl, like the flower of an untouched land, like the full-moon of the 15th day. Lying and thinking, the princess saw clearly in her mind's eye, the symmetrical breasts, the joyful, reddish face, the red lips, the flashing, burning, round black eyes, and she thought, 'Even this child takes pity on me and looks after me.' . . . Although she had not seen a town or city for a long time, the princess was tired, pale, and white in her face, with the narrow eyes, closed thin lips, little straight nose, and pinched nostrils of one whose ancestors have for generations been accustomed to rule. 'Suvd, don't look at me, don't look at me, don't take pity on me!' she wanted to cry, but she controlled herself and pretended to sleep.

For the Mongols, without a woman no home was possible. This was true from the spiritual as well as the practical point of view. The woman embodied the principle of order and symmetry, never placing things crookedly or using two hands instead of one, thus averting the forces of unpredictability and evil.

The healthy outdoor Mongol girl was forbidden, however, to take part

in such male activities as hunting and the slaughter of livestock for meat. Her own preserve was milking and the making of meat products, yoghurts, cheeses, preserved cream and fermented milk drinks, tasks in which men played barely any role. In Mongol culture meat and milk are opposed to one another and should not be cooked in the same vessel. Meat is eaten in the winter months whereas milk products are eaten in the summer from the first appearance in the sky of the Pleides in spring to the time when the constellation disappears in the autumn. Although milk is associated with women and meat with men, milk has the higher sacred value. Killing, of course, is a sin in Buddhism. The Mongols have a fairly cheerful disregard for this precept, but it lingers in the form of rituals to beg pardon of animals and in low status for butchers. 'The very word milk (*sü*)', however, as Lubsangjab writes, 'creates a psychologically warm and pleasant feeling in the Mongolian mind. For example, *süsedkiltei kömün* [literally 'milk-minded person'] means a kind-hearted or good person. Milk is always offered, or libated, with good wishes and to show respect' (1980: 41). Milk is *deej*, the supreme product, offered to gods, spirits and ancestors. It is libated before migrations, felt making, horse racing, choice of a burial place, when receiving guests, and for all communal festivities. Milk offerings to the spirits are essential to the economy; they are made, for example, when selecting a lamb as a sire ram, when castrating animals, or when the female animals first start giving milk in the spring. It is women who make all offerings of milk, except those to male ancestors and mountain gods (often the same thing).

Thus, since women in societies of the Inner Asian periphery were integrated into both material and religious aspects of the economy, it is not surprising that they had greater rights over property than their counterparts in the great civilisations. Women could own and dispose of not only chattels (including jewellery, utensils, clothes) but also productive property, land, livestock and labour (that is, servants). Quite apart from property distinctly theirs, women in Mongolia and Tibet had a greater say in regard to joint or family property than in China or India.

In Mongolia, the basic idea which is conveyed by the Ch'ing period law codes is that an adult woman should have rights to enough productive property to be able to live autonomously if widowed or divorced. In China, in contrast, harrowing stories abound of women being abandoned by opium-soaked husbands who had sold every last dowry item to buy drugs leaving the wife to beg on the streets. No-one would intervene (see, for example, Pruitt 1945: 39-65). For eighteenth century Mongolia we have by contrast the following case from a typical lawsuit. A poor woman, Dashjid, was married out by her mother several times. As each marriage failed the mother retrieved Dashjid and paid back the brideprice, but eventually the two were left in dire poverty, with

Dashjid's daughters and infant son. Eventually a lama bought one daughter, a man of the fourth rank in the imperial clan bought another. Dashjid herself was taken on by a rich man as a servant, but he did not give her enough to live on. One night in a fit of despair she killed her baby son. The case was taken seriously – to the highest courts in fact. The judgment was: to defrock the lama for buying and consorting with a girl and to return that daughter to her mother; to fine the man of imperial birth and to demote him to the rank of commoner for buying a woman without marrying her; and to fine the rich man for not looking after Dashjid and causing her to despair. Not only was Dashjid the only person not to be punished, she was allotted three 'nines' of the confiscated cattle to support herself and her family (Bawden 1968: 71–90).

At the other end of the social hierarchy were the Mongol princesses of independent means. Sometimes they became so wealthy and powerful that they were *de facto* rulers, even with the strictly patrilineal succession to office of the Mongols. I am not speaking here of widows taking over as regents while the son-heir was still young, although this was common among both Mongols and Tibetans. The two cases that I am concerned with are: first, the wife who was given a large dowry of her own, consisting of livestock, servants and whole districts of retainers; and secondly, the daughter who, whether an only child or not, was given a large share of her father's property and was married to an incoming son-in-law. In effect this amounts to inheritance of property by women, even if *office* was inherited only by males. Divorce was quite practicable for both men and women, and fairly common (Vree-land 1954).

Consider the following amazing life-story of a woman with independent wealth. In sixteenth-century eastern Mongolia a famous princess, known as the 'Third Lady' was so rich and powerful in livestock and followers that her hand was sought in marriage by her husband's grandfather, the Altan-Khan, ruler of the region. Altan-Khan's son Sengge hated the Third Lady, because she had ousted his mother as favourite, but when Altan-Khan died and Sengge had to compete with other possible heirs he realised that her strength was invaluable, he divorced his wives, married her, and succeeded to the throne. But as Altan-Khan's widow, the Third Lady kept the seal of office and refused to hand it over. Sengge's son Curuke set himself up by marrying a rival wealthy queen, Beyiji, but when the time came to contest for the throne he divorced her and he also married the Third Lady, now his father's widow. The Third Lady had invaluable contacts with the Chinese court which had to ratify the succession. The rejected Beyiji immediately contracted an alliance with the Third Lady's son who now found himself strong enough to compete for the throne with Curuke, and his own

mother. The Third Lady won, of course, and her husband Curuke was confirmed as Khan. In the next generation, Curuke's son by his first wife once again found that succession was dodgy. His subjects were refusing to follow him and, all in all, he thought that he too should marry the Third Lady. Now extremely old, the Third Lady was understandably reluctant. She was finally persuaded, but even after marriage her husband was unable to prise the seal of office from her and did not obtain it until she died (Serruys 1974). The Third Lady was by no means the only rich princess, and I have condensed this story from something even more labyrinthine, with several ladies all playing their hands.

We see from this that women could be autonomous centres of wealth and influence accreted from various sources along life's path, using it as a power base for conducting independent diplomacy with the Chinese. Although women could not themselves actually succeed to office, the Third Lady had something just about as good, the seal which was required to stamp all official documents. Her position is different from that of even the most powerful dowager empress in China, whose influence was linked to her attachment to a single man. The empress was never autonomous, such that her hand was sought by rival contestants for office. Divorce was uncommon in the upper classes of both India and China. Broadly speaking, the higher the class the more unspeakable was divorce, and the less likely were men to allow women's wealth to slip from their fingers.

It is now becoming clear why hypergamy and hypogamy are so important. Hypergamy (women marrying up) seems to be correlated with dowry, difficulty of divorce, and few property rights for women. With hypergamy, it is open to the husband to ignore the wife's natal family. In north India, in the Rajput upper classes, the flow of gifts from the bride's side is never reciprocated, and the groom may hardly ever visit his wife's natal kin. A wife's dowry is assimilated into the husband's family's property. It is not simply an endowment of the young couple, but may be used to acquire husbands for the groom's sisters (Parry 1979: 239). In cases of very large status differentials a high-ranking husband is attracted by what Parry calls a 'groom-price', an undercover cash payment (undercover because the bride's side are not too keen to have their low status openly apparent). If the groom is poor dowry may go on being paid over several years in order to preserve his status; it would be disastrous for both sets of affines if he or his wife were to be reduced to working in the fields (Parry 1979: 240). Tambiah (1973: 99) makes the point that the hypergamy is expansive; its ideals demand a constant search for more and more prestigious wife-takers on the one hand, and richer and richer wife-givers

to exploit on the other. Parry comments, however, that hypergamy may just as easily be the foundation for established political alliances. The intensely competitive nature of the system constrains the less ambitious to avoid at all costs the risk of a misalliance, and therefore to renew existing affinal relationships (1979: 296).

In China we find the same two opposing pulls between ambition and alliance as in north India. One pattern, not necessarily typical, is that in the upper class the relation with lower-status wife and dowry-giving affines is not entirely ignored but made use of in local politics, while it is the poorest peasant men, paying brideprice, who simply take a woman and repudiate her relatives. Because the wealthy landowners used affinal ties to confirm dominant positions in local affairs, it seems that the maintaining of links with the wife's family did not give her dramatically greater authority or bargaining power. Among the peasants, on the other hand, while men were icily distant with their affines, women used these ties informally for friendship and support (Watson 1981: 603). As Watson points out in her important paper, the dowry/brideprice distinction between the two classes was not just a marker, but served to reproduce class relations. The landowners used their incoming dowries and affinal links to maintain power, while the peasants were unable to better themselves because, being without wider contacts, they remained in thrall to their wealthy agnates (1981: 594). The distinction was accompanied by cultural differences in comportment, dress, food, seclusion of women, among other things (see also Lang 1946: 167).

But with hypogamy, where men marry up and women down, as in the Inner Asian societies, the picture is quite different. Here it is bridewealth, not dowry, which confers status on the giver. We could in fact go back to distinguishing between brideprice and bride-wealth. In north India and China, when goods are given in order to obtain a bride, this can correctly be termed a 'brideprice' because the payment is quite simply for a woman and the price is sensitive to supply and demand (cf. Parry 1979: 243-44 on changes in the market price for women among Rajputs). If the value of women goes up, as Croll shows for present-day China, the brideprice follows suit (1984: 44-61). It is dowry which bears the weight of prestige and alliance relations. In the Inner Asian societies, on the other hand, payments by the bridegroom's kin obtain both a wife and politically advantageous links. We can call this 'bride-wealth' because wealth in the sense of the general politico-economic standing of the two sides is what is at stake. Indeed in the highest ranks bridewealth becomes something like tribute. As with dowry among the Rajputs, we find the same preoccupations: how to give enough to secure a spouse

from a higher group without proclaiming thereby one's inferior status. In Mongolia during the Ch'ing period law codes repeatedly tried to limit escalating bridewealth and to fix it in ritualised, face-saving formula, whereby poorer people could substitute goods of lesser value while appearing to give the same. Among Mongols the word for bride-wealth, *sui*, means 'fated' or 'destined'; it is not associated with the idea of negotiation. In this system it is again in the richer classes that dowry appears. Clearly this is always likely to be the case, since, if the brideprice circulates to pay for wives, some extra wealth needs to be found if dowry is going to be paid out too. But in the Inner Asian periphery dowry does not buy status, because from the giver's point of view their sisters and daughters marry down. There are other ways, such as bridewealth, of making a showy splash of one's wealth. So why is dowry paid?

I think that the answer may lie in the pivotal role of women, who arrive as representatives of a superior group in their husband's family. It is true that when the Mongol bride appears she is required to prostrate herself before the husband's kin, to observe a range of respectful taboos, and to take on all the hard work in the household (Humphrey 1978; Hamayon & Bassanoff, 1973). It is this which led Szykiewicz (1978) to see a contradiction between Mongol ideology, which in countless myths and epics describes the fearsome struggles of the bridegroom to wrest a bride from her father, with the actual practice of subjection of the bride. But we might better formulate this to say that it is *because* the bridegroom does have to wrench a bride from her family that she must be subjected when he obtains her.

It is perhaps implied by the 'bone'/'flesh' distinction that daughters are felt to be 'of our blood'. Mongols have always preferred not to marry non-Mongols, but whereas men may infringe this women almost never do. Even marginally 'non-Mongol' groups, such as the Christian Mongols, were forced to pay higher bridewealth for wives (Krader 1963: 43). Even today, Mongol women marrying Russians or Chinese face disapproval. The reason, I think, has to do less with pollution through sexual intercourse than with the great value placed on the intimate, fleshly uterine tie between mother and children. On the other hand, a father was not seriously concerned to preserve his daughter's virginity. Why should those no-good sons-in-law expect it? Anyway you might as well try to guard a tiger (as a Mongol saying goes). Indeed, among both the Buryat-Mongols and the Kachin a girl is expected to have love-affairs with boys of her own agnatic group. 'I'd never sleep with a *mayu* (that is, marriageable) boy' one girl told Edmund Leach, 'then I might have to marry him!' (and take up the onerous duties of a bride).

So what we find in the Inner Asian case is the emotional tendency

of a father to hold on to his beloved daughter. In rich families where the acquiring of bridewealth was not much of an issue the father had nothing to gain by marrying out his daughter. If possible he would try to attract a son-in-law in. This was particularly the case with only daughters, but was a tendency even when there were also sons in the family. The Mongol word for 'son-in-law', *kürgen*, means 'follower' or 'one who gives help'. Dowry here is a means to acquire a son-in-law, to detach him from his kin and make him a dependent. Dowry was at least partly productive property; it was not paid in a lump but gradually over the years. It came in the form of livestock, branded with the wife's father's mark, and was therefore a physical reminder of dependency.

It is important to note that dowry in Mongolia remained the property of the wife, and her permission had to be asked if the husband hoped to dispose of it. This was true, it is said, even of that arch-tyrant Chinggis Khan, as Mongols often told me. Chinggis was not above using his wives as though they were daughters, and on one occasion he married off a secondary wife to a particularly worthy follower. A story about him, re-told to this day, relates how Chinggis said to her, in noble tones, 'You have entered my heart and limbs; it is not because you have lost your beauty, nor am I displeased with you, but X [the follower] has offered his life for me. I guarantee that your children will still be regarded as rightful heirs and your dowry of cattle and 200 men will go with you. But you brought in your dowry a very good cook – I will keep him.' I said to my Mongol friends that this does not sound like asking permission, but they replied: 'The Mongol mentality – you don't understand. If Chinggis hadn't been asking permission, he would just have, no words, . . . taken the lot'.

If the logic of hypergamy is that women cluster in excess at the top, in Inner Asia it is men at the summit who have nowhere to go above them for a wife. In the Mongol case this is solved in various ways: by dynastic marriages with Manchus; by princes taking it in turn to marry the same prestigious woman, as we have seen; by going into the church and also by the ideology of love and beauty: take a wife right from the bottom, from some unknown family – but a beautiful one.

If we turn now from the logic of hypergamy and hypogamy back to the ideological definition of women, I would like to end by mentioning the concepts of pollution and motherhood. The notion of female pollution was much less strong in Mongolia and Tibet than it was in either India or China. Ahearn (1978) has an interesting paper in which she discusses whether the pollution associated with Chinese women arises from the emotional significance of death and birth, from the social role of women, or from the system of beliefs about pollution. She concludes that the system of ideas assigned certain events (including

birth, death, menstruation) as polluting and that these affected women far more than men. She links the profound pollution engendered by women's procreative powers with their position as outsiders and the threat they pose to the male-oriented corporate kin group.

In Mongolia there was but a pale glimmer of these same ideas. Menstruation did not debar women from cooking and entering sacred places. The only remotely serious pollution was at birth, after which a woman had to undergo a purification rite. But the placenta was buried under the tent, a spot subsequently considered sacred. Later in life men would travel for miles to pay homage there. Wives were considered dangerous in that they brought with them the alien spirits of their natal group. This danger was counteracted by 'purification' through fire. But this was paralleled by men who if they went on a long journey also had to cross a fire when they returned home in order to rid themselves of alien spirits. Watson described the participation by Chinese women in death rituals, whereby daughters-in-law absorb the pollution of dead flesh (a *yin*, and hence female force) in order to guarantee the future fertility of the lineage (Watson 1982). This was not present in Mongolia except in heavily Sinicised regions on the border. Nor in Mongolia, in contrast to India, was sex considered polluting by ordinary lay-people. Sex, as the act of generation-creating life in the world of suffering and illusion, was negatively viewed in Mahayana Buddhism (even homosexuality was better); most people did not take this very seriously, though, and cheerfully acknowledged that they did not aim at such religiosity in this present life.

In India the combination of pollution associated with women's sexuality and the deeply admired love and self-abnegation of the mother gives rise to a profoundly ambiguous concept which is expressed in the Hindu cult of the benign/malevolent goddess. For women themselves, the suffering associated with motherhood is holy, a path to a religious virtue. This is in sharp contrast to the role of motherhood in Mahayana Buddhism, where the pain, suffering and dependency of the mother attaches her to this world and debars her from religious aspirations in this role (Paul 1979: 60–73). Motherhood, in the sense of physically bearing children, is hardly represented in religious literature. It is as good daughters, friends and nuns, guided it is true by male teachers, that women may acquire the status of Bodhisattva. The goddess Tara was an unmarried princess who acquired her sacred power through contemplation. When asked by a monk whether she would not prefer to transform her body into that of a man, she replied, 'I will serve the aims of beings with nothing but the body of a woman,' and she was able to acquire the power of 'Saving All Beings' (Beyer 1978: 65). It is interesting that she later became known as 'Tara-Mother' in both

Mongolia and Tibet. In Mongolian legends Tara magically acquires a son, thereby becoming a 'mother', but she only achieves ultimate enlightenment when she relinquishes him. The term 'mother' here is perhaps best understood metaphorically as the giver of life, the mother of the Tibetan and Mongolian people and as the representation of calm, strength and compassion.

Now, I think we can see what lies behind the contrast in women's 'temperament' which I mentioned at the beginning. Chinese women, with almost no property rights, had no alternative but to contrive *within marriage*, or to opt out altogether, for example by suicide (Wolf 1975: 111–142). As Chinese women, unlike their Mongolian counterparts were not clung onto by their natal families, were representative of an affinal link with a lower (devalued) group and restricted by the physical organisation of joint-family living, they had, especially perhaps in the upper class, no social role beyond the family. Their rage was essentially domestic violence. Even the dowry, paid to maintain the status of her natal family, was often in practice not hers to control and became an instrument for her domestic subordination. On the other hand, the Mongolian husband knew exactly how far he could go because he knew when his wife would call in her kin. More seriously, it is clear that the Mongol woman's power was legitimated by structures and ideologies outside the domestic circle. Mongols say: 'Between man and wife there is respect for law, between older sister and younger there is affection.'

In Mongolia women were undevious and quietly confident – not because Mongol values suggest that one must be quiet to appear confident, but because women were at the same time confident and enjoined to be quiet. Quietness in a verbal context was perhaps the way in which Mongolian women could represent themselves as respectful to men. Roberte Hamayon has written a fascinating paper (1979) in which she describes the linguistic complexities of women's speech, which is 'wise' without being creative. Women's competence, represented by her ability to solve the riddles of practical life, is taken advantage of by men, but prevented from subverting male legitimacy. A saying goes: 'Don't attack a man's word, don't go against a woman's way of doing things.'

The confidence and ability of women, as we have seen, correlates with the cultural acknowledgement of women's productive activities, with women's rights over property and their pivotal role in valued affinal alliances. There was always the alternative for women of setting up their own household economy, to which men might be attracted. The division of labour was skewed such that it was much more difficult for a man to live alone than a woman. As with the Himalayan peoples such as the Limbu, this possibility for women of simply moving out meant that it was mainly women who made marriages work. There was constant

tension between the ideology of women's autonomy, enshrined in the cult of the compassionate goddess Tara, and the patrilineal ideology, represented over the centuries of the Ch'ing dynasty by an ever-weaker cult of ancestors.

So, if we look at these patterns for the Mongols in the broadest sense, we might venture to see alternating cycles, in which, through history, women have been stronger and more autonomous during periods of war, and weaker in the eras of established, male-orientated state authority. By contrast, we see in China, as Barbara Ward remarked (1965: 136), a remarkable uniformity and continuity of the social system over time, but one which held within it a wide range of different social models. Ward, like Maurice Freedman, held to the view that the central node of the literati's 'ideological' model of society, based on the family, was relevant to all groups in China, however different their lifestyles from the ideal. This has been questioned by others (for example, Watson 1981) with whom I think I would agree. The class and occupation differences seem fundamental. To repeat: different patterns of marriage prestations were not just markers of class, but actually reproduced it (Watson 1981: 594). But even if subsequent research has called into question the Barbara Ward line on this particular matter, 'conscious models', their variety and how they relate to one another surely remains a central – perhaps the central – issue in the cultural anthropology of hierarchical societies.

The case I have presented is one for making a distinction between the marriage-property complexes of the great civilisations and those of the highland inner regions of Asia. Lévi-Strauss's distinction between hypogamy and hypergamy is the starting point for exploring this. Such complexes are not to be explained directly by differences in the systems of production; I would suggest that we have to look rather at what Ward called 'conscious models', or what I term 'constellations of values'. Concepts of gender and the social role of women enter into these values, and indeed they may even provide an explanation for the distribution of hypogamy and hypergamy. Such matters might be a subject for future research, as would be the question not so much of how women are affected by production conditions, but of how values that define 'women' themselves react on the choices to be made in conducting the economy.