

WOMEN SHALL NOT RULE

IMPERIAL WIVES AND CONCUBINES IN CHINA FROM HAN TO LIAO



KEITH McMAHON

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PROLOGUE

Sexual Politics and State Politics

Women Shall Not Rule tells the history of the wives and concubines of Chinese rulers from the legendary past to the aftermath of the only woman in Chinese history to reign as supreme monarch, Wu Zetian (625–705). It also examines how historians and storytellers portrayed the lives of the multiple wives of rulers, their family life, intrigues, love affairs, and scandals. Chinese rulers were not merely political and military leaders, but also polygamist husbands, for virtually all rulers were polygamists (though history records at least one monogamous emperor in the Ming dynasty). From the stories of polygamist emperors and their wives follows the history of how imperial women were agents of power in spite of the fundamental opposition to women rulers, thus the title *Women Shall Not Rule*. For centuries before the time of Wu Zetian, women repeatedly took part in state politics. But Wu soon became the most negative example of female rulership in Chinese history. It was three hundred years before there was another woman like her, Empress Liu of the Song dynasty. But neither she nor the women after her ever assumed as much authority as Empress Wu did. How was Wu Zetian able to gain such power? And how was it that there were no more Wu Zetians?

In dynastic China, the accepted practice was that men ruled the outer world and segregated the women to the inner world of the palace. But the politics of the inner world always infused the outer. The two

functioned side by side, in and amongst each other, though the state politics of men generally pretended that the sexual politics of women and the palace was completely separate. But sexual politics had an inherent effect on state politics because of the basic fact that every emperor had to have a successor, and every emperor and prince had to marry. Succession and marriage were the affairs of the ruling family of each dynasty, though non-family members such as imperial officials and eunuchs often advised and intervened. Besides fathers, uncles, and brothers, the most powerful and respected members of the ruling family were the mothers and grandmothers, all of whom were the wives or concubines of either the living or deceased rulers. The lives of these men and women took place in palaces that were like heavens on earth, ordered by ceremony and protocol; punctuated by dynastic rituals, anniversaries, and seasonal festivals; and full of servants and advisors who took care of the royal family's needs. At times their stories, filled with the family dramas of polygamous marital life, sound like a kind of imperial soap opera. Other characters included dowagers, princesses, crown princes, eunuchs, maids, wet nurses, and extramarital lovers, all of whom became involved in imperial family life and even state politics. Reading their stories requires two key perspectives. First, the institutional aspects of imperial polygamy, how it was established, what its values and ideals were, and how it was supposed to function. How, for example, were wives and concubines selected? How were they ranked and promoted or demoted? How was the emperor supposed to relate to them? How were they supposed to relate to each other? The second perspective is how imperial polygamy actually functioned, that is, what the actual behavior of its participants was like. How, for example, did jealousy affect imperial family life? How did the polygamous ruler share himself among many women? How did those relations affect his duties as ruler?

Two main types of ancient sources tell about these perspectives, traditionally termed "official" and "unofficial." "Official" sources are the imperially sponsored, ideologically correct histories of each dynasty, usually written by scholars of a succeeding dynasty. Each history contains one or two chapters of biographies of imperial wives and concubines. Although these biographies are the basis of this book, as detailed and informative as they may be, they are never enough. The broad category of "unofficial" histories is therefore necessary. Some of these

histories are more factually reliable than others; some are utterly fictional and even scandalous. They are not sponsored by official organs but emerge from both serious and irresponsible writers who relate extra and often untidy details that the official sources tend to suppress. Besides written sources, there are also material ones, including archaeological remains; stone inscriptions; tombs; statues, paintings, and other artwork; and objects of ritual and daily use. Sources differ depending on their date, purpose, and perspective. Official historians closer to Empress Wu's time, for example, accepted that she was actually emperor. As time passed, historians referred to her as a usurper, and, by the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), writers composed pornographic fiction portraying her as a lascivious old woman. Official historians often presented information in backhanded and coded ways, as with the ominous words they often used when they wrote that so-and-so “died suddenly,” referring to a suspicious death whose circumstances were unknown, that had for some reason to be kept secret, or that was only indicated by suggestion. Unofficial histories tended to spell out those circumstances, often in fascinating though not necessarily believable ways.

Besides official and unofficial, another set of critical terms that is necessary for reading the sources is prescriptive and descriptive. Prescriptive accounts relate how things were ideally supposed to be. One ancient text said that when an imperial consort entered the ruler's bedchamber, she was given a silver ring to wear on her left hand. When the visitation was over, she switched the ring to her right hand. It is best to read this account as an indication of an ideal form of behavior. The use of silver rings in precisely this way was not necessarily standard. The main point behind such a statement was that order should prevail when a ruler slept with his consorts. It was necessary to know what woman he slept with and when, both in order to record who became pregnant and to monitor the ruler's sexual life. Ideally he should spend his nights evenly with all of his wives, favoring no one in particular. How emperors and their wives actually behaved was another matter, which official and unofficial chronicles abundantly describe. Although the descriptive account might seem more “real” than the prescriptive, the prescriptive is real in that it tells us what issues mattered. Even the descriptive carries within it a choice about what to report and how to report it and, especially when it comes to profligate men and wanton women, tends to sensationalize and exaggerate.

Empress Zhao Feiyan (died 1 BCE), whose name means “flying swallow,” began as a government slave, became a renowned singer and dancer, and then attracted the attention of Han emperor Cheng (reigned 33–7 BCE). He took her first as concubine but eventually made her empress. From early on, writers told scandalous stories about orgies she had with men smuggled into the palace. She became one of the most notorious examples of the character type known as the “wanton” woman. Whether the stories of orgies are true is impossible to know, but her rise from slave to empress and her overwhelming influence on the emperor describe what actually happened.

History is not one continuous flow. Many things happen at once, with many separate strands relating to present, past, and future. In an attempt to represent the jagged and overlapping nature of that flow, this book is divided into a series of brief accounts, each given its own title. They generally follow chronological order but do not quite form a continuous narrative. Instead they constantly fork into separate topics and episodes. I mainly follow the official narrative of the biographies of the wives and concubines but also include alternate perspectives that are present in both official and unofficial histories, including fictional accounts. The lives of palace women relate to the lives of male rulers as unofficial history relates to official history. As polygamists, emperors stood at the top of the social ladder and served as the primary models of successful manhood. History is usually told in terms of these men and their political, economic, and military deeds. In contrast, the lives of palace women tell history from the alternate perspective of the domestic quarters of the palace. This perspective lets us look at emperors not just as rulers but as polygamists, husbands, and fathers presiding over palaces filled with wives, children, and servants of the imperial family. How did the men and women of the imperial polygamous family manage themselves? What kinds of things went wrong and why? What changes occurred and how did new dynasties attempt to imitate or correct the old?

An irony of Chinese history is that, in spite of the opposition to female rulers, the last major ruler of the last dynasty was a woman: Empress Dowager Cixi (1834–1908), who governed during the last five decades of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). She ruled because she was capable and ambitious, but she could not have made it so far without the usual reason that allowed a woman to rule: the death of her emper-

or-husband and the extreme youth of her son the successor. In other words, women ruled when men were absent or unfit, which happened to be the case at the end of the Qing. It is safe to say that, like Wu Zetian and other powerful empresses, Cixi was a talented and commanding ruler; otherwise she would not have lasted for so long. But since the prejudice against women in politics was so deep, it takes special lenses to understand the roles and deeds of these women and to read and interpret the accounts about them. We must begin by looking at the institution and values of royal polygamy from the earliest times onward.

I

Early China, 1250 BCE–317 CE

I

THE INSTITUTION AND VALUES OF ROYAL POLYGAMY

ONLY MEN SHOULD RULE AND ONLY MEN SHOULD BE POLYGAMISTS

Two closely related norms in Chinese history were that only men should rule and only men should be polygamists. These were the norms of the institution of imperial rulership, which included the institution of polygamous marriage. The institution and values of royal polygamy were established in ancient times, beginning with foundational principles in three key areas: love and favoritism, women and state politics, and the strict division between main wife and concubines. These emerged in mythical models of early polygamy and the first historical records of its rules and practices. The early records include definitions of queenly virtue; principles of sexual order, ritual, and protocol; and an ancient art of sex. This series of foundational principles and fundamental features, which are the subject of this chapter, emerges from the earliest archaeological and written sources, including the main Confucian canons that influenced all later history. The final topic of this chapter will be eunuchs, the castrated men who acted as personal servants of the royal family. Their existence was integral to the institution of royal polygamy, ending at the same time imperial rulership ended, in the early twentieth century.

Institutions involve rules, ideals, and expectations. They describe social and customary practices that people follow and believe in, they

have laws and prescriptions, and they bestow status and privilege. They governed life in the imperial palace until the very last breath of dynastic history in the early twentieth century. However, institutions only partly predict the reality of actual practice and behavior, the ways people carry out rules and expectations. The next chapter will begin the history of the actual behavior of rulers and their wives and concubines as told in ancient documents from the Han dynasty forward. Actual behavior has to do with how people conducted themselves, whether or not they followed institutional prescriptions. For example, the main institutional justification for polygamy was to ensure male offspring, who were essential for passing on the throne. But Chinese rulers also took concubines regardless of the need for sons and favored concubines more than their empresses. Actual behavior produced fascinating stories and character types, such as the wanton woman, the jealous empress, and the profligate emperor. Empress Wu was the most powerful woman in Chinese history and was at times “wanton” and “jealous,” but she also ruled effectively and responsibly for several decades. Some profligate emperors led a life of polygamous mayhem, like Emperor Hailing (1122–1161) of the Jin dynasty, who liked to steal other men’s wives and used to have sex to music while others watched. Other rulers became fixed on a single woman and generated love stories that became famous for centuries, such as Tang-dynasty emperor Xuanzong (685–762) and his consort Yang Guifei (719–756), whose affair was disrupted by a coup that nearly destroyed the dynasty. Many emperors, on the other hand, took dozens of consorts and had dozens of children but never ruined themselves or the empire. In whatever situation, in spite of the norm that only men should rule and only men should be polygamous, women nevertheless exerted influence, occasionally challenged the norms, and in a few cases changed them. Even if men violated the rules, they were still subject to constraints and could only go so far. Profligate rulers might be deposed or assassinated. Others found themselves constrained by their grandmothers, mothers, wives, and officials. Witness the famous statement by the sixth-century Sui emperor who impregnated one of his concubines. He and his empress had once sworn to have children by no other woman but the empress. When the empress had the pregnant consort killed, the emperor fled the palace in rage and, when reached by his pursuing attendants, heaved a deep sigh and said, “Here I am an emperor, yet I cannot do as I please.”¹

Polygamy and Female Rulers in China and Other Cultures

Before proceeding, let us look at Chinese imperial marriage in a world-wide context. To begin with, some form of polygamy was the rule rather than the exception in royal courts throughout the world, including China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Siam, Laos, Java, Arabia, Persia, Mongol Central Asia, Mughal India, Ottoman Turkey, Nigeria, the Mayan and Aztec regimes, ancient Ireland and Iceland, and ancient biblical kingdoms, among others. In general polygamy was institutionally regulated; the profligate ruler who staged orgies in his harem was relatively rare, although widely known about. Where there was Christianity, there was monogamy, thus Europe and Byzantium. But even in the Christian realms, male rulers had mistresses, what could be called polygamous mating. Louis XIV (reigned 1643–1715) was open about his main mistress Madame de Montespan (1641–1707), but secretive about others. Russia's Ivan IV (reigned 1533–1584) was like England's Henry VIII (reigned 1509–1547) in that when he tired of one woman, he did away with her and married the next. Ivan forced unwanted wives to become nuns (who continued nevertheless to maintain ties with the court), while Henry annulled his marriage with Catherine of Aragon, had Anne Boleyn beheaded, annulled his marriage with Anne of Cleves, and had Catherine Howard beheaded. The French kings were Catholic and could not divorce their queens, but the women of their courts nevertheless coveted the position of king's mistress, which bestowed privilege and wealth. The bastard children were raised in secrecy. Bastard sons were sometimes given important positions.

Polygamy was an affirmation of male potency. The presence of many women connoted fruitfulness and fertility. Many polygamous societies had the custom of segregating the ruler's women in special quarters, thus the Arabic loan word *harem*, often used in modern times to refer to the women's quarters of polygamous rulers all over the world. *Harem* comes from an Arabic root referring to the forbidden, the sacred, the taboo, and the inviolable (in actual practice, *harem* referred not just to the women's forbidden quarters but to any sanctuary or sacred place that was forbidden to common outsiders). Not all courts, including the Mayan and Aztec regimes and European courts, practiced such strict segregation. Even within Islamic culture, Muslim women in Mughal India were more prominent in politics, diplomacy, trade, and other

activities than their counterparts in the Persian, Arabic, and the Ottoman-Turkish worlds. So were the wives of Mongol and other Inner Asian peoples, from whom the Mughals were descended.

As for female monarchs, they were relatively rare in world history, so the rule in China against female rulers was not unusual.² No matter which culture or known historical period, the usual assumption was that women and political power were not a good mix. The female rulers we generally know about were exceptional, such as Cleopatra in Egypt (69–30 BCE), Queen Seondeok of Korea (606–647), Empress Wu in China, Empress Irene in Byzantium (ca. 752–803), Razia al-Din (1205–1240, also known as Raziyya Sultan) in India, Queen Margaret of Norway (1363–1414), Queen Elizabeth in England (1533–1603), Catherine the Great in Russia (1729–1796), or Empress Dowager Cixi in China (1835–1908), to name a few. Except for Margaret and Cixi, these women ruled in their own right as supreme monarchs. Otherwise women ruled in the more commonly seen capacity of regents, as with Margaret and Cixi, who were temporarily in charge of governments when their husband-rulers were indisposed or died and their sons were too young to rule. There were many such women in China. In France and other European realms, the Salic law of the fourteenth century prohibited women from succeeding to the throne. Britain did not follow that rule, however, and allowed queens regnant. The Ottoman Empire permitted female regents and in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had several in a row, all appearing after the reign of one of their greatest rulers, Suleyman the Magnificent (1494–1566). But whether or not they served as regents, imperial women participated in government in many courts throughout the world, whether they took authority or were delegated it. In 1513, Henry VIII went on a military campaign in France and left Catherine of Aragon as queen governor of England. In the Mughal Empire of India, Akbar the Great (reigned 1556–1605) left his mother in charge of Delhi while he went on a military campaign; his half sister governed Kabul Province. The next ruler, Jahangir (reigned 1605–1627), granted exceptional power to his wife, Nur Jahan (1577–1645). Under the Mughals and other Turko-Mongolian regimes of Central Asia, including the Khitan Liao of China, women regularly participated in political decision making and could lead armies in battle. The Mongol queen Manduhai (also called Mandukhai, born 1448) ruled on behalf of her much younger husband and Great Khan, Bat-

munkh; led troops in battle, once even while pregnant; and united the Mongols during the late 1400s.³

One thing was common among female rulers: the tendency of others to slander them, especially by accusing them of sexual crimes. People accused Empress Wu of sexual affairs with younger men whom she brought into her court and lavishly and openly favored. In France, Eleanor of Aquitaine (1124–1204) was said to have had an affair with an uncle while accompanying her husband on the Second Crusade. Later writers accused her of an affair with a Muslim prince. In the Delhi Sultanate, Razia al-Din fell after being accused of having a love affair with a slave. In Russia, Catherine the Great was said to have liked sex with horses and to have died when one fell on her while being lowered to her in a hoist. Marie Antoinette (1755–1793) was accused of molesting her eight-year-old son. Scandal literature had it that Empress Dowager Cixi ordered young men brought to her for sex, then had them murdered.

Some of the accusations had basis. Empress Wu appears to have had affairs with a monk and a physician and had a coterie of handsome young men in her old age. Catherine the Great had affairs with numerous men and had children by several of them, but the story about sex with horses was pure exaggeration. The stories about Eleanor of Aquitaine, Razia al-Din, Marie Antoinette, and Empress Dowager Cixi are probably all false. Scandal mongers also accused men of sexual crimes but, because of the bias against female rulers, let their imaginations run particularly wild with women. Female rulers were considered unnatural, they were wicked and incorrigible, and they represented an eclipse of male power. Although women ruled often and effectively, in general they were not given the chance to establish precedents for female rulership that continued beyond their reigns.

Another great variable across the world had to do with the presence of eunuchs, which I will address separately below. Eunuchs were castrated men who were present in all the royal courts mentioned above except Japan, Siam, the Mayan and Aztec Empires, and Europe. They lived mainly in polygamous regimes but also in the monogamous courts of Byzantium. Like palace women, their roles were both symbolic and real. The presence of eunuchs signified importance and grandeur; a person was privileged to have them. They also played vital roles as servants and intermediaries who could cross the boundaries between

royal and common, sacred and mundane, and sequestered inside and public outside. They loyally served their masters and mistresses, who controlled their destiny but whom they could influence because of their special proximity. Sometimes they held high positions and exerted tremendous power, even to the extent of selecting imperial successors. Monarchy is extinct in China today, as are eunuchs. Polygamy is outlawed, though newer forms of it have appeared in China in recent years, especially among wealthy men. Women in high positions in government are still rare, although less so in the Republic of China in Taiwan.

The Emperor Should Not Fall in Love

Where did love fit into the scene of imperial polygamy, if it fit at all? What happened if a ruler became infatuated with a woman or engrossed in sex with his harem? Stories from earliest recorded history tell of such rulers, such as Jie 桀, the last ruler of the Xia 夏 dynasty (seventeenth century BCE), who “doted” on a pair of sisters called the Two Jades. His obsession with them and other acts of misrule led to his downfall and replacement by the Shang dynasty.⁴ In general, although the ruler had multiple wives, his family and advisors hoped that he respected them all, especially his main wife, but that he did not fall in love with a particular one of them. Love and infatuation blinded the ruler, led him to make unwise decisions, and intensified the already existing rivalry between women. Likewise, his family and advisors did not want him to have sex with anyone he pleased. They warned him by citing stories like the one about Jie. Sexual excess was a sign of one of the worst types of behavior a ruler could engage in.

A small piece of the story of every Chinese ruler told about his marital and family life, focusing on the lives of his wives and concubines, called empresses (*hou* 后) and consorts (*fei* 妃). All of these women lived in a special part of the palace, referred to by names such as the rear palace (*hougong* 後宮), the six palaces (*liugong* 六宮), and the lateral courts (*yeting* 掖庭).⁵ These buildings held the greatest concentration of educated women in all of China. Well-educated women, it was thought, led to the good training of imperial offspring and would help guard against sexual and other types of excess in the palace. A standard biography for an empress or consort told of her family origin, her date of entry into the palace, her character, her deeds, and the

number of her children, if she had any, finishing with her date of death and the posthumous honors that she received. If there were love stories and sexual affairs between the woman and the emperor (or others), the official histories would include them mainly to warn about the dangers of such behavior. Some of the more spectacular love stories of the palace fascinated people for centuries and have inspired poetry, plays, novels, and movies. The same went for stories of sexual profligacy, which inspired pornographic literature that began to appear as early as the Song (960–1279) and was especially prominent in the Ming (1368–1644).

Let us make a giant leap to contemporary America. When Bill Clinton had his affair with Monica Lewinsky, he was doing something he could not resist. He was nevertheless foolish to think the affair could be kept secret. Lewinsky could not resist telling someone else. The resulting scandal lasted for months as the public and members of Congress carried out a thorough and embarrassing investigation. In ancient China, Lewinsky would have been a palace woman, maybe a consort-concubine or a maid, and Clinton could have even had a baby by her. Scandal and disaster would have occurred if, for example, his main wife, the empress, decided to murder the woman and the baby, or if the woman managed to gain such favor with the emperor that she destroyed the main wife. But the outcome could also be positive. The baby boy born of the palace woman could become the next emperor, as happened with the fifteenth-century Ming ruler (the Chenghua 成化 emperor) whose successor was born of his chance encounter with a female scribe working for the palace. She was never designated a consort, but the emperor secretly had sex with her; and the son she had eventually became emperor. By that time, it is true, she had long since been murdered by the father's childhood nursemaid and former lover. In general, it was dangerous to be the emperor's secret partner or her male offspring, but in this case the son's existence was kept secret until it was too late for anyone to destroy him.

“Hens Should Not Announce the Dawn”

How was the wariness about women rulers expressed? An ancient dictum that stood for centuries as a warning against women holding political power was “Hens should not announce the dawn” (*pin ji wu chen* 牝

雞無晨, from a document that appeared sometime between the sixth and third centuries BCE).⁶ If women ruled, they were considered meddlers in politics. They were a sign of male weakness and decline. Heaven abhorred them because rule by women was unnatural. The woman's duty was to never concern herself with anything but the domestic matters of the imperial family. The preference was for quiet and supportive women, especially empresses, who maintained harmony among palace women and helped guard against jealousy.

In spite of these views, the rule against female leadership was not thorough, and women were far from speechless and powerless. Their simple presence in the palace and the fact of their giving birth to children made their involvement in political decisions inevitable, especially regarding the selection of an heir apparent. Some women tried to stay out of politics even when they were given the opportunity to participate. Others asserted themselves anyway, whether to manipulate the relationships between the ruler, his wives, and his sons or to enter the politics of the man's world. Women became powerful mainly when men were unqualified to rule, for example, because they were too young, or were ill and incapacitated, or because a male ruler so loved and feared a wife or concubine that he allowed her and her family to influence politics. It also happened that a wife was simply more competent than her husband. Some of the competent women were respected. Some were condemned, even though they succeeded in exercising power strongly and effectively.

As for the written record of these women, it usually starts with Empress Lü 呂 of the Han, whose story will be told in the next chapter. But there were earlier cases, such as that of Lady Nanzi 南子 in the fifth century BCE, whose husband, Lord Ling 靈 of the state of Wei 衛 (534–493), withdrew from government and handed power to her. She reportedly had excellent policies, made wise appointments, and enjoyed the praise of many, including Confucius. Later, however, negative portrayals of her prevailed, still agreeing that she took power but painting her as an adulterous wife who, among other things, disrupted the line of succession.⁷ Another famous case was Queen Dowager Xuan 宣 of the Kingdom of Qin 秦 (died 265 BCE), the first recorded female regent in Chinese history. She began as the consort of the king of Qin, who died in 311. When his successor died only a few years later in 307, she and her younger brother managed to have her young son selected as king,

but she ruled as regent in his place and remained in power for forty-one years. In two cases earlier than Nanzi and Queen Xuan, women were major members of the male ruler's power group. King Wu 武 of the Zhou dynasty (eleventh century BCE) appointed his wife Yi Jiang 邑姜 as one of his nine ministers. This story occurs in written records. An even earlier case comes from archaeological records about Lady Hao 好, queen of the Shang-dynasty king Wuding 武丁 (ca. 1250–1192). She was a powerful military commander who led an army to invade and conquer other countries. Women like her occasionally continued to appear throughout Chinese history.

Only One Main Wife

Even though men enjoyed the privilege of being polygamists, they did not necessarily have an easy time with multiple wives. Of these women, only one was empress and main wife, while all others were strictly lower in status—thus, in brief, the core definition of Chinese polygamy. If she failed to bear a son, the empress would adopt one from one of the lower, secondary wives, that is, the concubines or what will also be translated as consorts (*fei*). Polygamy in other cultures meant that a man had multiple wives of roughly equal status. Islamic law, for example, allowed a man four wives, though he could have slave concubines if he could afford them. In China, the ruler's main wife was in charge of administering the inner palace. All secondary wives paid obeisance to her. She was to maintain order among them.

The earliest evidence of polygamy in China is almost entirely about men of the highest elite, mainly the rulers. From early on, historical records noted the disastrous consequences of such marriages, especially in the form of rivalry between wives. Many customs and policies addressed such problems, beginning with the principles of order in the ruler's harem. Imperial scribes, for example, recorded the dates of sexual visits, pregnancies, and other matters such as the women's good and bad deeds, all of which were part of the general attempt to impose order by monitoring the ruler in his relations with women and preventing rivalry and dissension among wives and offspring. The greatest fear, as just mentioned, was that he would succumb to the influence of the empress or a favorite among the secondary women and abuse or neglect state duties. The purpose of the values and institutions of polygamy was

to prevent such things from happening. Even the most flagrant emperor, empress, or consort operated within that framework and had to pay attention to rules, values, and the opinions of others.

Accounts about main wives and other palace women are relatively sparse until we get to the Han dynasty, which began in 206 BCE. Around 100 BCE, a court-appointed historian and eunuch named Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145?–90? BCE) wrote a history of China from the first mythical ruler, the Yellow Emperor, to his own times called the *Records of the Historian* (*Shiji* 史記). Chapter 49 is called “The Imperial In-Laws,” in which Sima Qian writes about empresses, empress dowagers, and the wives and concubines who made up the imperial harems of the Han up to his time. His chapter became a model for later dynastic histories and contains examples of the kind of homilies that were often written to address the grave nature of imperial polygamous marriage. Sima Qian begins by focusing on the profound importance of the relationship between rulers and main wives and notes that the fate of a kingdom often rested on the conjugal behavior of the ruler. Kingdoms fell because of a ruler’s obsession with a female favorite. Thus, as he writes, a number of canonical works—including the *Book of Changes* and the *Classic of Poetry*—begin with references to basic principles of male and female virtue, which prove that “the relationship between husband and wife is fundamental to the harmony of all human relationships.” He then cites the disasters that occurred because of the attempt by Liu Bang, the first emperor of the Han, to depose his original heir to the throne, his son by his main wife, Empress Lü. Liu Bang wanted to replace him with the son that he had by his favorite concubine. As we will see below, after Liu Bang died Empress Lü had both the concubine and her son brutally murdered. These events were fresh in the memories of the people of Sima Qian’s times.⁸

EARLY MYTH AND HISTORY ABOUT RULERS AND THEIR MULTIPLE WIVES

Let us begin with the earliest records of mythical and historical models of royal polygamy. Although the values and institutions constantly evolved, the earliest precedents lay in the mythical past, while the basic foundations were in place by the Han dynasty. One of the most famous

stories supposedly took place in the third millennium BCE, when the legendary emperor Yao 堯 was looking for a successor. He heard favorable reports about a man named Shun 舜 and decided to marry his two daughters to him. It happened that Shun lived in a family whose members tried to destroy him, but he remained faithful to them nevertheless. He had a father, stepmother, and half brother born of the stepmother. According to an early and influential interpretation of the story, Yao was testing Shun. If Shun could succeed with his two royal wives and his difficult family, then he would be a good ruler. The interpretation reflects a traditional notion that a person's virtue at home should predict his virtue in society at large. To readers of the Han dynasty and later times, however, the story contained a troubling element in that it made no distinction in rank between the two sisters. As just noted, a man should have no more than one wife; all women besides her were concubines. What follows is a brief presentation of the scholarly debates about the meaning of this story, especially in regard to the ranking of wives. The discussion will be more technical than usual in order to show how ancient commentators incorporated stories like this into the formulation of imperial precedent. The scholars participating in the debate were not just doing scholarship for its own sake, but were taking part in the promotion of rules and guidelines for imperial rulership, of which marriage to multiple women was an inherent feature.

The Two Wives of Emperor Shun: Interpreting an Early Myth

Besides the issue of the ranking of wives, it is also necessary to point out the connection between Shun and the issue of royal succession. Normally in Chinese history a ruler named one of his sons as heir apparent, preferably the eldest, who ideally was born of the ruler and the main wife. But such a son was not always available, thus the need for extra wives to bear sons. Shun's story, however, exemplified an even loftier ideal that never became part of historical precedent, that of selecting a successor based on merit rather than bloodline. Shun was not Yao's son, but had more merit than any of Yao's sons. Their story occurs in the *Book of Documents* (*Shangshu* 尚書 or *Shujing* 書經), one of China's most important ancient canons. It was written sometime during the last centuries of the Zhou 周 dynasty, which ended in 256 BCE; parts of it are perhaps as early as the sixth century BCE. I will also include com-

mentaries that ancient scholars wrote about the passage in the *Book of Documents*. Since the text was already several centuries old by the time of these scholars, the purpose of their commentaries was to explain difficult meanings and evaluate the issues that the episode raised about the standards of a proper marriage. Scholars were respected figures who crafted their words carefully and often cited others as they weighed various interpretations. I intersperse translation with paraphrase; words in brackets are either significant characters from the original text or brief explanations.

The *Book of Documents* says that when Yao was looking for a successor, he received this report:

“There is an unmarried man in a low position, called Shun of Yu.” The emperor said: “Yes, I have heard of him; what is he like?” The minister replied: “He is the son of a blind man; his father was stupid, his mother was deceitful, his brother Xiang was arrogant; he has been able to keep harmony and to be grandly filial; he has controlled himself and has not come to wickedness.” The emperor said, “I will try him; I will have him wed, and observe his behavior towards my two daughters. He directed and sent down his two daughters to the nook of the Kuei River, to be wives in the Yu household. The emperor said, “Be reverent!”⁹

Shun was known for his filial piety. He continued to care for his father and stepmother even though they tried to kill him. Meanwhile, Yao was looking for a successor and, after testing Shun in various ways, including marrying his two daughters to him, finally decided to choose him. An influential commentary on the *Book of Documents* was the *Faithful Interpretations of the Book of Documents*, by the Tang-dynasty scholar Kong Yingda 孔穎達 (574–648).¹⁰ In his view, “Yao married his daughters to Shun to test him . . . and to observe whether he could establish order in his family.” Kong further states:

There were three malicious members of Shun’s family, on top of which he was a commoner who was suddenly wed to two daughters of an emperor. For him to achieve harmony in such a situation would be especially difficult. If one observed Shun’s exercise of orderly ways with his two wives while at the same time he kept his own family in order, one could tell whether and how he might maintain order in the kingdom. The idea was that in order to consider whether

Shun could rule the kingdom, one should first observe whether he could rule his family.

Like other ancient commentators, Kong Yingda had trouble with the *Book of Documents*'s failure to clarify the ranking of Shun's wives. Thus he says: "To provide a man with a spouse is called 'to wive him.' A man cannot have two wives. The words 'to have him wed' [*nü yu shi* 女于時] in the original text include both women. Of two women, one must be higher in rank than the other, as in elder versus younger." Kong then cites a famous Han-dynasty scholar, Liu Xiang 劉向 (79–8 BCE), who wrote one of the most important books used in educating women, the *Biographies of Great Women*. According to Liu Xiang, as Kong Yingda cites, "Of the two women, the elder was named Ehuang [娥皇], the younger Nüying [女英]. When Shun ascended the throne, Ehuang became empress [*hou* 后], while Nüying became consort [*fei* 妃]." Kong Yingda refutes another famous commentator when he goes on to say "Zheng Xuan [鄭玄, 127–200 CE] referred to the avoidance of the word 'wife.' This was because Shun did not report the marriage to his father, nor did he practice the formality of ranking the main wife over the secondary wife. In Zheng Xuan's commentary on the *Book of Rites* [*Li ji* 禮記, an important Han text that we will see later on], he said that Shun married without telling his father and without distinguishing main wife from concubine. But this is Zheng Xuan's own interpellation and has no basis in the sources."

Whether or not commentators agree, they reveal some important things. First, they all agree that if a man marries two or more women, only one can be called a wife; others must be secondary wives. Second, the use of a particular word was taken very seriously. The *Book of Documents* used neither the word "wife" nor the word "marry" to refer to Yao giving his two daughters to Shun. Instead, it used the word *nü*, which means "woman," but which can also be used verbally to mean something like "to have him woman'ed," or as in Karlgren's translation, "to have him wed." As to how *nü* should really be interpreted in this context, in the end all we have are the bare words of the ancient text and the speculations by later commentators.

The story of Shun's wives also contributed to the tradition of idealizing virtuous empresses, a common element of biographies in dynastic histories. The following is from Liu Xiang's *Biographies of Great Wom-*

en, which the above commentary cited and which was supposedly compiled toward the end of the Former Han dynasty (202 BCE–9 CE). It mainly consists of positive portrayals of women, with one chapter about bad women. The *Biographies of Great Women* begins with the story of Shun's marriage to Yao's daughters, embellishing upon the account from the *Book of Documents*.

Worthies from all around recommended Shun to Yao, who thereupon married his two daughters to Shun in order to observe how he conducted himself in his household. The two wives served Shun diligently in the farm fields. They never put on the airs of an emperor's daughters nor did they act haughtily or disrespectfully. They were modest, mannerly, and frugal, and did their utmost to uphold wifely mores.¹¹

The story further reports that Shun's wives never interfered with his performance of filial duties to his parents and helped him whenever possible, even when his father tried to kill him by getting him drunk. His wives had him soak in an herbal bath that gave him the ability to drink all day but never get drunk. When Shun finally became emperor, he made Ehuang the empress (*hou*) and Nüying the imperial consort (*fei*).

The Rules and Practices of Early Polygamy, Thirteenth to Fifth Centuries BCE

There are no archaeological records of Yao and Shun, thus the need to refer to their stories as myths. The earliest archaeological records of a ruler with multiple wives are from the second millennium BCE in material from excavated tombs and inscriptions on bones used in oracle readings. King Wuding of the Shang dynasty supposedly lived between 1250 and 1192 BCE and, according to some, had more than sixty wives. Of these, only three were official queens. It is not clear if they reigned all at once or one at a time, but their sons were strictly above the sons of lesser wives. In other words, in that period the son of a concubine could not succeed the ruler, though in later times he could. As mentioned above, one of Wuding's queens, Lady Hao, was a powerful military leader who aided the king in war. Like the other two queens, she was

buried in a separate tomb, though lesser consorts may have been buried along with the king.

After the Shang dynasty came the Zhou (1121–249 BCE), which divided into the Western and Eastern Zhou and for which there are many records of royal polygamy. During the Spring and Autumn Period (770–453 BCE) of the Eastern Zhou, it is said that there were three categories of wives: the principal wife, of whom there could be more than one; secondary wives; and concubines, called *qie* 妾. The secondary wives belonged to a category that ceased to exist in later times and that went by the name of *ying* 媵. The earliest reference to *ying* in this special sense occurs in the year 675 BCE in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, a chronicle of the period compiled in the fifth century BCE. The term was defined as follows: When a feudal lord took a wife from one state, two other states with the same surname might send him wives too. Each of the three wives was accompanied by a niece and a younger sister, making nine women in all. Of these, three were primary wives, one of whom was the principal primary wife, while the other six were secondary or *ying* wives. The privilege of marrying nine at once did not extend to men of lower rank, among whom the ministers (called *qing-daifu* 卿大夫) could supposedly have only one wife and two concubines and could not take *ying* wives, though there were exceptions. The next lower class was the elite (called *shi* 士), who could have only one wife and one concubine.¹²

As detailed as such descriptions may be, however, there are in fact no clear references to men taking precisely nine wives, though there are many references to women as secondary wives or *ying*. In reality, the wives could come from more than two states, and men often married other women besides the nine. But many features of this hypothetical type of marriage nevertheless predicted the established rules and practices of imperial polygamy from the Qin and Han dynasties on. For example,

1. It was said that if the primary wife died, a secondary wife (a niece, for example) could not assume the deceased wife's status. This feature shows the weight attached to the rank of primary wife and how hesitant people were to replace her, even if she died.

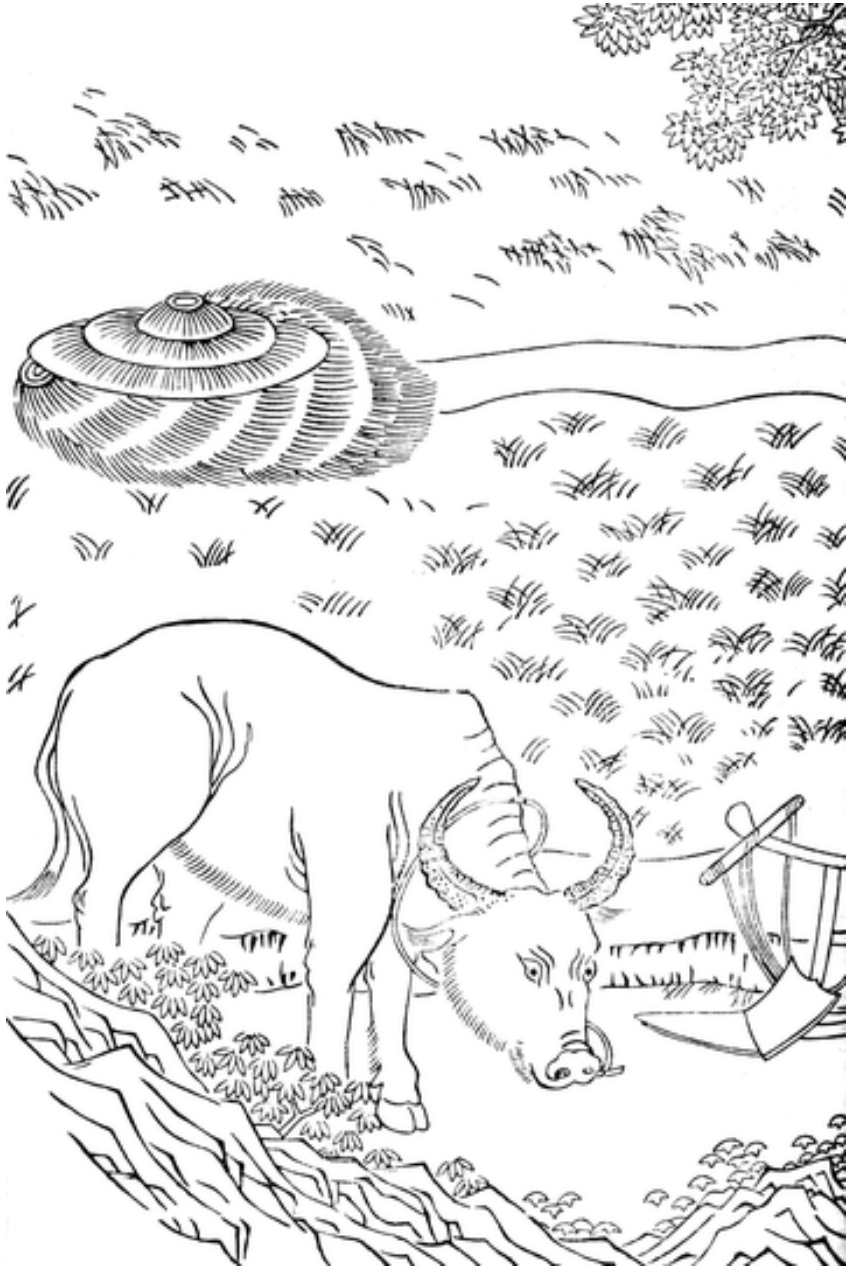


Figure 1.1. Emperor Shun's wives bring him food as he works in the fields. (*Huitu lienü zhuan*. Zhibuzu zhai edition [1779]. Taipei: Zhengzhong shuju, 1971, 1.1b-2a. Permission of Zhengzhong shuju.)



Figure 1.1. Continued.

2. It was also said that the secondary brides, if too young, would be sent to the man at a later date than the primary wife. In addition, if a wife did not have a sister, an elder brother's daughter could be sent. In some Han-dynasty accounts, the rationale for *ying* marriage was not only to guarantee male offspring but also to prevent and control jealousy, the idea being that related women were more likely to get along and not be jealous. In general, in later times wives were often related as sisters, cousins, or aunt and niece and could enter the marriage at the same time or not. But blood relationship did not necessarily prevent conflict.¹³
3. When other families or lineages besides the principal bride provided secondary brides, they sent them to the bride's family first, not directly to the groom. The primary wife had a sense of entitlement in that the secondary wives were from her own family or lineage and thus represented the interests of her natal family and state. This practice underscores the privilege accorded to the main wife, which remained constant in later times. However, imperial courts were in general wary of the political influence exerted by an empress's or any bride's natal family.
4. The ranking of women might change as the result of the addition of more primary wives or the promotion of sons. In later times, a consort's rank could likewise change, going up because of merit and down because of misbehavior.

As for concubines, they formed a category of their own that remained in existence for the rest of imperial history. A treaty from the year 651 BCE contained a statement of lasting influence: "Do not take a concubine as a wife" (*wu yi qi wei qie* 毋以妾爲妻). This statement was preceded by the sentence "Do not replace the heir designate" (*wu yi shu zi* 毋易樹子), and followed by "Do not let women become involved in affairs of state" (*wu shi furen yu guoshi* 毋使婦人與國事), both also of major importance for later times.¹⁴ Although concubines could and did become wives and even enter politics, they were supposed to be there for the sake of producing offspring. If a concubine produced a son who became heir apparent, the custom was for the sonless principal wife to adopt him as her own. As early as 720 BCE, there was a duke who had a principal primary wife who failed to have a son, while the son of his second primary wife died. He therefore married the younger

sister of his second primary wife and had the principal primary wife take that sister's son as her own. A famous case of abuse of the distinction between main wife and concubine was that of the powerful hegemon who had three primary wives, none of whom bore sons. But he had many concubine favorites, six of whom he treated as if they were wives.¹⁵ Although the system of multiple primary wives ceased to exist after the Spring and Autumn Period, its main purpose was to create political alliances between states and important families through marriage, a practice that continued throughout imperial history. By the beginning of the unified imperial system under the Qin dynasty in 221 BCE, however, there was only one main or principal wife. We might call it a superficial monogamy. All other women were of strictly lower rank.

Favoritism and the Definition of “Disorder” in the *Zuo Tradition*

A key and often-cited passage from an ancient canon, the *Zuo Tradition* (*Zuozhuan* 左傳), further underscores the dangers of favoritism and women. The *Zuo Tradition* is an approximately late-fourth-century-BCE narrative commentary on the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, which was from a century or so earlier. Both trace the history of the Zhou dynasty from 722 to 481 BCE. Two separate but overlapping passages define disorder (*luan* 亂) in terms of a recurrent motif in early history, the ruler's favoritism for a particular wife or son.

The root of disorder can be summarized in terms of four situations: 1) treating a concubine as if she were equal to a principal wife, 2) replacing the legitimate heir with the son of a favorite concubine, 3) two or more top statesmen competing for power, and 4) the splitting of a state.

The source of disorder can be summed up as follows: Inner favoritism leads to rivalry between wife and concubine. Outer favoritism gives rise to clashes between top statesmen. Favoring the son of a secondary wife causes conflict in the line of descent. A city that rivals the capital brings about the splitting of the state.

In general, there were two competing sources of power in the royal family, one the influence exerted by wives and their families, the other the influence of the ruler's brothers and other major male descendants

of the same surname. Women constituted the inner power base. Although a woman left her own family to marry into her husband's family, she could still exert influence if she came from a powerful family. The outer base was that of the male leadership and its rule of patrilineal descent, in which the head of the family should always be male and in which he should pass status, surname, landed property, and title, if he had one, to his eldest son; that is, using the practice of primogeniture. But brothers, uncles, and other male relatives of the same surname often competed for power, especially if the ruler's first son was weak or young or if the ruler had no son. Stories about "inner favoritism" in general focused on a ruler who favored a younger wife and her son over an older wife and her son, although established rules said he should not do so. Stories of "outer favoritism" also occur, but for now let us give the gist of three well-known accounts in the *Zuo Tradition* about inner favoritism, the latter two of which include a type of behavior not mentioned so far, cross-generational affairs in which a son takes a concubine of his father's or a father takes one of his son's.¹⁶

A famous example of women meddling in government is from the year 722 BCE, when the main wife of the duke of the state of Zheng favored her younger son over her elder and wanted him to become the next duke. The duke refused, but after the elder son succeeded him in 743, she asked the new duke to grant his brother a piece of territory. The younger brother proceeded to expand his territory in an obvious bid to rival his elder brother, who was finally forced to go to war against him and drive him away, thus exemplifying conflict between descendants. The elder brother broke with his mother, later regretted it, and finally had a touching reunion with her.¹⁷

Inner favoritism was perceived as giving excess privilege to women, whether mother, main wife, or concubine. Since a man could take concubines all his life, it was common that new concubines were around the same age as the man's grown sons. In notorious cases, sons had affairs with those women, both before and after the father's death. They were considered to have committed "incest," for which a special word was used, *zheng* 烝. Sometimes fathers took their sons' women, as also happens in the following story. The duke of the state of Wei "committed incest" with his father's concubine, who gave birth to a son whom he named heir apparent. The son later married a beautiful woman whom the duke took for himself and by whom he had two sons. Intrigue

followed years later when the duke allied with the wife he stole from his son to plot the son's murder. One of the son's half brothers (born of the duke and the stolen wife) told him of the plot, but the son refused to protect himself, saying that to do so, even to save his own life, would be disrespectful to his father. Thus he went knowingly to his death, thus a case of "replacing the legitimate heir."¹⁸

Another powerful ruler who emerged during the Zhou was Chong'er 重耳 (697–628 BCE) of the state of Jin. His problems began when his father, a duke, failed to have sons by his wife and "committed incest" with his father's concubine. Their son, Shensheng 申生, became the heir apparent, after which the duke took four more wives, one of whom gave birth to Chong'er and the other three of whom gave birth to three more sons. The third and fourth wives were sisters. The duke especially favored the third wife, Lady Li, who managed to get him to send all his sons to distant posts, but keep her and her sister's sons in the capital. Then she connived to turn the duke against Shensheng, who like the son in the last story refused to defend himself and instead let himself go to his death, convinced that it would be wrong to go against Lady Li, his father's favorite. When Chong'er was slandered, however, he fled to another kingdom. Like Shensheng, he felt it impossible to oppose his father even when his father was trying to do away with him. He wandered in exile for many years until he returned and took over as duke in 637 BCE, by which time his father had died.

QUEENLY VIRTUE AND PRINCIPLES OF SEXUAL ORDER

The warnings about favoritism and disorder in the *Zuo Tradition* were addressed to men. What messages were addressed to the women of the polygamous family? The answer can be summed up in a few words: do not be jealous. Ancient morality defined exemplary behavior in women in terms of rising above jealousy, which meant helping prevent favoritism and rivalry in the royal harem and creating harmony among women. The *Classic of Poetry* (*Shijing* 詩經) was a Zhou-dynasty collection of three hundred-plus poems, a large portion of which were about love, courtship, and marriage. It became a canon like the *Book of Documents* and the *Zuo Tradition*. Portions of it date from as early as the tenth century BCE, while the latest poems date from around 600 BCE. It was

studied and quoted by rulers, courtiers, and all learned men and women in premodern China for its simple and beautiful language, its portraits of legendary and historical events and daily life in ancient times, and its models of exemplary behavior. Its relevance to the sexual politics of empresses and consorts lies in the interpretations of the poems by early commentators who believed that many of the poems were about the relationships of polygamous marriage. The *Mao Commentary* was named after its supposed author, Mao Heng 毛亨, and dates from the middle of the second century BCE. Declared official and orthodox in the mid-Han, it held sway for many centuries thereafter. In poems that on the surface seem to have nothing to do with wives and consorts, the *Mao Commentary* found what it claimed to be references to virtue and depravity in the polygamous households of early Zhou rulers and other high-ranking men. The following excerpts include the original poems interspersed with the *Mao Commentary* plus interpretations by two later commentators, whom we have already seen in the myth of Shun: (1) the Han-dynasty Zheng Xuan and (2) the Tang-dynasty Kong Yingda.

Harmony among the Imperial Wives

The *Mao Commentary* finds what it calls “queenly virtue” in the very first poem of the *Classic of Poetry*, called “Guanju.” “‘Guanju’ is an expression of queenly virtue” (關雎, 后妃之德也), the commentary says. “Queenly” is a convenient translation of the words *houfei*, meaning empresses and consorts. Arthur Waley translates the first two stanzas as follows:

“Fair, fair,” cry the ospreys
 On the island in the river.
 Lovely is this noble lady,
 Fit bride for our lord.

In patches grows the water mallow;
 To left and right one must seek it.
 Shy was this noble lady;
 Day and night he sought her.

The *Mao Commentary* claims that this poem is not about a man longing for a woman, but about the happiness of the queen or empress “in

finding chaste women to mate with the Lord, and her concern that she present him with virtuous women who will not use their beauty in a lustful way” (樂得淑女以配君子，優在進賢，不淫其色; Waley translates “chaste woman” as “noble lady,” *shunü* 淑女). The other two commentators embellish upon the notion of the unjealous queen and the issue of chastity. Kong Yingda says, “*Yin* [淫] means lust. When a man likes women too much, he takes feminine charms as an object of lustful desire [*yin nüse* 淫女色]. When a woman tries too much to be a man’s favorite, she makes a lustful display of her charms [*zi yin qi se* 自淫其色].” Of lines 3 and 4, Zheng Xuan says, “The Queen is a virtuous woman, chaste and aloof, loyal and remote, a fitting mate for the Master.” She lives deep in the palace and “knows how to create harmony among the rancorous women of the harem.” Kong Yingda adds, “She aims to find chaste women [*shunü*] to mate with the Master.” Lines 5 and 6 refer to picking water mallow that grows to the left and right. To Zheng Xuan this means that the empress is adept at choosing among the women in the harem, in particular those below the most highly ranked palace women (ranking of women is discussed in the next chapter). The empress is concerned to find chaste women and, as Kong Yingda says, needs help from the harem women to pick and choose among them because, like the water mallow growing here and there, women are uneven in virtue and chastity.¹⁹

Besides introducing chaste women to the ruler, the queen also excels at creating harmony among the concubines. A stanza from “Drooping Boughs” (*Jiumu* 樛木) says:

In the south is a tree with drooping boughs;
The cloth-creeper binds it.
Oh, happy is our lord;
Blessings and boons secure him!

To Mao and the other commentators, the drooping boughs refer to the benevolence of the queen in her treatment of the master’s concubines, who are like the creeping vines at the base of the tree. She is unjealous and she knows how “to create harmony among the concubines” (*hexie zhongqie* 和諧眾妾).²⁰ In the poem “Locusts’ Wings” (*Zhongsi* 螽斯), the *Mao Commentary* finds that the result of harmony is a multitude of offspring:

The locusts' wings say "throng, throng"
 Well may your sons and grandsons
 Be a host innumerable.

To the commentator, in other words, the poem refers to the fact that the queen's lack of jealousy leads to a "multitude of sons and grandsons" (*zisun zhongduo* 子孫眾多). The title "Locusts' Wings" can still be seen today on a plaque above the gateway to the harem quarters in the Qing-dynasty imperial palace in Beijing. Those words alone served as an auspicious portent of multiple offspring, thriving like locusts.²¹

By the same token, secondary wives must not be resentful of the main wife. The poem "The River Parts and Joins" (*Jiang you si* 江有汜) is supposedly about a lady of the harem whom the main wife at first rejected but later chose. One of its stanzas says:

The River parts and joins.
 Our lady went to be married



Figure 1.2. The Gate of Plentiful Offspring, consorts' quarters of the imperial palace in Beijing. (Photo by author.)

And she was not taken.
 She was not taken,
 But afterwards there was regret

In the end they “found room for” the secondary wife and all was resolved. The *Mao Commentary* says:

“The River Parts and Joins” is about a beautiful secondary wife [*ying*] who was hard-working and free of rancor. The main wife finally regretted not having chosen her. In the times of King Wen in a place near the two rivers, there was a main wife who failed to include the secondary wife among the other wives. The secondary wife despaired of this but was never resentful, and the main wife finally regretted her mistake.²²

Harmony prevailed not only because of the efforts of the main wife but also because each woman knew her place. One of the alternate terms for a concubine was “little star,” which came from a poem of the same name (*Xiaoxing* 小星). It was about the difference between the main wife and concubines in their relationship to the ruler or master of the household. The scene was of concubines walking through the dark on their way back from their visit with the ruler.

Twinkle those small stars
 Three or five in the east.
 Shrinking, through the dark we walk
 While it is still night in the palace.
 Truly, fates are not equal.

Twinkle those small stars,
 In Orion, in the Pleiads.
 Shrinking, through the dark we walk
 Burdened with coverlet and sheet.
 Truly, fates are not alike.

According to the *Mao Commentary*, the concubine internalizes the fact that she belongs to a “lower order” (called *jian* 賤) than the main wife, who is “high” (*gui* 貴). The concubine can never expect to enjoy the same privileges as the main wife. Whereas the wife can come and go at a leisurely pace, concubines must come and go hastily and in a “shrinking” way, carrying their bedding, and can never stay the whole night. Kong Yingda’s notes on this poem in the *Mao Commentary* say:

Because the wife does not act jealously, she extends kindness to the lowly concubines and allows them to visit the master. The lowly ones know their place in the hierarchy and serve the main wife with utmost zeal. . . . Concubines all know that they are lowly and base. Thus they carry their blankets as they go to visit the master and never stay the whole night.

[Zheng Xuan adds:] “the concubines visit him according to order and sequence. This is because each of them occupies a separate place in the ritual hierarchy. Whenever concubines visit the master, they never stay the whole night” [凡妾御于君, 不當夕].²³

The commentators were painting a picture of an ideal world in the Zhou-dynasty past, for which they did not necessarily rely on actual fact. The concepts and behavior which they elaborated upon nevertheless became standard for later moralists.

Sexual Order in the Ritual Canons

Exemplary behavior between rulers and wives was also a matter of ritual, ceremony, and protocol, which deeply influenced the sexual order of the palace. How were men and women subject to rules of propriety and orderly behavior, what manners did they adopt, and what boundaries did they observe? One of the most critical issues of imperial polygamy was sexual visitation. How did the ruler arrange visits with his many wives? What order and sequence did they follow? Ritual, ceremony, and protocol were common topics in ancient Chinese canons, in which the primary relations were those of ruler and minister, father and son (or elder brother and younger), and husband and wife, which were called the Three Hierarchies (*Sangang* 三綱). The *Book of Rites* (*Liji*) was a Han-dynasty work from perhaps the late first century CE that also became part of the classical canon. It contained passages about sexual order and proper male and female behavior that were cited and applied during the entire history of dynastic China. The primary distinction was between inner (*nei* 內) and outer (*wai* 外), that is, the inner realm of women and the household and the outer realm of men and their public and political affairs. The inner was the wifely world, in short, as reflected in an old term for wife, the “inner one” (*neiren* 內人).

Order in the inner quarters was the topic of one of the main chapters of the *Book of Rites*, called “Principles of the Inner Realm” (*Neize* 內

則]). In it was written, for example, that in a proper household, women approaching marriageable age should not be seen in public. Male visitors to a house should not see or talk with the women of the host's family. Other prescriptions included:

Men do not speak of internal matters; women do not speak of external affairs [男不言內, 女不言外].

If a son has two concubines and his parents prefer one over the other, the son should follow their preference.

Even if a concubine has aged, before she reaches fifty, the man should cohabit with her every five days. [Zheng Xuan explains:] This is because she does not decline until fifty, when she can no longer conceive. At this time the concubine shuts herself in her room and no longer emerges to visit the master. "Visit" in this case means to attend to at night and urge him to rest. One visit every five days was the norm of the feudal lords.

Even a favorite concubine must in clothing and food reflect her inferiority to the main wife.

When the wife is not present, the concubine may not stay the whole night.²⁴

The sexual order of the imperial palace had its own set of norms in the form of such things as bureaucratic titles for empresses and harem women, differentiation in salaries and rewards, the organization of space in the living quarters, the appointment of officials and eunuchs to manage the imperial living quarters, the appointment of female administrators and servants in the inner palace, the conduct and protocol of sexual and other visits, record keeping in regard to who slept with the ruler and who became pregnant and gave birth, the supply of food, clothing, and equipment, including such things as carriages to convey women from place to place, and finally appropriate language to refer to the daily and intimate affairs of the living quarters (such as the use of the word "visit").

Another canon on ritual from the Han dynasty was the *Rites of Zhou* (*Zhouli* 周禮), which contained passages describing an ideal system of order in the inner quarters, including the way in which consorts were to be ranked. The book supposedly reflected the governmental administration of the royal state of Zhou, including duties and names of offices, officials, and their staff. It was in fact a later creation and was not even

known of before the Han (the first records of it appear in the mid-second century BCE, though it uses language indicating it may be from around the fourth century BCE). In later times, many rulers and officials referred to it, such as the famous usurper Wang Mang (王莽, 45 BCE–23 CE), who used it as a model of organization during his short reign. It was another of the numerous texts for which Zheng Xuan wrote a commentary. In reference to the women's quarters it said: "The six palaces function according to the teachings of Yin Ritual," where Yin is the *yin* 陰 of *yin* and *yang*. What was Yin Ritual? It included, for example, "making sure that clothing is modest by keeping it from being gaudy and corrupting and instead emphasizing the laborious handiwork that went into it." A note by Zheng Xuan equates "gaudy and corrupting" (*qixie* 奇邪) with what in his day was called "using wile and charm" (*meidao* 媚道), that is, attracting men by luring and tempting them.²⁵

Sexual Visitation in the Inner Palace

As for how the ruler arranged his sexual visits with his many wives, the word for "visit" in this sense was *yu* 御, which commentators typically defined as "to enter" (*jin* 進). It was a euphemism, a formal and inoffensive way to refer to something that was otherwise vulgar and taboo. In other words, one did not say "the emperor had sexual relations with so-and-so." It was of chief importance that his visits observed proper order and sequence in the rotation among wives. The goal was to prevent the ruler and his wives from engaging in conduct that diverted them from their sacred and official duties.

In his commentaries on both the *Book of Rites* and *Rites of Zhou*, Zheng Xuan explained the principles of order and sequence in visitation, which amounted to rules for turn taking. An important first principle was that the women visited the ruler, not the other way around. Special personnel dealt with "managing order and sequence in visits to the sleeping chambers of the ruler." As Zheng Xuan wrote, the rationale behind the system was "to prevent the master from having one woman who jealously latches onto him. Visitation takes place in the ruler's sleeping quarters because rulers do not go to the rear palace to rest." As to how turn taking supposedly took place, Zheng Xuan wrote that in general, "visiting the king's quarters proceeds according to timely order and sequence [以時御敘于王所]. . . . Those who are lower in rank go

first, while the higher go last.” In some sources the Zhou ruler supposedly had twelve primary wives, but according to the *Rites of Zhou*, he had 121 wives, that is, one empress, three ladies (*furen* 夫人), nine lady guests (*jiupin* 九嬪), twenty-seven hereditary ladies (*shifu* 世婦), and eighty-one lady visitors (*nüyu* 女御). Here we get one of the early indications of the system of ranking women, which according to Zheng worked as follows: “The Lady Visitors are eighty-one and they spend nine nights with the master. The Hereditary Ladies are twenty-seven and take up three nights. The nine Lady Guests spend one night, the three Ladies one night, and the Empress one night, for a fifteen day cycle.” In a comment on the “Principles of the Inner Realm” in the *Book of Rites*, Zheng Xuan explained sequence in a similar way in reference to the feudal lords:

The feudal lords marry nine wives. The niece and younger sister [of the three principal wives] visit the master in pairs. This lasts three nights. The two secondary principal wives stay with him four nights. The principal wife is next and stays for a whole night all to herself, and this goes on for five days. As for the Son of Heaven [who has 121 wives], the main principal wife visits him once every fifteen days.²⁶

As for how the palace kept track of visitation, in its reading of a poem from the *Classic of Poetry*, the *Mao Commentary* identified what it called the “red brush” of the officers of the palace called female scribes (*nüshi* 女史). They kept track of women’s visitations with the ruler and recorded women’s good and bad deeds. Other scholars believed that the word for “red brush” (*tongguan* 彤管) actually referred to a “red flute.” But again scholarly disagreement is less important than the emphasis on sexual order, which Zheng Xuan further described in a comment on the same poem:

The empress, consorts, and the bevy of concubines conducted their visitations with the Master in ritual fashion. The Female Scribes recorded the month and day and handed each woman a jade ring by way of supervising her entry and exit. . . . When a woman was about to enter, she was given a silver ring that she wore on her left hand. When the visitation was over, she switched the ring to her right hand.²⁷

The *Rites of Zhou*, *Book of Rites*, and the *Mao Commentary* are full of formulas like this and the ones about sequence and rotation. It is doubtful if many, if any, emperors followed these models precisely, but a system of ranking and record keeping was always in place. As one twentieth-century scholar said, arrangements like the ones about handing out rings and the visitations of the 121 wives were more imaginary than real. An elegant example of visitation is the description in the *Biographies of Great Women* of a Zhou-dynasty queen and her husband:

This was her etiquette: When she waited on [yu] her Lord, she held a candle as she entered. When she reached her Lord's quarters, having put out the candle, she advanced into the room, removed her court clothes and put on her negligee. Then she approached and served [yu] her Lord. When the cock crowed and the Music Master struck the drum to announce the dawn, the Queen Wife made a sound with the ornaments of her girdle and departed.²⁸

All matters of relations between ruler and wives had to be handled according to prescribed rules and language. The *Rites of Zhou* describes the office of the “palace attendant” (*neixiaochen* 内小臣), a eunuch whose duties covered “yin matters” (*yinshi* 陰事), that is, “matters concerning the visits and audiences between palace women and the emperor” (群妃御見之事). The text gives an example of what the eunuch does. “Before the water clock has finished striking eight times and as is documented in the White Record [a book in which records were kept of the names of the women who visited the ruler], he escorts the woman who is to approach and meet the Master.” As Zheng Xuan adds, the eunuch also transmits the so-called “yin orders” (*yinling* 陰令), which consist of “whatever the Lord desires from the Northern Palace” (*beigong* 北宮), another term for the area in which the women live. References to eunuchs delivering palace women to the emperor occur throughout Chinese history. The women's quarters were always at the rear of the palace, that is, its northern section. The emperor's throne was in the southern part, where he conducted political affairs. When on the throne, he faced south, with his officials facing north and stationed in front of him. When he retired, he moved back north to his own quarters, which were in front of the women's. Along with yin matters, lateral courts, and northern palace, many other special terms and euphemisms existed in these and other texts. *Bichong* 嬖寵, for example,

was a slightly negative term for a woman who was an imperial favorite. *Yanqin* 燕寢, “royal slumber,” was an elegant term referring to sexual congress between the ruler and his women. *Yan* occurred in other terms having to do with “royal repose” or “royal pleasure” (such as *yanxi* 燕息, *yansi* 燕私, and *yanle* 燕樂). The word *yu* 御 was also glossed as “to enter and meet with the ruler in order to encourage him in royal repose” (進接于王, 勸王燕息). *Yuxu* 御敘, “royal sequence,” was defined as the order and sequence of visitations with the ruler. The overall effect of these terms was to make royal sex sound elegant and heavenly.²⁹

THE ANCIENT ART OF THE BEDCHAMBER

How might members of the imperial family have understood the act of sex itself? Would they have been taught about it? In particular, would emperors have been taught how to handle themselves sexually with a multitude of wives? Rulers may have known about an esoteric body of knowledge that since ancient times was called the “techniques of the bedchamber” (*fangzhong shu* 房中術), often referred to in English as the art of the bedchamber. In the Han dynasty it was also called “the way of conjoining *yin*” (*jie yin zhi dao* 接陰之道) and “the art of riding women” (*yu furen zhi shu* 御婦人之術), where “ride” is the same word used above for sexual “visitation.” In two of the earliest mentions of these texts, a passage in Sima Qian’s *Records of the Historian* refers to them as “the prohibited books on conjoining *yin* and *yang*,” while the *History of the Han*, written during the second half of the first century, records eight such books held in the imperial library. Sima Qian’s use of the word “prohibited” already indicates the privileged but also possibly controversial nature of these texts, which never became canons. Their existence in the imperial library suggests that they were available to imperial eyes. For such texts to exist by this time means that the contents had to have been formulated earlier, some scholars estimating as early as the Warring States period (fifth to third centuries BCE). Other texts of the art of the bedchamber appeared in later centuries up to the Tang (618–907), after which their titles disappeared from both public and private catalogs. The art of the bedchamber went underground,

in other words, and was no longer considered something that was appropriate to refer to so openly until the twentieth century.³⁰

Using elegant but explicit language, the works advised men about such things as impotence, harnessing and enhancing sexual energy, the nature of female arousal, the structure of the vagina, positions of intercourse, and thrusting techniques. A separate set of works dealt with how to beget children. There were special terms for techniques, parts of the body, sexual problems and states of dysfunction, arousal, and satisfaction. The art of the bedchamber taught a man both how to please women and how to maintain his strength so that he could have sex with as many of them as possible. How familiar were emperors, empresses, and imperial concubines with this knowledge? Dynastic histories and other sources do not give a clear answer, though they occasionally refer to rulers who employed masters of the sexual arts, which included the use of aphrodisiacs, but what else they included is not clear. The texts are written in a style that resembles the canons of morality and ritual in that they advance the same principles of orderly behavior, temperance, and self-control. They treat what might be thought of as the most lewd and obscene topic as if it could be mastered in a rational and enlightened way.

Nine Shallow, One Deep

Of central importance in these texts is the notion of the man conserving and enhancing sexual energy. Since ejaculation is regarded as a loss of energy that in excess leads to illness and even death, the man must learn ejaculation control, even to the point of being able to have sex without ejaculating at all. It is a matter of preserving his essence and, when necessary, preventing it from escaping. Since young men are prone to lose control and ejaculate too early and too often, the art of the bedchamber teaches them to concentrate on staying erect without letting the intensity of arousal result in ejaculation. Mastery of timing and lack of haste are essential. The couple must begin affectionately by kissing and caressing, thus letting arousal build in both partners before joining the genitals. When intercourse begins, the man should control his rhythm, be gentle, and modulate the depth and frequency of his thrusts. The art of the bedchamber instructs the man that the vagina has nine parts corresponding to nine successive “inches” of depth,

where an inch is about the width of a finger. Penetrating too deeply is said to be harmful for both woman and man. The earliest texts (from perhaps the late third to the second century BCE) name all nine positions in the vagina but are not as clear as later texts about what constitutes shallow or deep. One Tang-dynasty text says, “Harmony of *yin* and *yang* takes place between the zither strings and the uneven teeth. The *yang* suffers harm if it goes past the stone of Mt. Kunlun; the *yin* suffers harm at the uneven teeth. If thrusts are shallow, the *qi* accumulates; if thrusts are deep, then *qi* disperses.” “Zither strings” (*qinxian* 琴弦) is one inch deep; “uneven teeth” (*maichi* 麥齒) is two inches deep; “the stone of Mt. Kunlun” (*kunshi* 昆石) is at eight inches. A Ming text says that one to three inches is shallow, four to five deep, and six to eight too deep.³¹ No explanation is given for the meaning of terms like zither strings or the stone of Mount Kunlun, but Mount Kunlun was the mythical cosmic mountain that connected heaven and earth and was also where a famous goddess lived, the Queen Mother of the West, who rarely received male guests; those she received never became permanent partners.

Timing includes rhythms of thrusting. By the Tang and after, the most often repeated of these rhythms was “nine shallow and one deep” (*jiuqian yishen* 九淺一深), that is, nine shallow thrusts followed by one deep thrust. The method presumes that shallow is better than deep in terms of both achieving the steadiest flow of pleasure without excess stimulation and avoiding injury to the internal organs. It is also important for the man to understand the woman’s sexual reactions and respond accordingly. The text called *Joining Yin and Yang* describes the woman’s arousal as follows: “First, the *qi* rises, her face heats up. Gently kiss. Second, the nipples stiffen, her nose moistens. Gently embrace. Third, the tongue becomes thin and slippery. Gently draw closer. Fourth, the fluids flow between the thighs. Gently caress. Fifth, the throat dries and she tries to swallow saliva. Gently cradle her.”³² In short, an aggressive and thoughtless man was the furthest thing possible from the model projected in the art of the bedchamber.

Returning Essence to Replenish the Brain

The art of the bedchamber promoted the idea that proper sex was beneficial to the man’s health and potency. Women benefited as well.

The man could even accumulate vital energy through intercourse by appropriating it from the woman. *Joining Yin and Yang* says, “Strike upward, do not enter, and thereby make the woman’s *qi* arrive to oneself.” Another text, the *Classic of the Plain Girl* says, “The man has intercourse in order to make the woman’s *qi* arrive to himself, the woman in order to expel illness. They are thus happy and gain in strength.”³³ Making the woman’s *qi* arrive had to do with gathering vital energy from her.

A parallel expression of the same concept is the formula “returning essence to replenish the brain” (*huanjing bunao* 還精補腦), the earliest recording of which is in a text of the late Eastern Han. Essence, *jing* 精, can be defined as *yang* energy in concentrated form, of which semen is a material manifestation (hence the contemporary word for semen, *jingzi* 精子). Both men and women have *jing*, but the emphasis in this case is upon the man not only preserving *jing*, but through the act of intercourse drawing *jing* from the woman into himself. “Returning *jing* to replenish the brain” was a complex science that was part of esoteric Daoism and as such stood apart from the practices of the art of the bedchamber. In simple terms, the process was as follows: during intercourse the man avoids ejaculation, awaits the woman’s approach to climax, then steals *jing* from her at her climax and draws it through his penis to what is called the “cinnabar field” (*dantian* 丹田) in his lower abdomen. From there he guides it up his spine to a point in his brain behind the eyes called the *niyuan* 泥垣. The science of returning essence belonged to what in English has been called Daoist inner alchemy, which in general looked down upon conventional sexual intercourse and considered the woman as a tool for alchemical goals and not as a partner in sexual pleasure. In some renditions of the practice, man and woman have what amounts to a sexual battle, each trying to be the first to steal the other’s essence. Yet another school of thought condemned the notion of stealing essence and taught separate meditative practices for both men and women by which they could return essence to the brain without intercourse.

Some emperors became fascinated with this and similar practices, including one Ming-dynasty ruler who recruited virgins to absorb their essence. He may have been practicing the art that one tenth-century text called “riding many maidens, but ejaculating rarely” (多御少女而莫數寫精). In one formula, switching partners meant taking as many as

ten in one night, which could help the man achieve “long life.” As with all such prescriptions, how precisely anyone practiced them is impossible to know. How common was it to count thrusts? How widespread was ejaculation retention or having sex with many women in a row? Whatever the answer, the focus was on investing the satisfaction of desire with grander goals of long life and even divinity. Hence the statement by an advisor to the usurping Emperor Wang Mang encouraging him to build a harem and telling him that it was good to do so because in ancient times, “the Yellow Emperor was able to achieve immortality by having 120 wives.”³⁴

“To Bestow Generously” and “Mastering Slowness”

It would be foolish to think that the art of the bedchamber described the average sexual act in the imperial palace or anywhere else. Since the Han historian Sima Qian already referred to them as prohibited texts, to begin with they were not something dynastic historians tended to report about. Sexual relations were far more varied and complex than what the art of the bedchamber envisioned. Yet the model polygamist that these texts promoted is important to keep in mind as an approximation of how an emperor should act. As the sexual master of multiple wives, he should be a gentle and benevolent man who was observant, considerate, and temperate. The woman was not easy to please unless the man adopted these traits, but once he did, she lost herself in sexual entrancement. Sex between the two was a kind of artful calisthenics. The *Classic of the Plain Girl* sums up the traits of the virtuous and refined male practitioner in terms of the behavior of his penis, called the “jade stalk” (*yujing* 玉莖). The penis should embody “five constants”: benevolence, justice, propriety, trustworthiness, and wisdom. These five were normally used to describe an ideal person’s ethical behavior and had nothing to do with sex. The translation is tentative in parts because of the obscurity of some of the language, but the gist is clear nevertheless.

In its true embodiment of the Five Constants [*wuchang* 五常], the Jade Stalk resides deep within the hermetic place [within the foreskin?]; it is disciplined and self-controlled; it contains within itself the utmost virtue; it bestows and moves without cease. The interpretation of this behavior of the Jade Stalk is thus: To bestow generously is

its benevolence. To have an opening in the middle is its justice [to be “just right” (*yi* 義) in controlling the flow of semen?]. Having a ridge around its head is its propriety [where ridge means the edge of the glans; to be self-disciplined and temperate?]. To be able to rise when aroused and to stop when desire ceases is its trustworthiness. To lower or raise itself when about to engage in the act is its wisdom.³⁵

Dynastic histories and texts like the *Book of Rites* and the *Rites of Zhou* never describe such things. A brief reference in the *History of the Former Han* describes the reviled usurper just mentioned, Wang Mang. Near the end of his reign, he reportedly spent days in the women’s quarters where he had a man in attendance who was a master of the “magical arts” (*fangshu* 方術).³⁶ The implication is that Wang Mang was engaging in dissolute behavior with the aid of the advisor on the art of sex.

The advisors whom a good ruler should employ would advance an idealized world in which sex would be like that depicted in a passage from one of the most ancient texts of the art of the bedchamber, *On the Loftiest Ways under Heaven*:

The essence of the pleasures of intercourse lies in slowness and endurance. If one masters slowness and endurance, the woman will be greatly pleased. The intimacy will be like that between brothers. The love will be like that of parents and children. Whoever can master these methods can safely be considered one of the heavenly elite.³⁷

Above all, the couple should avoid extremes of emotion and excesses of eating and drinking. They should never strain themselves or engage in violent movement. The man in particular should never domineer, but should observe and respond to the woman with confidence and control. Passages like this define what amount to the ritual propriety of sexual intercourse in parallel to the ritual propriety of other types of behavior canonized in works like the *Book of Rites* and the *Rites of the Zhou*. Many more sources could be cited to describe the values and institutions of sexual politics in early China, including texts on womanly virtue such as the one by Ban Zhao (45–116). Their contents will be reflected once we begin the chronological history of empresses and consorts in the next chapter.

EUNUCHS IN THE IMPERIAL PALACE

No discussion of the domestic life of the Chinese imperial palace can omit consideration of the role of eunuchs, thus the final topic of this chapter. They were an officially appointed corps of castrated men who served the imperial family in the palace and in posts all over the empire and lasted from their first appearance over 2,500 years ago to the end of the Qing dynasty. The last of them, Sun Yaoting 孫耀庭, died at age ninety-four in 1996 in Beijing. They were integral to the system of polygamy, for which they were useful as servants who were uniquely loyal to the ruler and his family and who could be allowed access to the ruler's women without fear of the women becoming pregnant. Who they were, what they did, and what they were like deserve a special introduction, beginning with a look at eunuchs in a worldwide context.

Eunuchs in China and Other Cultures

Eunuchs appeared in many cultures from ancient times to the early twentieth century, including ancient Assyria and Persia, the Byzantine Empire, Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Islamic states such as the Mughal, Umayyad, Abbasid, Safavid, and Ottoman Empires. They were known in ancient Greece and Rome. They had much in common cross-culturally. Chinese and Islamic royalties, for example, employed them as servants, especially in the ruler's harem. They performed both administrative and menial tasks and in Islamic states (but not in China) did so in the households of the wealthy as well. In China, the Byzantine Empire, and the Ottoman Empire they often held important administrative positions and served as military commanders and ambassadors. The Chinese obtained eunuchs from both their own and foreign peoples, such as the Koreans and the Vietnamese. The Ottoman Empire supposedly took eunuchs only from foreign lands, especially Africa but also border regions inhabited by Caucasians, and only took boys, who as in China and elsewhere were castrated involuntarily (Islamic law prohibited castration). Both the Byzantines and the Chinese also took post-pubescent men who became eunuchs voluntarily. As of today, eunuchs have mostly died out, though some of the Hijras of India still practice voluntary castration in dedication to an Indian goddess.

One thing eunuchs did in cultures other than China was serve in religious or sacred roles. Besides the Hijras just mentioned, for example, there was the revered corps of eunuchs who from about the twelfth until the twentieth century guarded the holy Islamic sites of Mecca and Medina. Eunuchs served in pagan cults in Greco-Roman antiquity, especially the cult of the goddess Cybele. One of the most influential thinkers of early Christianity was Origen of Alexandria (185–ca. 254), who castrated himself as an act of faith. He took literally the New Testament’s words in praise of those who became “eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 19:12). Eunuchs served as clergy, even bishops, in the Byzantine Empire, while from the eighteenth to the twentieth century the Christian Skoptsy of Russia castrated themselves as an act of purification and salvation. Chinese eunuchs from the Tang to the Qing often practiced Buddhism and Daoism and sometimes entered monasteries in retirement. The Qing was a slight exception in that there were eunuchs who served as monks, especially at imperial funerals.

In China, eunuchs were essential to palace life because of their service in the women’s quarters. By social custom, palace women could only move inside the women’s quarters. They were forbidden to interact with the male officials of the court or, except on special occasions, exit the palace to carry out personal or official tasks. Eunuchs were therefore suited as no one else was to serve the daily needs of palace women and to do so, supposedly, without fear of sexual involvement. Such service allowed them an intimate foothold with both the emperor and his women. Eunuchs could get to know their temperaments and become their confidants far more easily than could a court official. By virtue of such intimacy, eunuchs often became privy to information that could influence palace and even dynastic politics. They knew which consort the emperor or heir apparent favored at a given time. They could lobby on behalf of one consort or another. They could keep or divulge secrets. Since rulers grew up with eunuchs around them much of the time, eunuchs presumably did what people do with children in general, including serving them, teaching them, telling them stories, and playing with them. As a result eunuchs sometimes reached tremendous heights of power, far beyond the scope of their roles as menials of the palace. Eighteen of them engineered a coup in 125 CE and thereafter held such sway that in 189 opponents organized a massacre of

more than two thousand of them to remove them from power. In general, most eunuchs served humbly and loyally, while some became influential and highly respected, and yet another few abused their power outrageously. The basic assumption was that they could be counted upon to serve the ruler and his family with utmost fidelity. Their intimacy gained them special privilege, but also subjected them to abuse and punishment if they displeased the ruler. They also earned the disapproval of court officials, who feared their power and resented their privilege. Nevertheless, in spite of their degraded status as castrated men, they enjoyed the position of serving and living with the Son of Heaven and his royal family.³⁸

Their Origins and Roles

How did eunuchs originate, what did they do, and, as far as we can generalize, what were they like? The earliest eunuchs consisted of men who committed offenses punished by castration. Eunuchs also included captives in war, as in other cultures since ancient times. Shang-dynasty (1766–1123 BCE) oracle bone writings provide the earliest indication of the practice of castrating enemies. The first term for eunuch was *siren* 寺人, perhaps meaning palace attendant or man of the court, which can be found in the *Classic of Poetry* (first half of the first millennium BCE). Other early terms include *yanren* 閹人, “castrated man,” *fufu* 腐夫, and *furen* 腐人, the latter two roughly meaning “rotted” man. As the Tang commentator Yan Shigu said, “a castrated man can no longer beget children. He is like rotted wood that can’t grow anymore.”³⁹ But “castrated” or “rotted” man are negative terms that were inappropriate for both the language of the palace bureaucracy and the self-respect of eunuchs, many of whom commanded great power and prestige. The formal designation by the Han was *huan’guan* 宦官, which means something like “office of the menials,” a neutral term of respect that became standard for centuries. Numerous other terms existed, but by the Ming and Qing a new term emerged, *taijian* 太監, literally “director,” which is the most common word for eunuch in Chinese today, now that they no longer exist.

By the Han and after, eunuchs worked in the quarters of the emperor, empress, heir apparent, and other family members, including the emperor’s brothers, the heir apparent’s brothers, empress dowagers,

and princesses. Like other members of the palace bureaucracy, they received ranks and salaries. At the lowest level, they were in charge of the menial needs of food, clothing, cleaning and maintenance, and the supply of all necessities for the imperial family. They supervised the women's quarters, where they were responsible for the opening and closing of the main doors at set times, night watch, guarding the quarters from unwanted visitors, and policing the behavior of the women. In addition, they were in charge of communication between ruler and palace women, as well as between the palace and court officials. There was no single office in charge of eunuchs until the Sui and Tang, although eunuchs could also hold office outside that agency. Even though they were menials and slaves, by at least the Zhou dynasty some began to hold powerful positions. They numbered in the thousands by the Han, a handful of whom held administrative positions with high salaries. By then they were allowed to adopt sons, while some took wives and even concubines, as they did for the rest of eunuch history (and as eunuchs did in Islamic societies, but not in Byzantium, where they could adopt but not marry). As early as the seventh century BCE, men voluntarily underwent castration to become eunuchs. As one ancient source said, "men would castrate themselves or their sons in order to advance themselves." No matter who presented themselves, they had to go through a selection process before being officially chosen.

Eunuchs were stereotyped and vilified throughout imperial history. They were said to be petty, emotional, greedy, easily resentful, cliquish, and suspicious of others; they were compared to gossiping old ladies. Positive reports said that they were simple, honest, and "kindhearted," as one ancient source says. An English observer in 1877 said that they were kind, generous, and affectionate with women and children, and that they loved pets. In art and sculpture, they were portrayed as having fine skin and elegant manners. Some were noted for their great learning and won the admiration of Confucian scholars. The most famous Chinese historian, Sima Qian, was sentenced to castration for a crime, but instead of serving in the inner palace was allowed to continue his project of writing the history of China. One eunuch was famous for advancing the technology of papermaking; another led major sea expeditions that reached as far as eastern Africa.⁴⁰

Early Accounts of Eunuchs

If the emperor was the world's premier polygamist, his personal servant the eunuch was at the opposite pole of masculinity. A graphic sense of this difference can be gotten from the operation to castrate a man, which consisted of removing both the testicles and penis (though records also indicate in some cases that only the testicles were removed). The most detailed information comes from the end of the last dynasty, the Qing (1644–1911), in which the standard was to remove the entire organ. At that time, there were specialists who received imperial approval to perform the operation, which used next to no anesthetics. Complete recovery might take three months. Many men died after the operation; most did not, but of those, many suffered some form of incontinence for the rest of their lives (leakage might occur as a result of a sudden fright, for example). Earlier records are sparse and include a note in the *History of the Han* indicating that after the operation the subject should be kept in a warm closed room called a “silkworm room,” supposedly because it was like the room in which silkworms were kept while they were raised and fed.⁴¹

It pays to take a brief survey of the earliest references to eunuchs up to the Han dynasty, which begins the next chapter. From the first records, they already present an image that fits their later stereotype as fawners, flatterers, and meddlers. A poem in the *Classic of Poetry* refers to an eighth-century-BCE Zhou-dynasty king who ruined the kingdom because of his infatuation with one of his wives. The eunuchs in the poem flagrantly encourage the king in his evil ways. Another poem from the *Classic of Poetry* presents a contrasting image of a man who identifies himself as a “palace attendant,” using the term *siren*. He represents himself as a virtuous person who has been unjustly accused and who bitterly charges his slanderers.⁴² In general the *Zuo Tradition* refers to eunuchs as conniving power seekers. Eunuch Diao 貂 appears in 658 BCE as having leaked military secrets. In 643, while serving the famous hegemon Duke Huan of Qi, Diao promoted a cook who presented the duke with a delicious meal. The duke was shocked to learn that the cook had killed his own son to feed the duke, one of whose favorite concubines then defended the cook by saying that what he did was a sign of devotion. The same concubine convinced the duke to depose the original heir apparent in favor of her son, then after the

duke died leagued with the eunuch to kill the duke's ministers and designate her son as duke (in the end, that son was killed and the original heir apparent restored).⁴³

A eunuch was bound to be loyal to his master and wives, upon whom his fate depended. He had next to no existence outside the institution of the palace. A eunuch named Pi 披 appears in the story of Chong'er, whose father stole the wife of Chong'er's brother and connived against him and Chong'er, as told above. Chong'er fled the kingdom in 655 BCE by climbing over the city wall. As he was escaping, Pi was sent in pursuit and managed to cut off the end of Chong'er's sleeve, though Chong'er got free (years later Pi became Chong'er's trusted follower).⁴⁴ But the eunuch's loyalty to his master also created a rift between him and the ruler's officials. One duke demoted worthy officials and surrounded himself with favorites. Once on a hunting trip with his women in 574 BCE, one of his ministers presented him with a boar, which Eunuch Meng Zhang 孟張 proceeded to steal. The minister killed the eunuch, but the duke took the minister's deed as an insult and later had him and two other family members killed. In 536, Eunuch Liu 柳, a duke's confidant, heard that two of the duke's advisors plotted to murder Liu. The eunuch dug a pit, killed an animal, put a fake document implicating his enemies in the animal's mouth, and buried it. Then he told the duke that one of the plotters had conspired against the duke, who had the animal dug up, found the fake oath, and had the plotter exiled.⁴⁵

Finally, an inevitable part of sensational stories about eunuchs was that the castration was either disguised or incomplete. Even if the castration was complete, historical and scientific evidence shows that eunuchs could still have sexual relations. Thus we see tales about sexual affairs between imperial wives and eunuchs, which were likewise told to the end of dynastic history. Some of the stories were true, while some were told for the sake of slander and obscene amusement. One of the earliest stories is probably untrue, but comes from the eunuch Sima Qian's *Records of the Historian*, which claims that the First Emperor of China, Qin Shi Huang 秦始皇, was an illegitimate son whose father was a rich merchant named Lü Buwei 呂不韋 (died 235 BCE). His mother was Lü Buwei's concubine. As the story went, the king of Qin coveted Lü Buwei's concubine, whom Lü gave to him, knowing that she was already pregnant. She gave birth to a son who eventually succeeded the

king and became the First Emperor. Unfortunately, his mother, the queen-dowager, continued her relationship with Lü Buwei, who feared the consequences and decided to find a replacement for himself. He heard of a man, Lao Ai 嫪毐, with an unusually large penis and thought that the queen would be interested in him. Indeed, as Sima Qian tells it, she summoned Lao Ai and began a relationship with him. As a cover-up, Lü Buwei pretended that Lao Ai had committed a crime for which the punishment was castration. The queen-dowager had Lao Ai's facial hair plucked to make him look like a eunuch, but he did not undergo the operation. As a fake eunuch, Lao Ai was able to move about freely in the palace and continue the relationship with the queen-dowager, who "was wild about him." In the end, the emperor found out and ordered Lao Ai and the sons she bore from him executed and the queen-dowager sent away.⁴⁶ Another notorious eunuch appeared not long after, Zhao Gao 趙高, who when the First Emperor died did away with the heir apparent and set up another one, whom he then forced to commit suicide, after which he set up a third ruler, who in turn finally killed Zhao Gao. These are some of the earliest references to eunuchs. At times they held enormous power, especially in the Later Han, the Tang, and again in the Ming. Even when rulers attempted to limit their influence, they never entirely eliminated them and generally accepted them as indispensable members of the palace.

NOTES

1. See Li Yanshou, *Beishi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 14.533–34.
2. Books and articles on royal women that I have consulted include Anne Walthall, ed., *Servants of the Dynasty: Palace Women in World History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Judith Herrin, *Women in Purple: Rulers of Medieval Byzantium* (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 2001), especially 51–129; Lynda Garland, *Byzantine Empresses: Women and Power in Byzantium, CE 527–1204* (London: Routledge, 1999), especially 136–57; Lisa Balabanlilar, "The Begims of the Mystic Feast: Turco-Mongol Tradition in the Mughal Harems," *Journal of Asian Studies* 69, no. 1 (2010): 123–47; Shaharyar Khan, *The Begums of Bhopal: A Dynasty of Women Rulers in Raj India* (New York: Palgrave for I. B. Tauris, 2001); Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Fatima Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota

ta Press, 1993); Leslie Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), including 3–6 on the meaning of *harem*; and Anne J. Duggan, ed., *Queens and Queenship in Medieval Europe* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1997).

3. She had eight children by Batmunkh. See Jack Weatherford, *The Secret History of the Mongol Queens: How the Daughters of Genghis Khan Rescued His Empire* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2010), 245.

4. See the bamboo slip text from the Warring States period discussed in Li Xueqin, “Qinghua jian jupian zongshu,” *Wenwu* 5 (2010): 51–58. Thanks to Crispin Williams for this reference.

5. The usual custom will be to give the alphabetized pronunciation for Chinese names and terms of one to four syllables only.

6. From the *Shangshu*, in Sun Xingyan, *Shangshu jinguwen zhushu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986), 11.286. A brief, general discussion of the topic is Yang Lien-sheng’s “Female Rulers in Imperial China,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 23 (1961): 47–61.

7. See Olivia Milburn, “Gender, Sexuality, and Power in Early China: The Changing Biography of Lord Ling of Wei and Lady Nanzi,” *Nan Nü : Men, Women, and Gender in China* 12, no. 1 (2010): 1–29.

8. See Sima Qian, *Shiji* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1989), 49.1967–69.

9. Translated by Bernard Karlgren, “The Book of Documents,” *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 22 (1950): 4, with some modifications. Sima Qian’s account of the marriage is in *Shiji*, 1.33–34.

10. Kong Yingda’s commentary is based on an earlier text from the second century BCE, the so-called “old” text of Kong Anguo 孔安國, who died ca. 100 BCE. The passages I quote are from a common reference work published in 1739 that collects the thirteen ancient classics and their ancient commentaries, called the *Notes and Commentaries on the Thirteen Classics*, *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏. See Ruan Yuan 阮元 (1764–1849), ed., *Shangshu zhengyi* 尚書正義 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1999), 46–49.

11. Liu Xiang, *Gu Lienü zhuan* 古列女傳, in *Sibu congkan (shibu)* (Shanghai: Hanfen lou, n.d.), 1.1a.

12. On King Wuding, whose wives were Lady Jing 井, the primary queen, and ladies Hao 好 (also known as Fuhao 婦好) and Gui 癸, see Chou Hung-hsiang, “Fu-X Ladies of the Shang Dynasty,” *Monumenta Serica* 29 (1970–1971): 346–90; Ding Shan, *Shang Zhou shiliao kaozheng* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1988), 99–126; and Ying Wang, “Rank and Power among Court Ladies at Anyang,” in *Gender and Chinese Archaeology*, edited by Kathryn Linduff and Yan Sun (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2004), 95–113. On marrying nine women, see *Chunqiu Gongyang zhuan* (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1999), 158. On *ying* wives, see Han-yi Feng, *The*

Chinese Kinship System (Taipei: Southern Materials Center, 1985), 46–51 (originally 1937). My account relies heavily on Melvin P. Thatcher, “Marriages of the Ruling Elite in the Spring and Autumn Period,” in *Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society*, edited by Rubie S. Watson and Patricia Buckley Ebrey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 25–57.

13. Younger brides sent later happened in the case of Duke Gong 恭 of Song 宋 (reigned 588–575) and his primary wife, Bo Ji 伯姬, for whom three states sent secondary brides between 583 and 581 BCE (the eighth to tenth years of Duke Cheng). On the rationale about marrying related women, see comment by the Han-dynasty He Xiu 何休 (129–182) in *Chunqiu Gongyang zhuan*, 158 and the *Bohutong* (Han-yi Feng, *The Chinese Kinship System*, 48).

14. See Thatcher, 30, and the first-century-BCE *Chunqiu Guliang zhuan* (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1999), 125.

15. The references are first to Duke Zhuang 莊 of the state of Wei 衛 and second to Duke Huan 桓 of the state of Qi 齊, from the *Zuozhuan*, third year of Duke Yin and seventeenth year of the Duke of Xi, respectively.

16. See *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhengyi* (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1999), 214 and 316 for the original quotes: 並后，匹嫡，兩政，耦國，亂之本也，from the eighteenth year of Duke Huan; and 內寵並后，外寵二政，嬖子配適，大都耦國，亂之本也，from the second year of Duke Min. This discussion takes from Li Ling, *Huajian yihujiu* (Beijing: Tongxin chubanshe, 2005), 268–70, including his references to “inner” and “outer” power bases.

17. My source is Wang Li’s *Gudai Hanyu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2003), 8–13, which is convenient because it pieces together accounts that are otherwise discontinuous in the original. The duke was Duke Wu 武; the mother was Lady Jiang 姜; their two sons were Zhuang 莊 and Duan 段.

18. From the sixteenth year of Duke Heng. The duke was Duke Xuan 宣; the son of the first incest was Jizi 急子; the two later sons were Shouzi 壽子 and Shuo 朔, the latter of whom participated in the plot against Jizi.

19. For the *Mao gong zhuan* 毛公傳, see *Mao shi zhengyi* (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1999), 4. See Arthur Waley, trans., *The Book of Songs* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 81–82. For Kong’s and Zheng’s comments, see *Mao shi zhengyi*, 21–23 and 25.

20. See Mao poem 4, Waley, trans., *The Book of Songs*, 173, and *Mao shi zhengyi*, 41.

21. See Mao poem 5, Waley, trans., *ibid.*, 173. For *zisun zhongduo*, see *Maoshi zhengyi*, 41, 43.

22. See Mao poem 22, using Waley’s translation, *The Book of Songs*, 74, with modifications in all lines except the second to accord with the *Mao Commentary*. The comment is from *Maoshi zhengyi*, 97.

23. See Mao poem 21, Waley, trans., *The Book of Songs*, 108, and *Mao shi zhengyi*, 94.

24. The first quote above is from *Li ji zheng yi* 禮記正義 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1999), 51.1420, the *Fangji* (坊記) section. The other quotes are from the *Neize* section, 836, 839, and 859.

25. See Sun Yirang 孫詒讓 (1848–1908), *Zhouli zhengyi* 周禮正義 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987), 552 (definition of *yu*), 515 (Yin ritual).

26. See *Zhouli zhengyi*, 560 and 552 (121 wives). The same arrangement is also spelled out in the Hunyi (昏義) section of *Liji zhengyi*, 61.1624, from which Zheng perhaps copies. The Han commentator He Xiu refers to twelve wives for the Son of Heaven; see his note in the *Chunchiu Gongyang zhuan*, 392, for the tenth year of Duke Cheng. For Zheng Xuan on the “principles of the inner realm,” see *Liji zhengyi*, 859, passage coming after reference to master spending every fifth night with aging concubine.

27. See Mao poem 42, the “Fair Girl” (*Jingnü* 靜女), Waley, trans., *The Book of Songs*, 33, and *Maoshi zhengyi*, 174.

28. For the quote from the modern scholar, see Chen Dongyuan, *Zhongguo funü shenghuo shi* (Taipei: Shangwu, 1980; originally 1926), 35–36. For the visitation of the Zhou royal couple (Queen Jiang 姜 and Duke Xuan 宣), see Albert Richard O’Hara, *The Position of Woman in Early China, according to the Lieh Nü Chuan “The Biographies of Chinese Women”* (Taipei: Mei Ya Publications, 1971), 50, and Liu Xiang, *Gulienü zhuan*, 2.2a. The translation is O’Hara’s with some modifications.

29. Zheng Xuan’s remark on yin orders is from *Zhouli zhengyi*, 540; for *yanqin*, see *ibid.*, 560; and for the quote regarding *yu*, see *ibid.*, 553. *Yansi* and *yanle* can be found in *Shiji*, 87.2558, in regard to the Second Emperor of the Qin.

30. See *Shiji*, 105.2796, and Li Ling (author) and Keith McMahon (translator), “The Contents and Terminology of the Mawangdui Texts on the Arts of the Bedchamber,” *Early China* 17 (1992): 145–85.

31. Li and McMahon, “The Contents,” 166, citing *Fangnei* 房內 and *Sunü miaolun* 素女妙論.

32. Li and McMahon, “The Contents,” 176, with slight modifications, and Li Ling, *Zhongguo fangshu gaiguan* (Beijing: Renmin Zhongguo chubanshe, 1993), 37. The text is called *He yinyang* 合陰陽.

33. See Li Ling, *Zhongguo fangshu gaiguan*, 37, and Li and McMahon, “The Contents,” 171, in *Sunü jing* 素女經.

34. See Ban Gu, *Hanshu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 99.4168–69. For an account of the woman’s practice of accumulating vital energy, see Douglas Wile, *Art of the Bedchamber: The Chinese Sexual Yoga Classics including Women’s Solo Meditation Texts* (Albany: State University of New York Press,

1992). “To ride many women” is from the *Sunü jing*, cited in Tamba Yasuyori’s (tenth-century) *Ishimpō bōnai* (Tokyo: Edo bungakusen, 1976), 6:23; switching partners for the sake of long life is from the *Yufang mijue*, cited in Li Ling, *Zhongguo fangshu gaiguan*, 104. The Ming ruler was Shizong (1507–1566).

35. See excerpt from *Yufang mijue* 玉房秘訣 in the Tang text *Yixin fang* 醫心方, in Li Ling, *Zhongguo fangshu gaiguan*, 109.

36. See Ban Gu, *Hanshu*, 99.4180.

37. Li Ling, *Zhongguo fangshu gaiguan*, citing *Tianxia zhidao tan* 天下至道談, section 20, 45.

38. Besides the dynastic histories and other Chinese sources cited below, my main sources on eunuchs in China are Yu Huaqing, *Zhongguo huanguan zhidu shi* (Shanghai: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 1993) and Yu Yunhan, *Yanhuan* (Tianjing: Baihua wenyi chubanshe, 2005), the latter of which is written for a popular audience. Relevant readings for eunuchs in Byzantine and Islamic cultures include Shaun Tougher, *The Eunuch in Byzantine History and Society* (London: Routledge, 2008); David Ayalon, *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans: A Study of Power Relationships* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1999); and Shaun Marmon, *Eunuchs and Sacred Boundaries in Islamic Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

39. See *Hanshu*, 5.147.

40. On marriage and Byzantine eunuchs, see Tougher, *The Eunuch in Byzantine History and Society*, 46 and 66. See Fan Ye, *Hou Hanshu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1995, original edition 1965), 78.2510, about castration for the sake of advancement and for “kindheartedness” (*qingzhi zhuanliang* 情志專良), 78.2507. The English observer was G. Carter Stent, “Chinese Eunuchs,” *Journal of the North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, new series 11 (1877): 143–84. This article is widely cited, but contains numerous errors, though the observations about the operation of castration are probably reliable. The inventor of paper was Cai Lun (蔡倫, died 121 CE) and the leader of sea expeditions, Zheng He 鄭和 (1371–1433). Castration as a punishment was eliminated from the legal code in the Sui dynasty (581–618), but it still occurred afterwards.

41. See Yan Shigu’s note in *Hanshu*, 59.2652. The information about the operation in the Qing is from Stent, “Chinese Eunuchs.”

42. The first poem is “Zhaomin” 召旻, about King You 幽. The second is “Xiangbo” 巷伯, as translated by Arthur Waley, *The Book of Songs*, 315 (Mao poem 200).

43. The reference to secrets is from the *Zuo Tradition*, year two of Duke Xi, and to the cook, *Zuo Tradition*, year seventeen of Duke Xi. A Han-dynasty account adds that Diao (called Shu Diao 豎刁) castrated himself so that he could ingratiate himself with Duke Huan and serve in his harem. See Zhao

Shouzheng, ed. and trans., *Guanzi zhuyi* 管子注譯 (Nanning: Guangxi renmin chubanshe, 1982), 32.307. Thanks to Piotr Gibas for supplying the references in the *Zuo Tradition*.

44. See *Zuo Tradition*, fifth, twenty-fourth, and twenty-fifth years of Duke Xi, also referring to Pi giving Chong'er advice about selecting a worthy official.

45. The first was Duke Li 厲 of Jin, who was put to death not long after; see *Zuo Tradition*, seventeenth year of Duke Cheng. For Liu, see sixth year of Duke Zhao.

46. See *Shiji*, 85.2505–14.

2

EMPRESSES AND CONSORTS OF THE FORMER HAN, 206 BCE–25 CE

LIU BANG, POLYGAMIST AND FIRST EMPEROR OF THE HAN

For understanding empresses and consorts, emperors are necessarily important because imperial women were rarely independent of them. They were “sons of heaven,” as they were called in Chinese. Their bloodlines defined imperial descent. Founders of dynasties were especially important because of their massive personalities and accomplishments. So were the rulers who were infamous for excess and profligacy. Since all of them were polygamists, some generalizations apply to what happened to them because of that fact. To begin with, because a ruler divided his sexual relations among more than one woman, he set in motion a potential for fragmentation that at its worst derailed his whole regime and even the dynasty itself. The potential for fragmentation lay mainly in his relations with his wives and their sons. For besides administering the present, the most important duty of the emperor was to provide a successor. If he was careless and intemperate in the affairs of the inner quarters, he not only set a poor example but endangered the line of succession by subjecting it to the rivalries between his wives and sons.

Under such conditions, normally subordinate people like empresses, concubines, and eunuchs often gained tremendous power. Sometimes they stepped in to prevent or repair the damage created by emperors.

They could do so both by the strength of their personalities and by referring to the values and institutions of imperial polygamy, the purpose of which was to monitor and guide the emperor and his family and, above all, maintain equilibrium. At other times, women meddled outrageously. Their meddling was considered a constant potential danger. For this reason, they were often condemned for their intrusions and, even in minor cases of involvement, they had to be careful not to appear too meddlesome. The very first reign of the Han already contained many of the elements warned against: jealousy, favoritism, and women and their families participating in government.

How Liu Bang Became Emperor

Let us begin with Liu Bang 劉邦 (247–195 BCE), the first ruler of the Han (206 BCE–220 CE) and victor after many years of rebellion against the first unified empire in Chinese history, the Qin (221–206 BCE). His posthumous imperial name was Gaozu 高祖, August Ancestor. Since he was a major hero in Chinese history, and since the Han was a model for later regimes, it is worth knowing a little more about him than just as a polygamist. What kind of a person was he? Why and how did he prevail over everyone else, especially his principal rival Xiang Yu 項羽 (232–202 BCE)? The signals of his character first emerge in the introduction to his biography in the main historical source from the time, Sima Qian's *Records of the Historian*. As a youth Liu Bang “was humane and good to people, loved being generous, and was openhearted. He was full of ambition and never busied himself with household matters.” He became chief of a precinct, a sort of police chief who dealt with acts of lawlessness, including banditry. Sima Qian then singles out two traits in brief succession, first, that “there was no officer in the precinct whom he had not slighted and insulted,” a tendency he was known for long after, and, in addition, that “he liked wine and women.” In his early days before he became a commander, he used to get so drunk that he would fall unconscious and sleep in the saloon for hours at a time. His affair much later with Lady Qi 戚 (died 194 BCE), as recounted below, is the main evidence left to us of his love of women. References to his rudeness appear in descriptions of his treatment of important underlings.¹

His transition from a lowly precinct chief to the leader of an army with imperial ambitions began with a revolt against the Qin dynasty in 209 BCE. Many others responded to that event, but eventually the two chief rivals became Liu Bang and Xiang Yu, whom Liu Bang finally defeated and killed. Liu Bang's skill in selecting and listening to advisors was said to be one of his strongest points. He may have been coarse and rude, but if people stood up to him, he would come around. One advisor told Liu Bang that, compared to Xiang Yu, who was said to be courteous and warm-hearted, Liu was rude and insulting. Liu Bang responded by changing his behavior and rewarding the advisor with forty thousand catties of gold. When another of his advisors had his first audience with Liu Bang, two maids were just then washing Liu's feet. The man was a classicist, a stuffy type whom Liu Bang hated, thus the rude reception. But the man insisted that Liu should not be improper with an elder. Liu Bang stopped what he was doing and had the man take the seat of honor, from which he entertained Liu with his wisdom about power struggle.² Knowing how to punish and reward followers was a difficult and risky affair. In one famous case after Liu became emperor, his close advisor Zhang Liang 張良 told him that many of his generals were talking of revolt. It was not long after he defeated Xiang Yu and before he established his capital in Chang'an. When Liu Bang asked why the generals were unhappy, Zhang replied that they were afraid that Liu Bang would grow suspicious of their loyalty and have them executed. In order to demonstrate good will, Zhang advised him to enfeoff the very general he disliked the most. Liu Bang immediately gave that man a marquisate and ordered his ministers to hurry and distribute both honor and territory to the rest.³

The Han dynasty became a model for future dynasties, both in terms of state governance and, for our main purpose, governance of the inner quarters. One of the major differences between Liu Bang and Xiang Yu had to do with their approaches to political organization. Liu Bang favored a centralized empire, while Xiang Yu favored a federation of many dozens of smaller states. During his reign Liu Bang still had to deal with opponents of centralization, as did some of his early successors, but he and his statesmen put in motion what later solidified into an ideal of imperial order defined not just in terms of territory and military might, but also cosmic support and moral ideals (mainly in the form of state Confucianism). The emperor was the Son of Heaven; he and his

bloodline were backed by higher powers. The cosmic aspects of authority included the fact that it was an emperor's sacred duty to continue his bloodline, for which having multiple wives in order to guarantee sons was essential. Being a polygamist was thus a sacred duty, in other words, for which a formal structure was needed in order to manage the ruler's family. Solidifying that structure was one of the major accomplishments of the Han.⁴

But Liu Bang also bestowed upon posterity an ugly example of what the *Zuo Tradition* defined as the disorder caused by favoritism. He attempted to depose the original heir apparent, his son by Empress Lü 呂, and replace him with his son by his harem favorite, Lady Qi. He was finally dissuaded, but the repercussions of his attempt lasted well after his death, as we will see in the account of Empress Lü below. When the emperor first announced that he wanted to depose the heir apparent, court officials opposed him, but none could succeed in getting him to change his mind. The empress sought the help of the influential advisor Zhang Liang, who knew four elderly men whom the emperor had long wanted to meet. Because the emperor had treated them disrespectfully, they had long since secluded themselves and sworn never to serve the Han. But they were finally persuaded to come to court, where they addressed Liu frankly by telling him that he insulted them and caused men like them to be unwilling to serve. In addition, they put in a good word for the crown prince, after which the emperor changed his mind and announced that he would not depose him after all.⁵

Living Quarters and Ranking of Empresses and Consorts in the Han

Most of what is written about a person like Liu Bang has to do with how he established himself as emperor and how he ruled the Han, as the brief summary above is meant to demonstrate. But if we want to look at a man like Liu Bang as a polygamist, then we need to survey the random details about his private life and the biographies of other people living at the time, especially his wives. First, however, it is necessary to describe the living quarters of the imperial household and the ranking system for both the imperial bureaucracy and the ladies of the harem. Each dynasty had its own system and terminology, but all roughly mirrored the example supplied in the *Rites of Zhou* and the systems estab-

lished during the Qin and Han. Understanding the system helps both in seeing how it evolved over time and in evaluating the status of the individual wives.

The privy treasurer (*shaofu* 少府) was the male official in charge of palace bureaucracy as a whole. He was one of the nine chamberlains (*jiuqing* 九卿), chief ministers of the central government bureaucracy, each of whom headed a ministry and each of whom held the second-highest status in the system of ranking, which was expressed in terms of bushels (or *dan* 石) of grain per month. These ministers were at “fully two thousand bushels” (the highest being ten thousand; more on ranks and salaries momentarily). The privy treasurer served the emperor directly. He was not a eunuch, but many of his underlings were. His jurisdiction included the management of palace food, drink, clothing, equipment, and entertainment, and the various functions of the imperial harem.

The lateral courts (*yeting* 掖庭) was the name of the quarters in which the ladies of the harem lived. The manager of the harem was a eunuch whose title was prefect of the eternal lanes (*yongxiang ling* 永巷令), later changed to the prefect of the lateral courts (104 BCE, *yeting ling* 掖庭令). As a subordinate of the privy treasurer, he earned six hundred bushels per month. The empress’s quarters were apart from the harem and went by the title palace of eternal autumn (*changqiu gong* 長秋宮), and were separate from the emperor’s apartments as well. In theory the empress spent every fifth night with the emperor, returning to her palace in the morning. Besides eunuchs, there were also palace maids (*gongnü* 宮女), who were slaves who served the empress, empress dowager, and the harem ladies, and who ranged in age from about eight to thirty-five years old, when they were supposed to be released from the palace. There was a prison for women in the palace, which was also a workshop called the weaving room, in which silk was woven, dyed, and softened. The weaving room plays a role in numerous accounts of imperial women, as we will later see.

All women had titles reflecting their ranks, which in turn corresponded to the ranks and positions of men at an equivalent level in the hierarchy of court officials. Each rank had a set salary, which was calculated in both money and amount of grain. The ranking system varied over time, but the historian Ban Gu 班固 (32–92 CE) gives us an idea of these ranks in his first chapter on empresses and consorts in the *History*

of the Former Han (*Hanshu* 漢書), which he wrote in the second half of the first century. He is the next great ancient historian after Sima Qian, parts of whose work he copied directly and sometimes modified before taking up where Sima Qian left off at his death. Each official in the Han had a title, such as grand tutor (*taifu* 太傅) or chancellor (*chengxiang* 丞相), and a rank based on an abstract scale in units of bushels. It was an abstract scale because there was no permanent standard for what one bushel exactly equaled. The figures that exist from a memorial written between 48 and 44 BCE tell us that at that time two thousand bushels were equivalent to a monthly salary of twelve thousand cash. Eight hundred bushels equaled 9,200 cash. Part of the salary was in coin, part in unhusked grain, which was measured in a unit called *hu* 斛, the monetary value of which varied, but on the average was seventy to eighty cash per *hu* in the Former Han. According to calculations, the average number of *hu* per month for a small family (a grandmother, husband and wife, and two children) was 10.5, or 127 per year. An official or harem woman who earned fully two thousand bushels received 180 *hu* per month, while two thousand bushels corresponded to 120 *hu* per month. These are approximate figures for the first century CE.⁶

For the women of the harem there were at first six ranks below the empress. In the Former Han there were eventually fourteen, the highest being illustrious visage (*zhaoyi* 昭儀), with status equal to the chancellor's, and the lowest being a group of six types of maids at one hundred bushels per month, the last of whom was called night attendant (*yezhe* 夜者). The top eleven ranks were expressed in terms of both the bureaucratic and feudal hierarchy. That is, the highest lady, the illustrious visage, was equivalent to both a chancellor of the official bureaucracy and a feudatory prince in the feudal hierarchy. In a reform at the beginning of the Later Han in 23 CE, the emperor abolished the status rankings and reduced the number of levels to three, the highest being honorable lady (*guiren* 貴人) and the next beautiful lady (*meiren* 美人), followed by chosen lady (*cainü* 采女). The first of these three received a small salary, the other two occasional gifts. There were few honorable ladies, but many chosen ladies, by 166 CE as many as five thousand to six thousand. With the increase in numbers, some of the former titles were renewed, in particular illustrious visage and favorite beauty (*jieryu* 婕妤). Ban Gu summarizes the ranking system as follows:

In the beginning, the Han used the same titles as the Qin. The emperor's mother was called the Empress Dowager [*huang taihou* 皇太后], his grandmother the Great Empress Dowager [*taihuang taihou* 太皇太后], and the main wife, Empress [*taihou* 太后]. Concubines [*qie* 妾] were all called Ladies [*furen* 夫人], among whom there were Beautiful Lady [*meiren* 美人], Good Lady [*liangren* 良人], Eighth-rank Lady [*bazi* 八子], Seventh-rank Lady [*qizi* 七子], Senior Maid [*changshi* 長使], and Junior Maid [*shaoshi* 少使].

By the time of Emperor Wu 武 [reigned 140–87 BCE], he established Favorite Beauty [*jiayu* 婕妤], Utter Beauty [*xing'e* 嫕娥], Glamorous Beauty [*ronghua* 容華], and Compliant Lady [*chongyi* 充依], each of which corresponded to a feudal rank. After Emperor Yuan 元 [reigned 49–33] added the Illustrious Visage [*zhaoyi* 昭儀], there were altogether fourteen grades. The Illustrious Visage held the status of a Chancellor and in feudal rank was equivalent to a Feudatory Prince. The Favorite Beauty was equivalent to a Superior Chamberlain and in feudal rank to a Full Marquis. The Utter Beauty had the status of fully 2000 bushels and in feudal rank was equivalent to a Marquis within the Passes. The Glamorous Beauty had the status of a true 2000 bushels and in feudal rank was equivalent to a Grandee of the Sixteenth Order. The Beautiful Lady was at 2000 bushels and in rank was equivalent to a Grandee of the Fifteenth Order. The Eighth-rank Lady was at 1000 bushels and in rank equal to a Grandee of the Thirteenth Order. The Compliant Lady was at 1000 bushels and in rank equivalent to a Grandee of the Twelfth Order. The Seventh-rank Lady was at 800 bushels and in rank the same as a Grandee of the Eleventh Order. The Good Lady was at 800 bushels and in rank the same as a Grandee of the Tenth Order. The Senior Maid was at 600 bushels and in rank the same as a Grandee of the Ninth Order. The Junior Maid was at 400 bushels and in rank the same as a Grandee of the Eighth Order. The Maid for All Purposes [*wuguan* 五官] was at 300 bushels. The Constant Maid [*shunchang* 順常] was at 200 bushels. The Pure Maid [*wujuan* 無涓], Respectful Maid [*gonghe* 共和], Joyous Maid [*yuling* 娛靈], Soothing Maid [*baolin* 保林], Obedient Maid [*liangshi* 良使], and Night Attendant [*yezhe* 夜者] were all at 100 bushels. Senior and junior maids from good families were equivalent to Accessory Clerks [minor “subofficials” who were “at the very bottom of the officialdom” and who were paid much less than one hundred bushels per year]. Everyone from Maid for All Purposes on down was buried near the Outer Palace Gates.⁷

The Intimate Life of the First Han Emperor

Official historians considered the private life of an emperor unworthy of record. Glimpses nevertheless appear, especially when historians make a point about the ruler's moral character or when an episode of private life intrudes upon the affairs of state. How did a ruler spend his time in his living quarters? What people did he associate with there? It was important for others to know in case anyone had gained special intimacy. One case of intimacy proved innocent, but at first looked ominous. Liu Bang had a valued minister named Fan Kuai 樊噲, originally a dog butcher who came from the same county as Liu Bang and had been with him since the beginning of the revolt against the Qin. After Liu became emperor, some of his underlings revolted against him, including Qing Bu 黥布, who was preparing to do so during a time when Liu Bang had been ill and would not allow any of his ministers in to see him. But Fan Kuai finally insisted on pushing his way into Liu's living quarters, with the chief ministers following:

There they saw the emperor pillowing his head against a eunuch, with no one else in attendance. When Fan Kuai saw this, he wept, "When your highness and the rest of us first rose up in Feng and Pei in order to set the world in order, how majestic you were! Now that the world has been put in order, how exhausted you look. You are gravely ill, the chief ministers live in terror, and you refuse to meet them about important matters. Instead you deliberate alone with a eunuch. Has Your Majesty forgotten the affair of Zhao Gao?" Emperor Gao laughed and got up [高帝笑而起].

This is all that Sima Qian writes. Zhao Gao was the notorious Qin eunuch who, when the First Emperor died, did away with the heir apparent and set up another whom he then forced to commit suicide, after which he enthroned a third ruler, who in turn killed Zhao Gao. The word in this passage for "laugh" (*xiao* 笑) also means smile or grin. Whether the laugh was an embarrassed laugh or a placating chuckle, for example, there is no way of telling, except to say that Liu Bang responded to the criticism without anger or dismissal. The ministers needed to talk to him because of urgent matters, and Fan Kuai finally dared to enter the inner quarters without permission.⁸

On another occasion, one of his closest advisors walked in on the emperor while he was hugging his favorite, Lady Qi. It is an episode more typical of unofficial history and fiction, but Sima Qian records it. Zhou Chang 周昌 was also from the same county as Liu and had been with him from the beginning. He was a stutterer, but had strong nerve and, as one of the chief military officers, had direct access to the emperor.

Once he entered the inner apartments during leisure time to present a report and found Liu Bang in the midst of hugging Lady Qi. Zhou turned and fled, but the emperor chased him and when he caught up pounced on his back and rode him like a horse. He asked Zhou, “What kind of a ruler am I?” Zhou looked up at him and replied, “Your Majesty is another Jie or Zhou!” [two ancient rulers who were flagrant pleasure seekers]. The Emperor laughed at Zhou’s words, but feared and respected him even more thereafter.

When the emperor wanted to replace the heir apparent with his son Ruyi 如意, Lady Qi’s child, all the chief ministers strenuously opposed him, but none prevailed. When the emperor asked Zhou Chang for his opinion, Zhou spoke furiously, “Though your servant is a poor speaker, I in-in-insist that your decision is improper. Although Your Majesty intends to replace the heir apparent, your humble servant r-r-refuses to obey.” Liu Bang burst out laughing. His wife, Empress Lü, had been listening from a side room and later bowed to Zhou Chang, saying, “Without you, My Lordship, the heir apparent would probably have been replaced.”⁹

In the same chapter on Zhou Chang, Sima Qian describes the polygamous life of a man from a later reign, a prime minister named Zhang Cang 張蒼 (from the time of Emperor Wen 文, reigned 180–157 BCE). Although Zhang was far from being an emperor, he provides a glimpse of the intimate life of an ancient, though perhaps unusual, polygamist. He was an expert in music and calendrical systems and was responsible for the first revisions of the calendar in the transition from the Qin to the Han. When he was old and had lost all his teeth, Sima Qian reports, he liked “to drink milk from the breasts of young wet nurses.” In addition, he had dozens of concubines and would stop sleeping with a woman after she became pregnant. He died at over one hundred years of age. Why he stopped sleeping with a woman after she became pregnant

is unknown, except that perhaps he believed in the health benefits of intercourse with women when they were the nearest to virginity. Such a belief would have found support in the ancient art of the bedchamber. Otherwise he may have wanted to avoid allowing a woman too much influence because she had a son. Such was the rationale for sultans of the Ottoman Empire many centuries later, who allowed only one son per slave-concubine. China had no such rule, but held to the general principle that a ruler or a polygamist should share himself evenly among his women.¹⁰

Besides concubines, wet nurses, and other female servants, some emperors also became intimate with young men. Sima Qian wrote a brief chapter on male favorites in *Records of the Historian*, in which the most famous cases came after Liu Bang and his son. Sima Qian wrote that women were not alone in using their looks to charm the ruler. “Many were the men of ancient times who gained favour in this way.” As Sima Qian added, Liu Bang “was won by the charms of a young boy named Ji,” while Emperor Hui had the boy favorite Hong. Both boys advanced themselves because of their looks and charm. “As a result all the palace attendants at the court of Emperor Hui took to wearing caps with gaudy feathers and sashes of seashells and to painting their faces, transforming themselves into a veritable host of Jis and Hong.”¹¹ Sima Qian does not directly refer to emperors having sex with the boys. He merely says that “day and night they were by the ruler’s side” (*yu shang wo qi* 與上臥起), which are nearly the same words used for centuries thereafter to refer to intimacy between an emperor and a male favorite.

EMPRESS LÜ, “STRONG AND RESOLUTE,” REIGNED 188–180 BCE

Empress Lü was the first in a long series of empresses and consorts in the Han and later eras who played major roles in dynastic politics. In her case she not only influenced family affairs but also took the reins of central government. Historians and chronological tables typically consider the years from 188 to her death in 180 as her own reign period, even though a succession of two puppet male emperors were technically on the throne during that time. She governed as if she were emperor, although never declaring herself one. Liu Bang had eight sons, the

second of whom was born of Empress Lü and became the crown prince or heir apparent, called *taizi* 太子 (“the great son”). Liu passed over his first son because he was born of a concubine. His third son, however, was born of a favorite concubine, Lady Qi. He was named Ruyi. Empress Lü was Liu’s wife from the early days, that is, as Sima Qian put it, from when he was still “humble and insignificant.” The implication of these words was that Liu Bang should have never considered anyone but his main wife’s son. Sima Qian and later historians usually place the biographies of empresses in the chapter on empresses and consorts, but in this case he gives the empress a separate chapter, an unusual privilege. There he describes her as “strong and resolute” (*gangyi* 剛毅). Although Empress Lü managed to prevent Lady Qi’s son from replacing her own, as we saw, her hatred of Lady Qi and her son gave rise to many years of intrigue.

Empress Lü Tortures Lady Qi

After Liu Bang died, his heir apparent succeeded him at age fifteen as Emperor Hui 惠 (reigned 195–188). Empress Lü plotted against the rival crown prince, Ruyi, but Emperor Hui, his half brother, kept protecting him. Nevertheless, in 194 while the emperor was on a hunting expedition, the empress had Ruyi poisoned. Next, in an episode that became famous for the rest of Chinese history, she had Lady Qi tortured and left for dead. As Sima Qian wrote:

The empress severed Lady Qi’s feet and hands, put out her eyes, and cauterized her ears. She had her drink a potion to destroy her voice and then had her live in the privy. She called her the “human hog” [*renzhi* 人彘].

When Emperor Hui returned from his trip, he was overcome at the sight of Lady Qi. “This is not something human beings do,” he said to his mother. “I may be the Empress’s son, yet I will never rule the world again.” Afterwards he became dissolute and refused to perform the duties of government, dying in 188 at age twenty-three, after which the empress installed one puppet ruler, then another. In the meantime, she empowered members of her clan by giving them high positions and titles, even appointing four of them as kings. In doing so she violated an

oath that she, Liu Bang, and others had sworn that only members of his bloodline would rule. She tried to control the line of succession by marrying her granddaughter (her daughter's daughter) to Emperor Hui, thus marrying a niece to an uncle. When the granddaughter failed to bear a son, the empress declared the son of one of Emperor Hui's concubines heir apparent and, after Hui died, enthroned him as the first puppet ruler. Later she had him killed after his discovery that his mother had been murdered by the empress's granddaughter. Empress Lü killed many others during her reign, reportedly including three of Liu Bang's sons besides Ruyi. Finally one day after performing a ritual purgation, she saw a strange "being like a blue-green dog," which wounded her in the arm before disappearing. A divination was performed which said that the apparition was the ghost of Ruyi coming back to haunt her. She became ill and passed away. Descendants of Liu Bang who lived outside the capital joined forces and, along with other opponents of the empress at court, did away with her clan and other of her appointees. The throne passed to another of Liu Bang's sons, who was the fourth Han ruler, Emperor Wen 文.¹²

The empress had a terrible reputation in later times. Sima Qian was critical of her in a later chapter, but complimented her in her biography—though perhaps there is some irony in his comparison between the empress and the ideal ruler, who was "nonacting" (*wuwei* 無為) and never left his chambers. He "stood in his long-draping robes, folded his arms across his chest, and thus kept the world in order" (垂拱而天下治). Did Sima Qian mean to say she should have left well enough alone and stayed in her women's chambers? Some of the empress's tactics could not be considered unusual, such as arranging imperial marriages and grooming future leaders. Being "strong and resolute" were outstanding qualities. As for mutilating and murdering members of the imperial household, that was usually considered excessive, no matter if the perpetrator were male or female. But if a male ruler killed rivals in order to seek and maintain power, why could a female ruler not kill her rivals? Let it suffice for now to say that Empress Lü was an early and classic example of a strong female ruler whose reputation was deeply clouded by her cruelty and interference in imperial succession.¹³

A Neglected Consort Becomes a Dowager

Since Sima Qian gave Empress Lü her own separate chapter, the first woman in his chapter on empresses and consorts was Empress Dowager Pu 蒲. She was one of Liu Bang's neglected consorts, but gained the historian's attention because her son was selected as emperor after Empress Lü's death. It was by chance that she became a consort to begin with, since Liu Bang had originally imprisoned her husband for betrayal and had confined her to the weaving room (as noted above, the part of the palace where women were sent in punishment). She caught Liu Bang's attention when he once entered the room and saw how beautiful she was, thus Sima Qian's description of the intimate moments preceding her conception of Emperor Wen.

He had her summoned to his harem, but after more than a year she never received the invitation to sleep with him. When she was younger, she had been close friends with Ladies Guan and Zhao, and all three had sworn that whoever was first favored with high position would not forget the others. Not long after, both ladies received Liu Bang's attentions. Once when Liu Bang was sitting on the Chenggao Terrace in the Henan Palace, he overheard the two women laughing together about the oath they had sworn with Lady Pu. He asked what they were laughing about and they told him the story, which saddened him and made him feel sorry for Lady Pu. That day he summoned her to his couch. She said, "Last night I dreamt of a dragon coiled in my belly." "That is a sign of good fortune," he replied, "I will fulfill your dream." Because of this one night she gave birth to a boy who later became the King of Dai. Later, however, Lady Pu saw Liu Bang only rarely.

After the emperor died, Empress Lü confined all women who were favorites. But since Lady Pu saw the emperor only rarely, she was allowed to leave the palace and live in the principality in which her son ruled. When Empress Lü died, the chief ministers summoned him back and installed him as ruler, thus Emperor Wen (reigned 180–157), who elevated his mother to empress dowager.¹⁴

IMPERIAL WOMEN FROM EMPEROR WU TO EMPEROR XUAN

Han palace politics were deeply influenced by the marriage ties between emperors and their wives, at times to overwhelming degrees. This was especially so in the period between the reign of the next major ruler, Emperor Wu (141–87 BCE) and Wang Mang's 王莽 usurpation of the Han in 9 CE, and again during the entire Later Han (25 CE–220), which began after Wang's usurpation. During Emperor Wu's reign fighting once broke out in the capital between the empress's family and that of a favorite consort. During another emperor's reign, the wife of a powerful official maneuvered her daughter into the position of empress by poisoning the reigning empress. Later the two Zhao sisters rose from slavery to become empress and favorite consort, but were frustrated by their failure to have sons and conspired to eliminate the sons of other imperial wives. The period also saw several strange and irregular instances of imperial succession, such as when an impoverished imperial descendant married a eunuch's daughter, then suddenly found himself selected as emperor; or when another emperor tried to offer the throne to a beloved male favorite. Famous literary works resulted from episodes of the time, including Emperor Wu's sorrowful poem about the death of a dear consort, a lady's moving lament about her fall from imperial favor, and the pornographic tales that were told about the Zhao sisters.

By the end of the period, the house of Han appeared to have lost its mandate and was usurped by Wang Mang. Ban Gu's *History of the Former Han* devotes two chapters to the empresses and consorts of the Former Han from its beginning to Wang Mang's usurpation. The first chapter copies from the *Records of the Historian*, though it varies at times, and continues on its own beginning in Emperor Wu's reign, when Sima Qian died. The following excerpts begin with that reign, starting with what Sima Qian wrote, adding details Ban Gu supplied, and then continuing with Ban Gu alone.

A Singing Girl Becomes Empress

The reign of Emperor Wu was characterized by military prowess and territorial expansion. It was famous for launching military campaigns

against the nomads to the north and in the process expanding China's knowledge of western regions along what would become the Silk Road in Central Asia. Sima Qian's basic annal on Emperor Wu almost entirely ignores the military accomplishments, however, in which the emperor did not directly participate, and instead concentrates, first, on the emperor's attempt to restore state rituals according to what they were supposed to have been in the time of the mythical Yellow Emperor and, second, on the emperor's fascination with the occult and achieving immortality. For the latter the emperor used to employ masters of the supernatural (called *fangshi* 方士) and other specialists, including male and female shamans and readers of emanations (called *wangqizhe* 望氣者). Sima Qian respected the emperor's restoration of imperial sacrifices, but not his fascination with the occult.

Emperor Wu cannot be said to have been a good governor of his wives. He allowed their families great privilege and as a result suffered severe conflicts between rivaling groups, the Weis and the Lis in particular. These events served as potent warnings to future dynasties. His first empress was selected for him by his powerful aunt. When she failed to bear children, she spent great sums of money on drugs to induce pregnancy. When the emperor promoted a singing girl named Wei Zifu 衛子夫 to palace lady, the empress hired a sorceress to cast spells on her. The emperor discovered the plot, had the empress deposed, and in 128 BCE enthroned Wei Zifu as empress. Since singing girls were typically expected to be available sexually, the emperor had in effect promoted a prostitute to empress. The way they met is told in the following account, in which a special word is used for when an emperor invites a woman to join him in sex, to "favor" or "grace" her (*xing* 幸).

Wei Zifu was from a poor family and began as a singer in the palace of Emperor Wu's elder sister, the Princess of Pingyang. In the first years of his reign the emperor failed to produce a son. To remedy this, the princess invited a dozen women of good families to her palace so that the emperor could meet them. But he liked no one. When singing girls were brought in, however, he took a liking to one of them. He left for a natural break, she followed him to the changing room, and there "she received his favor." The woman was Wei Zifu. After returning to his seat, he was overjoyed and gave the Princess of Pingyang one thousand in gold. The princess sent Wei back to the palace with him, where she lived for years without once being summoned. Since the emperor

had the custom of dismissing women he did not like or need, Wei Zifu eventually managed to obtain an audience and, weeping, asked to be let go. He pitied her and favored her once more, after which she became pregnant and won his affection. She became a great favorite, gave birth to three girls and a boy, and was finally promoted to empress. The son was appointed heir apparent. Mother and son, however, came to a dire end as a result of a scandal in which they were accused of using black magic against the emperor. In addition, the empress's family became involved in a conflict with another consort family, the Lis, who tried to oust the Weis. Fighting broke out in the streets of the capital, with thousands dying and the Weis decimated. The emperor was not in the city at the time. The empress and the heir committed suicide and all members of the heir's family were executed except a baby grandson, who years later became Emperor Xuan 宣. His peculiar circumstances continued to play a role in future years, as we will soon see.¹⁵

An Emperor Mourns a Beloved Consort

Emperor Wu had several more consorts who were granted biographies in the dynastic histories, the first of whom was a dear favorite, Lady Li 李. His sorrow over her death became one of the most famous love stories of the Han. Empress Wei had “lost her looks,” as Ban Gu writes, which was a way of saying that she had aged and fallen out of favor. At first the emperor liked a Lady Wang, who died, then he met Lady Li, who came to his attention because her elder brother, a court musician, once sang a song extolling her beauty: “One look and she could topple a city; a second look and she would topple a kingdom!” “Wonderful,” the emperor sighed, “Is there truly such a woman?” He summoned her and indeed found her beautiful. She bore him a son, but fell ill and died sometime before 87. The emperor missed her so much that he called for a master of the supernatural to do a *séance* and summon her soul, then wrote a long, mournful rhyme-prose about her, which still survives.¹⁶

Sima Qian died during Emperor Wu's reign. The end of his chapter on imperial wives contains an account of two highly ranked consorts whom the emperor forbade from seeing each other. They are followed by the story of the mother of Emperor Wu's successor, whom he designated the day before he died. Both accounts contain drama, the first in

terms of the two consorts meeting after all, the second in terms of the magical aura surrounding the consort's selection, then her fall from favor. The first account provides passing information about status and income in the imperial harem.

Emperor Wu favored Lady Yin 尹. Lady Xing 邢 held the rank of Utter Beauty. Everyone called her by that title. In status she was “fully 2000 bushels.” Women of the rank Glamorous Beauty had the status of 2000 bushels, while Favorite Beauties were equivalent to a Full Marquis. Empresses were often chosen from the ranks of Favorite Beauties.

Since the emperor favored Ladies Yin and Xing at the same time, he issued an order forbidding them to see each other. But Lady Yin requested that she be allowed to meet Lady Xing. The emperor approved, but had another woman dress as Lady Xing and gave her a dozen or so attendants. When the disguised Lady Xing came forward, Lady Yin looked at her and said, “This is not Lady Xing.”

The emperor asked, “How can you tell?” She answered, “From her appearance and bearing, she is obviously not a match for a ruler,” whereupon the emperor issued a summons and had Lady Xing put on old clothes and approach the front by herself. Lady Fu looked her over and said, “This is she,” then lowered her head, bowed deeply, and wept, lamenting that she was no match for Lady Xing.¹⁷

As for the consort with the magical aura, she was Favorite Beauty Zhao 趙, also known as the Lady of the Clenched Hands (*quan furen* 拳夫人), a name that derived from the emperor's first encounter with her. During one of Emperor Wu's imperial journeys outside the palace, a reader of emanations told him that there was a remarkable woman in the vicinity. Emperor Wu asked that she be summoned, and a woman appeared whose hands were clenched into fists. When the emperor tried to undo them, they came unfolded. He favored her and she became known as the Lady of Clenched Hands (Ban Gu notes that her father had been previously punished with castration). Another version of the story says that her right hand was paralyzed in a hook-like shape from an illness she suffered. The emperor's touch allowed it to open up. Unfortunately, she later incurred the emperor's wrath, was sent away, and died of grief. But he liked their eight-year-old son, of whom he once said, “He is like me.” At his deathbed, the emperor named him heir apparent, entrusted his care to a chief aid, the commander and

marquis Huo Guang 霍光 (died 68 BCE), and died the next day. The son became ruler in 87 BCE, thus Emperor Zhao 昭 (died 74). In an unusual postscript, it was said that Emperor Wu was glad that Lady Zhao died. When asked why, he replied that a mother in her prime whose young son becomes emperor is too prone to abuse power. Didn't everyone recall Empress Lü? But the same account that tells of her hooked hand asserts the injustice of her death, the sign of which was the fact that her corpse remained warm and gave off a fragrance that lasted for a month.¹⁸

An Emperor Who Married a Eunuch's Daughter

Emperor Zhao's extreme youth allowed Huo Guang to retain control for the entire reign and, because Emperor Zhao left no heir, the next reign as well. The youth of Emperor Zhao's empress, who married him when she was ten, made it such that when he died she became empress dowager at about fifteen years of age. She was Empress Shangguan 上官, who played a role that empresses and dowagers often played throughout Chinese history, that of issuing the edict to enthrone the imperial successor. When Emperor Zhao died without an heir, it was left to Huo Guang to select the next ruler. He passed over a son of Emperor Wu's, whom he considered unsuitable, appointed then deposed one of Emperor Wu's grandsons, and finally found an eighteen-year-old great-grandson of Emperor Wu. Huo had the young Dowager Shangguan issue an edict enthroneing the young man, who at the time was living in humble circumstances because of the scandal in which his great-grandmother, Wei Zifu, had been involved when he was a baby (his grandfather, Wei's son, was Emperor Wu's original heir apparent). The great-grandson became Emperor Xuan, the seventh Han ruler (reigned 74 to 49 BCE), while Shangguan became Great Empress Dowager Shangguan.

Emperor Xuan's lowly origins gave rise to peculiar circumstances during his reign, beginning with his desire to rehabilitate his maligned ancestors. Since he was not the biological son of the previous emperor, imperial protocol dictated that he take the previous emperor as his father and demote his own father. In other words, his parents and grandparents were not allowed to receive the honors that an emperor's ancestors normally received. But Emperor Xuan did not like the rules

and wished not only to right the injustice he felt his mother and father had suffered, but also to grant them full posthumous honors. When he heard that his mother's mother was still alive, he launched a search for her among the commoners until he found her. His mother had long since died as a result of the extermination of her family in 91 BCE during the conflict between the Wei and Li clans referred to above. Emperor Xuan's effort to rehabilitate his ancestors became a reference point for other emperors in Chinese history who, like him, were not born of the previous emperor but who wished to grant posthumous honors to parents and grandparents, whether by means of titles, temples, or positions in the imperial ancestral temple. Such attempts tended to ignite opposition from court officials, but in Emperor Xuan's case as in others, the ruler eventually got his way.¹⁹

The second major episode in Emperor Xuan's family life had to do with the fact that his first wife, Empress Xu 許, was the daughter of a eunuch named Xu Guanghan 許廣漢. While serving Emperor Wu, Xu had mistakenly taken another attendant's saddle and put it on his own horse. He was accused of the crime of stealing while in attendance of the emperor, the penalty for which was death, but the emperor allowed him to undergo castration instead. Under normal conditions, Xu would never have been able to marry his daughter to an emperor. But at the time the future Emperor Xuan was still living in obscurity in the lateral courts, where another eunuch had been looking after him. Years before, that eunuch had worked for the Wei family and suffered castration at their downfall, when he took it upon himself to care for the young boy. It was he who arranged the match with the daughter of Xu Guanghan. A year later she gave birth to a son, shortly after which, in 74 BCE, her husband was chosen as emperor. Huo Guang still held great power and wanted the emperor to marry his daughter and make her empress instead of Lady Xu. But the emperor refused and had Lady Xu named empress. Three years later, however, unbeknownst to Huo Guang, his wife had Empress Xu poisoned to death. Huo Guang was horrified when he found out, but had the affair covered up and let his daughter be married to the emperor, who, ignorant of the conspiracy, cherished his new Empress Huo. But in 67, a year after Huo Guang died, Emperor Xuan named the deceased Empress Xu's son as heir apparent, enraging Huo Guang's wife. She tried but failed to have the heir apparent poisoned, after which the details about her murder of Empress Xu

leaked out. Huo Guang's wife and her allies plotted to depose the emperor and replace him with a member of the Huo family, but they were exposed and eliminated. Empress Huo was deposed in 66 BCE and eventually committed suicide.²⁰

To sum up the succession of emperors so far: Emperor Wu designated the son of the Lady of the Clenched Hands as his successor, thus Emperor Zhao. When Zhao died without an heir, his regent Huo Guang selected Emperor Xuan, whose Empress Xu was poisoned but whose son became the next ruler, Emperor Yuan 元 (reigned 49–33). After him came Emperor Cheng, who became involved with the notorious Zhao sisters.

A WANTON EMPRESS: ZHAO FEIYAN, THE FLYING SWALLOW

It often happened that women became prominent only after becoming dowagers. Emperor Yuan's wife, Wang Zhengjun 王政君 (71 BCE–13 CE), was such a woman. She gave birth to the next ruler, Emperor Cheng 成 (reigned 33–7 BCE), and played a major role in imperial politics for years, but not before the disastrous episode of her son's two young favorites, the Zhao sisters, two of the most notorious women in Chinese history. They rose from slavery to center stage and outmaneuvered Wang Zhengjun until the emperor died. One of their victims was Emperor Cheng's empress, the niece of the Empress Xu who had been poisoned. At first the emperor liked his wife so much that, in the words commonly used by the historians, "women of the Rear Palace rarely gained audience with him" (後宮希得進見). But since the couple produced no surviving offspring, the emperor was pressured to meet other palace ladies. After about a decade he finally began doing so, and that is when he met Zhao Feiyan 趙飛燕 and her sister.²¹

In the historian's language, the Zhao sisters were "wanton women," typically called *yinfu* 淫婦. Since men can usually get away with sexual misbehavior more than women, the wanton woman was by implication worse than the profligate man. When reading about her it is important to keep this bias in mind, since historians tend to exaggerate her misdeeds. Zhao Feiyan and her sister latched onto Emperor Cheng in a way that had not been seen in Han history. What follows cites from

both official and unofficial history, including stories that have no historical basis at all. First let us review the case of one of Emperor Cheng's prior favorites, the virtuous Lady Ban 班, who was related to the historian Ban Gu and his sister Ban Zhao 昭, who assisted him in writing the *History of the Former Han*.

A Virtuous Consort Slandered by a Rival

Lady Ban began as a junior maid, but was soon favored and elevated to favorite beauty. She bore the emperor a son who died. She became famous for an incident in which she rejected the emperor's request to ride with him in a carriage, asserting that only notorious rulers rode together with a woman. She could say this with conviction because she was well read in the *Classic of Poetry* and other canonical texts and, as she once said, used to surround herself with portraits of famous virtuous women (she would probably have known that Confucius once disapproved of Lady Nanzi for riding in a carriage with her husband, Duke Ling). After the emperor began seeing palace women, Ban presented him with one of her servants, whom he likewise raised to favorite beauty. In doing this, she was engaging in a classic gesture of wifely sharing, in which an empress or consort introduced women of her own choosing to the ruler. But Emperor Cheng became involved with Zhao Feiyan and her sister, who slandered both Empress Xu and Favorite Beauty Ban. As a result, Ban requested transfer to Empress Dowager Wang Zhengjun's palace, where she could stay out of trouble. She wrote a rhyme-prose about her loss of favor, evoking wise women of the ancient past, including Shun's two wives and the wives of the founders of the Zhou dynasty. She wrote that she had enjoyed the greatest fortune, though she hardly deserved it, but then suddenly her fortune ended: "Before I knew it, the bright sun had veiled its light, leaving me in the dusk of evening." All she could do now was take her "place among lesser maids in the Palace of Lasting Trust," where Dowager Wang lived, performing humble tasks such as "sprinkling and sweeping among the curtains," which she vowed to do until she died. "Though casting her eyes upon His cloud-bound house made the tears stream down her face," she continued, she was proud that she had once "enjoyed the privilege of his lofty brilliance."²²



Figure 2.1. Han emperor Yuan's Consort Feng 馮 courageously blocks an escaped bear heading to the throne room. (*Huitu lienü zhuan*. Zhibuzu zhai edition [1779]. Taipei: Zhengzhong shuju, 1971, 4.35b–36a. Permission of Zhengzhong shuju.)



Figure 2.1. Continued.

After the fall of Empress Xu and Lady Ban, in 16 BCE the emperor promoted Zhao Feiyan to empress, refusing to listen to his mother's objections. The *History of the Former Han* says that Zhao Feiyan had

been born in a family of government slaves in Chang'an, where her parents abandoned her at birth but, because she survived after three days, decided to raise her after all. As a youth she was attached to the household of Emperor Cheng's elder sister, where she became renowned for her singing and dancing. Since she was light and lithe, she was given the name Flying Swallow. Emperor Cheng met her while on an incognito visit to his sister and liked her so much that he summoned her to the palace, where she became a great favorite. He also summoned her sister, Zhao Hede 趙合德, gave her the rank of illustrious visage, and switched his attentions to her after promoting Zhao Feiyan to empress. Neither woman fulfilled the vital role of producing sons, however, which made them viciously jealous of the harem women who did. The emperor met those women as secretly as possible, but in each case the sons they produced disappeared mysteriously. Then in 7 BCE Emperor Cheng died suspiciously and without a son to succeed him. He had shortly before selected a nephew as heir apparent, who became Emperor Ai 哀 (reigned 7–1 BCE). When Dowager Wang Zhengjun announced that she would have Emperor Cheng's death investigated, Zhao Hede committed suicide. But Zhao Feiyan had already won Emperor Ai's sympathy and, when he received reports about the Zhao sisters' misdeeds, he did not pursue matters further. Zhao Feiyan lived through his reign, but after his death Wang Zhengjun had her demoted to commoner status, shortly after which she committed suicide.

What the sisters did with the emperor's male offspring is a good example of a common sort of misdeed in Chinese palace history. An investigation carried out after his death revealed that he once favored a female scribe named Cao 曹, who was well educated and had been an instructor of the empress. When Zhao Hede learned that Scribe Cao had a son, she took the child and ordered Cao to commit suicide. Six slave women present at the birth were also ordered to commit suicide. The baby disappeared. In another case, the emperor favored a palace woman whom he housed in a special part of the palace and who became pregnant in 11 BCE. As the historian describes, when Zhao Hede found out, she became violent. "She was furious and began to hit herself with her own hands. She knocked her head against the wall and the pillar and threw herself from the bed onto the floor. She wept and cried and refused to eat." The emperor swore that he would never elevate the young mother to empress. Later he issued an order for the baby to be

delivered to a room from which he and the consort dismissed everyone else. The next thing the historian reports is that they had a eunuch take the baby, who was in a little hamper, to the keeper of the women's jail with a message saying that there was a dead baby in the hamper and that it should be buried in a secret place. In other words, the historian omits saying that the emperor and his consort killed the baby, his own heir.²³

The Wanton Affairs of Empress Zhao in a Pornographic Tale

Zhao Feiyan's life receives a different coloring in accounts outside the officially accepted dynastic history. *Miscellaneous Records from the Western Capital* (*Xijing zaji* 西京雜記) is an early collection of anecdotes and descriptions of Han imperial life and is an example of what was often called “unofficial” or “outer” history (*waishi* 外史), where “outer” connotes topics that dynastic histories considered trivial, indecent, or dangerous. The excerpt below is about the sexual life of Zhao Feiyan, which supposedly began with a musician named Qing Anshi 慶安世, the first of many lovers. Stories like this became part of the Zhao Feiyan legend for centuries to come.

When Qing Anshi was fifteen, he became a Court Gentleman for Emperor Cheng. He was a master of the zither and a virtuoso of the famous tunes known as “The Phoenix Pair” and “The Parting Rocs.” Empress Zhao liked him and said so to the emperor, who granted Qing Anshi access to the inner apartments of the palace. Empress Zhao was tremendously fond of him. He wore fine shoes of soft silk, carried a phoenix-feather fan, and had a fur jacket made of purple velveteen. He slept with the empress, who wanted to have children but never could. Because she was childless, she used to conduct prayer ceremonies in a special chamber to which no one but her closest maids was allowed, not even the emperor. She used to invite cocky young men [*qingbo shaonian* 輕薄少年] to her quarters dressed in women's clothing, who arrived in curtained carriages, dozens of them entering the inner precincts every day. She had sex with them all, without stopping for rest. When one got tired, she'd replace him with the next. Still, she died childless.²⁴

This story was later incorporated into a short pornographic novel called *The Sensational History of Flying Swallow* (*Zhaoyang qushi* 昭陽趣史), written during the Ming dynasty, possibly around 1621. The anonymous author writes that the sisters were originally a female fox and a male swallow who engaged in sexual battle to steal each other's essence and who, because of their sexual misconduct, were banished to life on earth by the Jade Emperor. One episode of sexual profligacy follows another, beginning with an adulterous affair between the homosexual lover of a military official and the official's wife. The Zhao sisters are the twins who result from that relationship. They eventually learn to sing and dance and win the emperor's favor, but when he prefers Hede to Feiyan, Feiyan begins to have sex with a libertine the sisters once knew, whom she has a male palace slave named Yan Chifeng 燕赤鳳 smuggle into her quarters. Desperate to have children, Feiyan later smuggles into the palace Qing Anshi and the young men disguised as women, after which she and her sister have sex with Yan Chifeng. In a climactic episode that first appeared in a Song-dynasty version of the story, *The Unofficial Biography of Flying Swallow* (*Feiyan waizhuan* 飛燕外傳), the emperor dies because Zhao Hede, greedy for sex, gives him an overdose of aphrodisiac. The Ming novel is full of descriptions portraying the inexhaustible sexual strength of the wanton woman. Few men can match her, and certainly not the emperor, who can only stand back as she takes other lovers at will.

Both official and unofficial versions of Zhao Feiyan's life tell the same basic story about how she became empress, rising from government slave to imperial favorite. But the *History of the Former Han* contains nothing about the Zhao sisters' birth or adulterous affairs, much less orgies with young men. Yan Chifeng and Qing Anshi appear nowhere. Instead, the focus is on the influence that the Zhao sisters had on the emperor and the court, the sisters' failure to have children, and the multiple cases of murdering offspring, forcing pregnant women to abort, or having pregnant women murdered. Whether the Zhaos had sex with other men is impossible to verify.²⁵

Emperor Ai and His Male Favorite

As noted above, an emperor's favorite could also be a man. One of the most famous stories of same-sex love in Chinese history took place



Figure 2.2. Empress Zhao Feiyan. (*Baimei xinyong tuzhuan* [1870], 41 a. Hathi Trust Digital Library. Original in Harvard Library.)

between Emperor Ai and the young male courtier Dong Xian 董賢 (23?–1 BCE). Dong's father had been a censor during the reign of Emperor Cheng and in that capacity appointed his son to the position of houseman for the heir apparent, who was the future Emperor Ai. After Emperor Ai assumed the throne, Dong Xian rose to gentleman attendant, though he was still unnoticed. But one day when Dong was announcing the time, he captured the emperor's attention, for he was a good-looking young man. The emperor made him gentleman of the palace gate, an honorific position for personal attendants of the emperor. From then on "he was with the emperor whether sleeping or rising" (*chang yu shang wo qi* 常與上臥起), says the history, using the same words as earlier and later accounts of emperors and male favorites. He eventually rose to commander-escort, a position normally reserved for imperial in-laws and sons and grandsons of dukes and thus completely inappropriate for someone like Dong. The most famous episode of their affair occurred one morning after they had been sleeping together.

One day after sunrise, Dong Xian was still fast asleep and happened to be lying on the emperor's sleeve. The emperor wanted to get up. Not wishing to bother him, the emperor cut off his sleeve in order to free himself, his love for him was so great. Dong was a warm and gentle person but also devious. He knew how to use his charms to great advantage. Whenever the emperor granted him permission to go on leave, he refused and insisted on staying in the palace in order to "look after the emperor's medical matters."

The emperor allowed Dong Xian's wife to live in the palace, installed Dong's younger sister as lady of illustrious visage, second in rank to the empress, and rewarded many of Dong's family members. In 2 BCE, to the shock of members of the court, the emperor appointed the twenty-two-year-old Dong to the position of commander in chief (*dasima* 大司馬), one of the three highest ranks in the Han bureaucracy. Dong Xian accompanied the emperor as before, neglecting his duties as commander. The following year an Inner Asian khan visiting the Han court was surprised at such a youthful commander. When he asked about him, the emperor replied that Dong Xian had been promoted because of his great worth. The khan bowed and congratulated the ruler for having such a fine minister.

The height of the emperor's favoritism came when he proposed passing the throne to Dong Xian, comparing himself with the ancient Emperor Yao, who had passed the throne not to his son but to Shun, the man he considered worthiest. The proposal may have been a drunken jest, but an official who was present immediately reminded Emperor Ai of the gravity of appointing a successor and asked that he not speak so frivolously. The emperor did not pursue the matter further. Emperor Ai died suddenly in 1 BCE, at which point Great Empress Dowager Wang took over and leagued with her nephew Wang Mang to appoint a new emperor. Wang Mang impeached Dong Xian, who along with his wife committed suicide.²⁶

GREAT EMPRESS DOWAGER WANG ZHENGJUN

Let us look at the end of the Former Han through the lives of two women, first the Great Empress Dowager Wang, then another empress with the same surname, the wife of the young Emperor Ping, the next-to-last emperor of the Former Han. Both were related to Wang Mang, the usurper who ended the Former Han and ruled his own New dynasty between 9 and 23 CE. Wang Zhengjun, as we saw, was Emperor Yuan's wife, Emperor Cheng's mother, and Wang Mang's aunt. Over sixty-odd years she went from being a palace lady to great empress dowager, living to age eighty-four and playing a central role on numerous occasions. According to Ban Gu, she never wavered in her basic loyalty to the Liu household of the Han after Wang Mang took over. At the end of her biography in the *History of the Former Han*, Ban Gu quotes his father, Ban Biao 班彪 (3–54 CE), saying that next to the women who harmed the royal house of Han (referring in particular to empresses Lü, Huo, and Shangguan), Wang Zhengjun was a hero, especially for refusing to surrender the Han imperial seals to Wang Mang. Ban Gu, who detested Wang Mang, even gave her a chapter of her own in the history.²⁷

Ordering Her Father to Remarry Her Mother

Her biography begins with a report about her parents, whom she ordered to remarry after their divorce. Her father held a low rank, it is

said, liked wine and women, and had many concubines. Of his twelve children, Wang Zhengjun and two sons were born of his main wife, whom her father divorced because of her jealousy (one of the faults for which a man could divorce a woman in ancient times). The mother later remarried, then became a widow. When Wang Zhengjun became dowager, she ordered her father to remarry her mother. No details say why, but it was a bold act, perhaps intended to provide support for her widowed mother.

Auspicious omens during her girlhood pointed to Wang Zhengjun's future greatness, compelling her father to give her a good education. She entered Emperor Xuan's palace at age eighteen as a "woman of the household" (*jiarenzi* 家人子), a special category of unranked women from good families who were unassigned to either the ruler or heir apparent. At the time, the heir apparent (the future Emperor Yuan) loved a favorite who became sick and died and who in her dying words said that her illness was due to other consorts laying curses upon her. The heir apparent believed her and thenceforth shunned his other consorts. When his father heard this, he had his empress pick a few women of the household to "attend and entertain" the heir apparent. Wang Zhengjun was among a group of five. The heir liked no one, but under his mother's pressure picked Wang Zhengjun, who was sent to him and in no time became pregnant, giving birth to a son in 51 BCE. This was unusual since he had been seven or eight years with other women, none of whom had children. When the heir was enthroned in 48, she became empress, her son heir apparent. Later, however, the new emperor wanted to depose the son (the future Emperor Cheng) because of his drinking and love of pleasure, and preferred the son of his favorite, Illustrious Visage Fu 傅. In the end the empress and his officials managed to prevent him from carrying out his plan.²⁸

Throwing the Imperial Seals on the Ground

The most dramatic moment in Wang Zhengjun's biography came at Wang Mang's usurpation. Previously, Emperor Cheng had been content to let others govern for him, in particular members of the Wang family, of whom Wang Mang was the most powerful. First Emperor Cheng died, then Emperor Ai, at which point there was no heir apparent. Great Empress Dowager Wang seized the Han imperial seals and

designated a nine-year-old step-grandson, Emperor Ping 平 (reigned 1–5 CE), as ruler, with Wang Mang as regent. Wang Mang began to gather enormous political power, all along against his aunt's wishes, as Ban Gu says, although Wang still tried to please her. When Emperor Ping died, Wang Mang first enthroned a two-year-old great-great-grandson of Emperor Xuan, then declared himself emperor. He sent someone to his aunt to fetch the imperial seals, which she refused to hand over, relenting only when she realized that he was unstoppable. She opposed him to her death in 13 CE.

The scene of her refusal to surrender the seals is full of drama. In order to persuade her to hand them over, Wang Mang sent a marquis whom the dowager particularly trusted. But she accused him of betraying the dynasty and all that the house of Han had done for him and his family. If Wang Mang was going to rule a new dynasty, she told him, why didn't he make a new set of seals? "I am an old widow of the house of Han who is at the verge of death. I'd rather be buried with the seals than ever give them away!" She finally gave up, however, and threw them on the ground. In Ban Gu's account, Wang Mang never managed to please either Wang Zhengjun or his own daughter, whom he promoted as empress to Emperor Ping, against his aunt's wishes. The daughter was about fourteen years old. Wang Mang gave her a sumptuous ceremony studiously based on ancient rites. After Emperor Ping died, she became empress dowager, though she was still very young. Her end came when rebels toppled Wang Mang in 23 CE, thus the scene of her heroic death as the last woman in the chapter on imperial wives of the Former Han.

In temperament she was tactful, moderate, and morally resolute. After the house of Han had been deposed, she pleaded illness and refused to attend court. Her father held her in fear and respect and was deeply grieved. He wanted her to remarry, [but when he sent her a suitor] she flew into a rage and whipped her attendants. Her illness grew worse and she refused to get out of bed. Her father stopped insisting. When the Han army came after Wang Mang and set fire to the Weiyang Palace, she said, "How can I ever face the house of Han again?" and burned to death by throwing herself into the fire.²⁹

WANG MANG, WHO MARRIED 121 WIVES

As we did with Liu Bang, let us inspect another famous emperor and temporarily put aside the narrative of Han empresses and consorts. Wang Mang (45 BCE–23 CE) was an oddity among Chinese rulers, in particular because of the way in which he liked to cloak himself in the aura of someone who was ordained by both divine mandate and public opinion. This was the case in both his methods of ruling and his practice of polygamy. He liked giving the appearance of acting correctly and according to ancient standard, whether it was in usurping the throne or in taking 121 wives. He had already held powerful positions for many years when he saw that the Han imperial household was too weak to select a capable successor. He took charge first as commander in chief, then as regent, and finally as emperor of his own New *Xin* 新 dynasty in 9 CE. He had grand ideas for solving what he saw as the Han's deepest problems, tried to remedy them, failed, and lost his life to rebels. Among his most important policies were first, a nationalization and redistribution of land, since he wanted to weaken wealthy landowners, many of whom lived on tax-free estates, and improve the livelihood of overly taxed peasants; and second, a system of price and commodity controls. Neither of these succeeded. The reasons for his failure are the subject of numerous studies. What I will do instead is portray Wang Mang's life in terms of his family and sexual relations, including his physical comportment, with an emphasis on the recurrent theme of his attempts to appear orthodox and correct.

His Large Mouth and Receding Chin

Wang Mang claimed descent from no less than the ancient Yellow Emperor and liked to style himself and his pronouncements by referring to him and other heroes of the ancient past. Before he became emperor, he even had as one of his closest associates a direct descendant of Confucius. One of his characteristic methods was to have supporters plant divine portents that predicted and affirmed his enthronement. Portents had long been used to predict dynastic change in China and consisted of astronomical, climatic, and other environmental phenomena, such as Venus appearing in the daytime, which was a momentous sign. If political change was already in the air, then people paid

serious attention to such phenomena. If there was no call for change, and stars like Venus appeared anyway, as they often did, then they might pass without special note.³⁰

Another of Wang Mang's methods, similar to the use of portents, was to have people submit requests for him to do things that he did not want to appear to have initiated himself. Similarly, he liked to model himself after ancient heroes like the Duke of Zhou or after the prescriptions of hallowed texts like the *Rites of Zhou*, in which one of the ideals of rulership was being open to criticism. Thus at the beginning of his reign he established "the banner for initiating improvements, the post for speaking ill and criticizing, and the drum for those who dare to admonish." He appointed four officials to receive anyone wishing to raise such matters. In short, he liked to make it look as though he were a channel of virtue and right action and as though he ruled not from personal whim but based on what divine mandate, portents, officials, and the people of the empire would have him do.³¹ In telling Wang Mang's story, I mainly rely on the information provided in the *History of the Former Han*, which treats him as a villain. The account is so negative, in fact, that it arouses suspicion. Perhaps if Wang Mang's dynasty had succeeded, his dynastic history would have treated him as a hero similar to Liu Bang. In fact other rulers both before and after created illustrious genealogies, fabricated portents, and relied on sacred precedent. Wang Mang, moreover, was not an irrational tyrant. He continued many policies of the Han and was a vigorous administrator.³² But he was reviled throughout Chinese history. How much is true in the descriptions of his personal behavior is at times hard to tell, especially when it comes to deciding how conniving and calculating he was. Historians and other writers like to read people's minds and act as if they know what their subjects thought and said. If nothing else, what the *History of the Former Han* presents is at least a neat fiction, which we can explore by first looking at Wang's physical appearance.

The *History of the Former Han* describes him as being neither handsome nor tall, which the biographer presents as a problem for Wang's self-image:

In looks Wang Mang had a large mouth and receding chin, bulging eyes with reddish pupils, and a loud and raspy voice [侈口蹙頞, 露眼赤精, 大聲而嘶]. He was five feet seven inches tall [shorter than average for the time]. He liked to wear thick-soled shoes and tall



Figure 2.3. Wang Mang's daughter throws herself in the fire as the attackers arrive. (*Huitu lienü zhuan*. Zhibuzu zhai edition [1779]. Taipei: Zhengzhong shuju, 1971, 4.38b–39a. Permission of Zhengzhong shuju.)



Figure 2.3. Continued.

hats, and wore clothing padded with felt. He liked to stick out his chest and look down on the people around him.

At the time there was an Expectant Official at the Yellow Gate who was skilled in the esoteric arts. Someone asked him about Wang Mang's appearance. He replied, "Wang Mang can be said to have an owl's eyes, a tiger's mouth, and a jackal's voice. Thus he is capable of eating people, but it is also certain that he will be eaten by others."

Wang Mang had the expectant official executed, but "afterwards used a mica shield to screen himself so that only his most intimate followers could see him."³³

Wang Mang Had No Concubines

Because his father had died, Wang Mang at first did not fare as well as his male cousins. He made up for that by distinguishing himself from them and their extravagant ways. He was always "courteous and temperate," his biography reports, and became more so as he rose in rank. Two uncles, one of whom he cared for diligently during a long illness, were particularly helpful in his rise to power. Wang Mang thus made himself a model of filial piety. Likewise, he crafted an appearance of sexual temperance. Once he secretly purchased a maid, but when his cousins found out, he gave her to a man who had no sons, telling him that the woman was from a family known for bearing sons. As Homer Dubs translates, "In the foregoing manner he hid his desires and sought for fame." Later, a long memorial praised him, saying that he had only "one consort and no other" (*fei pi wu er* 妃匹無二). As for his wife, she was said to be humble and unostentatious. Once she dressed so humbly that people thought she was a servant and were astonished to find out who she was. He maintained strict discipline with his sons. In 5 BCE he ordered one of them to commit suicide for murdering a slave. After becoming emperor he had a grandson commit suicide for owning a painting of himself wearing the robes and hat of the son of heaven. He had another son commit suicide in 3 BCE for engaging in a plot against him.

Another example of Wang Mang's artful maneuvering appeared in his attempt to marry his daughter to Emperor Ping. First he called for a selection of women for the young emperor, but withdrew his daughter from the pool saying that he was afraid of the competition. Great Em-

press Dowager Wang, who opposed the marriage, believed that he was sincere in withdrawing his daughter. At that point, however, over a thousand commoners, scholars, and officials submitted letters to the dowager urging the selection of Wang's daughter as empress. Wang Mang sent someone to turn the requests away, but even more came than before. So the dowager had no choice but to accept his daughter. Here as in other instances Wang Mang's method was to create the effect of "I don't want to do this, but I will do it if you say I must."³⁴

Sending for Chaste Maidens and Marrying 120 of Them

By the time Wang's wife became empress, she had had four boys, two of whom Wang had ordered to commit suicide, causing her to "weep until she lost her sight." Another son committed suicide after being discovered having an affair with a woman Wang had once favored and plotting with her to assassinate Wang. This was followed in the same year, 21 CE, by the deaths of Wang's wife and his last remaining son. As it happened, while still a marquis, Wang had favored several female attendants, three of whom had altogether two boys and two girls, who had all been kept secret. But though he finally granted the children fiefs and noble titles, he still referred to the mothers as "attendants" (*shizhe* 侍者), not concubines, and thus still needed an empress and new heirs, for which he began readying himself as follows.

A Court Gentleman named Yang Chengxin presented a mandate in the form of a portent saying that Wang Mang should establish a new mother of the people. He added, "The Yellow Emperor was able to achieve immortality by having 120 wives." Wang Mang thereupon sent forty-five Grand Masters of Palace Leisure and forty-five Receptionists to divide themselves over the empire and search widely in the villages for families of merit that had chaste maidens and submit their names to the palace.

Meanwhile the empire suffered outbreaks of famine, rebellion, and banditry, in great part caused by a catastrophic change in the course of the Yellow River. When Wang heard that a member of the house of Han had declared himself emperor, he was terrified. "But he wanted to give an appearance of calm, so he dyed his beard and hair and enthroned an empress from among the chaste maidens drafted from the

empire.” He presented her family with lavish gifts, welcomed her into the palace, and carried out the marriage ceremony. Then, being the correct person that he was, he proceeded to model himself on the mythical Yellow Emperor and other ancient sage-rulers by taking 120 wives:

He installed Three Ladies, consisting of Harmonious Guest [*hepin* 和嬪], Beautiful Visitor [*meiyu* 美御], and Harmonious Woman [*heren* 和人], who were equal in rank to the Three Dukes. He had nine Guest Ladies [*pinren* 嬪人], who were equal in rank to Chamberlains, then twenty-seven Beautiful Ladies [*meiren* 美人], equal in rank to Grandees, and finally eighty-one Visiting Women [*yuren* 御人], equal in rank to Senior Servicemen. There were 120 altogether, each of whom wore seals hanging from her girdle and carried a bow case [an auspicious symbol for bearing sons]. . . .

When the various officials offered their congratulations, they said, “. . . The ideal of the empress and the way of motherhood are clearly fulfilled. . . . The multiple grains will be bountiful and the myriad crops will grow abundantly. Everyone will be joyous, the people will be generously blessed, and the world will be immensely fortunate!” Wang Mang spent every day in the Rear Palace with a Master of Esoteric Arts, Zhaojun, from Zhuo Commandery, and others, testing the magical arts and giving himself over to sensual pleasures [於後宮考驗方術, 縱淫樂焉].

The report of his sexual indulgence echoes the last days of other last rulers of kingdoms or dynasties throughout Chinese history. What the magical arts consisted of is not clear, but they may have included the art of the bedchamber, the use of aphrodisiacs, and sex tools, as well as ritual and occult practices.³⁵

Wang Mang's Last Days

A person's last days say a great deal about that person, especially if there is a crisis. With all the problems Wang Mang faced in his last years as emperor, he began to show signs of irrational fear. There was unrest in the form of the peasant rebellion of the Red Eyebrows, armies of bandits, and the rise of forces led by the house of the Han. There were ominous portents, such as a “blackness in the middle of the sun,” which

deeply disturbed him.³⁶ Then there was a comet, which his court astrologer and diviners interpreted to mean that the bandits would soon be defeated. Wang Mang “loved numerology involving lucky times and days.” When matters became grave, he would calm his fears by uttering incantations. At one point he appealed to heaven, asking why it gave him the mandate to rule but did not destroy his enemies? If he was wrong, he said, then heaven should destroy him. And “thereupon he struck his heart with his palm and wept loudly. When his breath was exhausted, he prostrated himself and knocked his head upon the ground.”³⁷

When attackers entered Chang’an and set fire to the palace, Wang Mang’s supporters defended themselves with their military might, while Wang Mang defended himself with magic. He put on purple garments, the imperial color corresponding to the polestar, where the heavenly ruler of the universe was believed to reside. He carried his imperial seals and “the dagger of the Lord of Yu” (*Yudi bishou* 虞帝匕首), that is, ancient emperor Shun. The dagger was an instrument he had ordered made that he used to symbolize divine power. An astrologer accompanied him carrying a divining board (called *shi* 栻), which was used to tell lucky and unlucky times. “Wang Mang turned his mat to face the direction in which the handle of the Big Dipper pointed and intoned [echoing a line from the *Analects*, 7.23]: ‘Heaven bestowed on me this virtue. What can the Han army do to me?’” A few days later Wang was carried to a part of the palace in which there was a tower surrounded by an artificial lake. He planned to rely on the magical effect of water to defend himself. He carried with him his book of “divine portents” (*fuming* 符命) and the “awesome ladles” (*weidou* 威斗), magical instruments he had ordered made several years before. They were supposed to work along with incantations to suppress enemy forces.³⁸ When the attackers arrived, a man said to have been a butcher killed him and someone else cut off his head, while yet others cut his body to pieces and divided it up. His head was delivered to the new Han emperor and exposed in the marketplace. There Ban Gu says that the commoners abused it and that someone even cut out its tongue and ate it.

NOTES

1. See *Shiji*, 8.342–43.
2. See *Shiji*, 56.2055. The first advisor was Chen Ping 陳平. Other comparisons of Liu Bang and Xiang Yu, however, describe Xiang Yu as “brazen and crafty” (慍悍猾賊) and prone to senseless rage, while Liu Bang is a “great man of inner strength” (大人長者). See *Shiji*, 8.356 and 358, and William Nienhauser, ed., *The Grand Scribe’s Records* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 2:30, 32. The classicist was Li Yiji 麗食其, *Shiji*, 97.2692–93. Liu Bang received the famous general Qing Bu in the same way, causing him such rage that he almost killed himself (*Shiji*, 91). Liu Bang forced another classicist, Shusun Tong 叔孫通, to stop wearing the classicist’s clothing (99.2721, 2724–25).
3. See *Shiji*, 55.2043.
4. The ideas in this paragraph (except about polygamy) are taken from Michael Loewe, “The Former Han Dynasty,” in *The Ch’in and Han Empires, 221 BC–220 AD*, edited by Denis Twitchett and Michael Loewe, vol. 1 of *The Cambridge History of China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 103–222, especially 104, 107, and 116.
5. *Shiji*, 55.2047.
6. For this information, see Hans Bielenstein, *The Bureaucracy of Han Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 125–27.
7. On the accessory clerks, see Charles O. Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1985), 524. The translated passage is from *Hanshu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 97.3935, also taking from Bielenstein, *Bureaucracy*, 73–74, and the Yan Shigu 顏師古 (581–645) commentary on the *Hanshu*, which was finished in 641 CE. I have kept Bielenstein’s translations of the titles in all cases except illustrious visage, utter beauty, glamorous beauty, good lady, respectful maid, joyous maid, and obedient maid, which I have approximated from the readings of the Yan Shigu commentary.
8. *Shiji*, 95.2659.
9. *Shiji*, 96.2677.
10. *Shiji*, 96.2682.
11. Sima Qian, trans. Burton Watson, *Records of the Grand Historian: Han Dynasty II* (Hong Kong and New York: Renditions, 1993), 419 (*Shiji*, 125.3191).
12. *Shiji*, 9.395–97, 405.
13. See *Shiji*, 9.412 and chapter 49.
14. *Shiji*, 49.1970–71.
15. *Shiji*, 49.1978; *Hanshu*, 97a.3950 and 3961.

16. See *Hanshu*, 97a.3950–55 and the translation of the poem in Stephen Owen, *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911* (New York: Norton, 1996), 215–18. The brother was Li Yannian 李延年.

17. See *Shiji*, 49.1984. The author of this excerpt is Chu Shaosun 褚少孫, a Han scholar who added occasional supplements to Sima Qian's records.

18. She was also known as Lady Gouyi 鉤弋. See *Shiji*, 49.1985–86 (the emperor glad at her death); and *Hanshu*, 97a.3956–3957 (“he is like me”). For the story of the hooked hand and the fragrance, see Liu Xiang, *Liexian zhuan* [Biography of immortals], chapter 43.

19. See *Hanshu*, 97a.3961–63 and Carney Fisher, *The Chosen One: Succession and Adoption in the Court of Ming Shizong* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1990), 7–14.

20. See *Hanshu*, 97a.3964–65, 3968–69.

21. See *Hanshu*, 97b.3974.

22. It is the same poem in which she wrote of surrounding herself with portraits of virtuous women. The translation is Watson's (with some modification), from Ban Gu, *Courtier and Commoner in Ancient China: Selections from the History of the Former Han by Pan Ku* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), 263–64. The account of Zhao Feiyan's slandering of Empress Xu and Lady Ban is in the biography of Lady Ban, which reports that in 18 BCE Zhao accused them of using sorcery to win favor and putting curses on other women. See *Hanshu*, 97b.3983–85 and 3988–89. For Confucius's disapproval of Lady Nanzi, see Olivia Millburn, “Gender, Sexuality, and Power in Early China,” *Nan Nü: Men, Women, and Gender in China* 12, no. 1 (2010): 1–29, 22–25.

23. See *Hanshu*, 97b.3993–94.

24. See Cheng Lin and Cheng Zhangshan, eds. and trans., *Xijing zaji quanyi* (Guiyang: Guizhou renmin chubanshe, 1993), 60–61, date of composition uncertain, but perhaps around 500.

25. See *Hanshu*, 97b.3995. The Ming novel tells of Feiyan's failed attempt to fake a pregnancy and get a baby from another woman and of Hede's murder of a palace woman's child.

26. See *Hanshu*, 93.3733, 3738.

27. See *Hanshu*, 98.4035–36.

28. See *Hanshu*, 98.4015–16.

29. For the seals (called *guoxi* 國璽), see *Hanshu*, 98.4032, and for Wang Mang's daughter, *Hanshu*, 97b.4010–11.

30. On portents, see Homer H. Dubs, *The History of the Former Han Dynasty* (Baltimore, MD: Waverly Press, Inc., 1955), 3:349–51, and the footnote-essay 26.4. His line of descent is found in Wang Zhengjun's biography in the *History of the Former Han*.

31. The translations are by Dubs, with minor modifications, *The History of the Former Han Dynasty*, 3:272–73. See *Hanshu*, 99.4104.

32. Hans Bielenstein takes this position, considering Ban Gu's account severely biased, in his "Wang Mang, the Restoration of the Han Dynasty, and Later Han," in *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 1, edited by Denis Twitchett and Michael Loewe, 223–90. Rudi Thomsen's *Ambition and Confucianism* (Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 1988), discusses pro and con views about Wang Mang (9–17), Wang's finesse at appearing to give in to the will of others, especially in the form of first declining a request as a way of appearing to be pressed by others to accept it (57), and his use of portents (82–83 and 96–101).

33. On his height, see Cao Xiangcheng's annotated translation of Wang Mang's *Hanshu* biography in *Wang Mang* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), 129. See *Hanshu*, 99.4124 and Dubs, *The History of the Former Han Dynasty*, 312–13, from which I have borrowed in translating this passage.

34. On being courteous, see *Hanshu*, 99.4039 and Dubs, *The History of the Former Han Dynasty*, 125; on hiding his desires, 99.4040–41 and Dubs, 128; only one consort, 99.4054 and Dubs, 163; and marrying his daughter, 99.4051–52.

35. On his wife losing sight, see *Hanshu*, 99.4165; on the female attendants, 99.4166; on the 121 wives, 99.4168–69 and 4180.

36. See *Hanshu*, 99.4158. For speculation about the black spot, see Dubs, *The History of the Former Han Dynasty*, 387–88, note 6.7.

37. On the comet, see *Hanshu*, 99.4179; numerology, 99.4186; and prostrating himself, 99.4188, using Dubs, *The History of the Former Han Dynasty*, 458, removing his brackets.

38. See *Hanshu*, 99.4190–91. I am following Dubs, *The History of the Former Han Dynasty*, 372–73, and footnote 2.4. For the passage recounting when these objects were made, see *Hanshu*, 99.4151, from the year 17 CE. The ladles were about two feet long, made of five colors of minerals plus copper, cast in the shape of the Big Dipper, and carried on the shoulders of attendants.

3

THE LATER HAN TO THE END OF THE WESTERN JIN, 25–317

EMPRESSES IN CHARGE OF GOVERNMENT IN THE LATER HAN

The restoration of the Han dynasty occurred after a long civil war, whose victor was a member of the Liu clan, Liu Xiu 劉秀 (5–57 CE). He became Emperor Guangwu 光武 (reigned 25–57 CE), who presided over the construction of a new capital in Loyang and a major reorganization of Han bureaucracy. The dynasty lasted for almost two more centuries, becoming one of the longest in Chinese history. Empresses, consorts, and eunuchs all played central roles in imperial politics, leading later historians to ascribe the dynasty's fall to their influence. Most of the empresses came from clans that became newly powerful with the rise of Guangwu. Because he relied on those clans for support, imperial marriage with their women was a serious political affair and remained so for the rest of the dynasty. There were three main power groups: the Ma and Dou clans of the north and the clans from Nanyang, Guangwu's place of origin. Balancing the interests of these and a few other clans led to struggles over who would be empress, whose son would be heir apparent, and whether the members of a clan would be rewarded or punished. Execution and exile were common treatments for the losers, though exoneration could occur within a few years. Basing the choice of empresses on political considerations may have resulted in emperors limiting their sex with them. Although facts

about sexual lives are difficult to know, of six emperors from Emperor Ming to Emperor Huan, none had sons by their empresses, while five of the six had sons with other women. During the Later Han eunuchs began to play a major role, especially by the end of the first century CE. In two cases emperors rid themselves of the relatives of empresses with eunuch help. Eunuchs also gained new privileges. They were allowed to found families through adoption and could pass wealth and noble status to their adopted sons, thus consolidating themselves in ways that were unavailable before.

The *History of the Later Han* (*Hou Hanshu* 後漢書) was compiled by Fan Ye 范曄 (398–445), who lived long after the dynasty's fall. In general he was bound to be biased against rule by women and eunuchs. In his two chapters about empresses and consorts he tended to minimize reference to clan factionalism and instead to explain marital events in terms of personal issues. In other words, he reported the divorce of an empress as due to her jealousy or use of sorcery, whereas the real reason may have been that she belonged to a losing clan. I will let the *History of the Later Han* tell the main story and add interpretations about clan politics based on modern scholarship. Fan Ye begins his two chapters with a brief review of the ranking system of earlier rulers. Emperor Guangwu is noted for his return to simplicity in the form of fewer ranks and lower rates of compensation for the women. The empress and honorable ladies (*guiren* 貴人) were at the top, followed by beautiful ladies (*meiren* 美人), palace ladies (*gongren* 宮人), and chosen ladies (*cainü* 采女). There were no more feudal titles or salaries except for occasional gifts. Fan Ye also notes the policy by which the palace sent agents in the eighth lunar month of each year to pick virtuous and good-looking “virgins from good commoner families” (*liangjia tongnü* 良家童女) between the ages of thirteen and twenty. Still, he says, the dynasty ultimately failed to stem the interference of imperial women, particularly those who relied on the help of their fathers and brothers to enthrone a young new emperor when the previous emperor died. He was referring to the fact that, like eunuchs, women generally ruled when male leaders were young and inexperienced and even deliberately chose young and inexperienced males in order to rule more powerfully for a longer time. Such criticisms do not hide the fact that some of the empresses were capable leaders who mastered the art of imperial politics, for which the historians sometimes in fact praised

them. Four empresses in particular were powerful during the Later Han: empresses Dou, Deng, Yan, and Liang, all except Yan from major clans.¹

Changing Empresses to Please His Supporters

Emperor Guangwu had two empresses, Guo Shengtong 郭聖通 and Yin Lihua 陰麗華, who came from two major clans. He first enthroned Guo, then yielded to pressure to depose her in favor of Yin, but never completely abandoned Guo. He had married Yin Lihua, who was from a Nanyang family, before becoming emperor. A year later he married Guo Shengtong, who was from a powerful northern clan. When he became emperor he preferred Yin as empress, but Guo had already borne him a son and Yin insisted on yielding to her because of that. Guo became empress, her son became heir apparent, and Yin became honorable lady. Several years later, however, in 41, the emperor deposed Empress Guo, complaining that she “lacked the queenly virtue of the Guanju poem” and comparing her to empresses Lü and Huo of the Former Han. Going behind the scenes of the account in the *History of the Later Han*, we can interpret these events as follows: In enthroning Guo he was satisfying northerners, whose support he needed during the civil war. Divorcing and replacing her with Yin was due to the fact that in later years he had less need for northern support, while his Nanyang backers pressured him to install both an empress and heir apparent from there. He was reluctant to depose Empress Guo but finally yielded to the pressure, citing the *Classic of Poetry* to justify himself, even though Empress Guo could hardly have been much like Empress Lü. Each woman bore him five sons. Two years after the deposing of Empress Guo, her son the heir apparent offered to yield his position, says Fan Ye. Such a move must have been surrounded by intense politics. The emperor accepted the offer and installed his first son by Empress Yin. Perhaps by way of affirming the emperor’s actions, Fan Ye idealized Empress Yin. She was frugal and unostentatious, he reported, engaged in a minimum of pleasure and entertainment, and shunned laughing and joking. She was humane and filial and considerate of those in need. But the emperor never withdrew his respect from the Guo family, the historian continued, especially the former empress’s brother. The deposed empress never suffered harm, living until 52 CE.²

Empress Ma 馬 was the wife of the next ruler, Emperor Ming 明 (reigned 58–75), the son of Empress Yin. Ma's biography awards her the most exalted qualities of a good empress: lack of jealousy, refinement in learning, and restraint in granting privilege to members of her family. She rose from humble origins because, though the Ma clan was one of the most powerful, it suffered a setback when men of the Liang and Dou clans slandered her father. Orphaned at age ten, she entered the lateral courts of the heir apparent at age thirteen after a family member pleaded on her behalf. Getting such a daughter drafted into the imperial harem would improve the family fortune. She failed to have a son, however, and had to adopt one from a cousin in the harem from a Nanyang family. Upon recommendation by Empress Dowager Yin, Lady Ma was installed as empress in 60, two years after the emperor assumed the throne. She was well read in classical texts like the *Book of Changes*, the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, and the *Lyrics of Chu*, says the historian, and was known for gravity and temperance. A star example of her virtue was her worry that “the emperor failed to seek offspring from a wide range of women. She would therefore recommend and present women from among those in her company” (后常以皇嗣未廣，每懷憂歎，薦達左右). While the emperor was alive, she rewarded the women of the harem who gained his favor, and after he died and the honorable ladies were vacated to another palace, she expressed sadness at their departure and rewarded them once again. She couldn't be a better example of queenly virtue as expressed in the *Mao Commentary*.³

The Conniving Empress Dou and the Brilliant Deng Sui

The politics of the next ruler's harem involved three pairs of sisters (the Dous, Songs, and Liangs) and the return to power of the Dou 竇 clan, which had suffered because of the rise of Empress Ma. From the Dous emerged the first of a series of empresses who took control of government because of the death of their husbands and the extreme youth of the successors. The women usually ruled with the help of a father or brothers. Emperor Zhang 章, the adopted son of Empress Ma, reigned from 75 to 88. The Dou sisters were great-granddaughters of a major member of the Dou clan during Emperor Guangwu's time and entered Emperor Zhang's palace in 77. The elder sister became empress in 78.

Meanwhile, Empress Dowager Ma introduced to the harem the two Song 宋 sisters, her second cousins, the elder of whom bore a son. Since Empress Dou had no son, Honorable Lady Song's son was selected as heir apparent in 79. But when Empress Dowager Ma died later the same year, Empress Dou slandered the Song sisters, who committed suicide, and had the heir apparent replaced by the son of another consort, Honorable Lady Liang 梁, who had entered the harem with her sister in 77 (the Liangs were a northwestern clan that had supported the Dous during the civil war). Empress Dou plotted against the Liang sisters as well, both of whom "died of worry" (*yi you zu* 以憂卒) in 83, the historian's way of saying that they likely committed suicide. Now the empress had no more rivals and was favored more than ever by the emperor, says Fan Ye. When the emperor died in 88, Empress Dou's chosen heir took the throne at age nine. This heir was Emperor He 和 (reigned 88–106), on whose behalf Dou ruled as dowager with the help of her brothers, one of whom served as regent. The young emperor finally rid himself of them in 92 by executing the brothers and many of their supporters, including the historian Ban Gu, author of the *History of the Former Han*. But he went against the wishes of others and refused to harm or demote Dowager Dou, who lived until 97 CE.⁴

The second in the series of powerful Later Han women was Deng Sui 鄧綏 (81–121), one of the most capable women in the Later Han. She was the granddaughter of one of Emperor Guangwu's main followers and was Emperor He's second empress. His first empress was a great-grandniece of the earlier Empress Yin, also named Yin, and was intelligent and well versed in books and the arts, says Fan Ye. But she lost favor when the emperor began consorting with Deng Sui. The historian praises Deng Sui as a brilliant woman who was adept at palace politics. She could read at six and knew the *Classic of Poetry* and the *Analects* at twelve. Her being so studious upset her mother, so Deng Sui began doing women's work in the day and reading and reciting at night. Her father died in 92, just as she was about to enter the palace as a lady in waiting. She wept for days and nights and refrained from salted food for three years (the prescribed term of mourning for a father). She looked so haggard that her family could hardly recognize her. She finally entered the palace in 95 and was noted for her striking beauty. Becoming honorable lady the next year at age sixteen, she was respectful, correct, and cautious. She dressed plainly, avoiding all frills and being

sure not to outdo Empress Yin in any way. “If by chance her clothing was the same color as Empress Yin’s, she changed immediately.” Because the emperor kept losing sons and she herself had none, Deng Sui “often selected and presented talented ladies to attract his interest” (數選進才人, 以博帝意). Such was the list of her qualities. But Empress Yin began to hate her. Once when the emperor was ill, Empress Yin told him that she wished Deng were dead. Deng heard this, wept, and insisted that she had never intended to harm the empress. She was on the verge of poisoning herself to avoid Empress Yin’s wrath, but others managed to stop her. Empress Yin was finally deposed and moved to another palace, where she “died of worry.” Members of her clan were executed or exiled. Deng Sui tried but failed to reverse the edict to depose the empress and, after becoming regent in the next reign, succeeded in rehabilitating the Yins.

Deng Sui was also distinguished because of the company she kept with one of the most famous female intellectuals of Chinese history, Ban Zhao 班昭 (45–116), sister of the historian Ban Gu. The emperor invited her to the palace to finish writing the *History of the Former Han* after her brother’s death. She also served as court poet and instructor, becoming tutor and advisor to Deng Sui. She was author of *Precepts for My Daughter*, one of the main texts of women’s moral education, and was an exemplar of the type of female intellectual who served in imperial courts throughout Chinese history.

Deng Sui’s eventual rise to power occurred because Emperor He died in 106 without designating either of his two sons as heir apparent. It was left to Empress Deng to decide. She became regent and chose the baby son, who died later the same year (the other son was sickly). Next she chose the twelve-year-old son of Emperor Zhang’s deposed heir apparent, thus Emperor An 安 (reigned 106–125), who was the grandson of Emperor Zhang and the unfortunate elder Song sister. Dowager Deng ruled for a decade and a half until she died in 121. Like other regents, she perhaps chose young boys in order to prolong her rule and refused to hand power to Emperor An even when he was old enough. With an older boy, she would have had to exert more pressure to stay in power. Fan Ye describes her in glowing terms. She was frugal and hated corruption, even among her family members. Whenever she heard there was a famine, “she lost sleep for whole nights” and organized relief efforts. As a result, “peace was restored and bountiful har-

vests renewed.” Nevertheless, many people opposed her regency, which she extended beyond the usual bounds. One man, Du Gen 杜根, was sentenced to death for petitioning her to relinquish power. He managed to escape, was exonerated after she died, and became famous for ages because of his daring and his escape. With Deng Sui gone, her clan fell swiftly.⁵

Empress Liang Na, Who Gave Wise Advice about Avoiding Harem Intrigue

After Empresses Dou and Deng Sui, the third powerful dowager was Liang Na 梁嬪 (116–150), the empress to Emperor Shun 順 (reigned 125–144). She provides another example of how the prescriptive ideals of queenly virtue organized the ancient description of palace life. The enthronement of her husband was the result of a coup engineered by eunuchs after the death in 125 of Emperor An, the ruler Deng Sui had selected (the coup was against his wife, Empress Yan Ji 閔姬, who had tried to take control of government). Liang Na was a member of the same powerful clan as the Liang sisters against whom Empress Dou plotted in 83. Intelligent and expert in the *Classic of Poetry* and the *Analects*, she liked to have portraits of exemplary women placed in her midst, recalling Lady Ban of Emperor Cheng’s time. When she entered the lateral courts in 128 at age thirteen, a fortune-teller noted her extraordinary looks, after which the grand astrologer performed a divination from the *Book of Changes*. The results were auspicious, so she was made an honorable lady. When introduced to the emperor, as the historian writes, she “calmly and deferentially addressed him and said,”

“Yang is virtuous by being generous in its favors to all. Yin practices fairness by not grabbing favor to itself. To have plentiful offspring, as says the poem ‘Locusts’ Wings,’ is the source of good fortune. I pray that Your Majesty be mindful of letting the rain fall evenly everywhere and be observant of order and sequence among the bevy of palace ladies, so that I your humble servant may avoid the fate of being slandered by others.” The emperor’s regard for her increased after this. [從容辭於帝曰：“夫陽以博施為德，陰以不專為義，螽斯則百，福之所由興也。願陛下思雲雨之均澤，識貫魚之次序，使小妾得免罪謗之累。”由是帝加敬焉].

Her words are worth examining because of her use of key allusions. “Locusts’ Wings” refers to the poem in the *Classic of Poetry*, discussed above, which begins: “The locusts’ wings say ‘throng, throng’ / Well may your sons and grandsons / Be a host innumerable.” As every educated person knew, the poem was about the queen’s lack of jealousy, which supposedly led to a “multitude of sons and grandsons.” The words “among the bevy of palace ladies” are a translation of *guanyu* 貫魚, from the *Book of Changes*, which literally means “a string of fish tied together at their heads” and which symbolizes the notion of palace women receiving equal favor, as if strung on the same string. The rest of the line in the *Book of Changes* goes “a string of fish tied together at their heads, the palace women win favor, and there is no one who is not benefited” (貫魚, 以宮人寵, 無不利).⁶

Liang was declared empress in 132, soon after which her husband, Emperor Shun, appointed as regent first her father, then her brother, who soon became the dominant force in palace politics. When the emperor died in 144, she became dowager and her brother continued as regent. Since she had no son, they chose an infant son of a consort as successor, but he died in 145, after which the brother persuaded his sister to select a seven-year-old great-great-grandson of Emperor Zhang. That boy died in 146 (Emperor Zhi 質), some say poisoned by the brother, after which the Liangs enthroned the fourteen-year-old Emperor Huan 桓 (reigned 146–168), a great-grandson of Emperor Zhang. Dowager Liang’s brother continued to rule for over a decade until overthrown in 159 by Emperor Huan, again with the help of eunuchs. Dowager Liang’s biography describes her as a good ruler who resolved numerous problems and maintained peace over the empire, but who succumbed to the influence of her brother and others of his entourage, including eunuchs. “Because of this people in the empire lost hope.” She handed the reins of government to Emperor Huan in 150, retired, and died the same year at age forty-five, having reigned for nineteen years.⁷

Emperor Huan’s Three Empresses and Thousands of Palace Women

At the time of Emperor Huan, the Han still had more than half a century to live, but its decline was in process, as historians saw in terms

of indulgence in two things, women and eunuchs. Besides his thousands of palace women, Emperor Huan had a series of three empresses, none of whom had sons and each of whom defied the model of queenly virtue. They provide three vignettes, first of Empress Liang Nüying 梁女瑩, who liked luxury. She was the younger sister of Emperor Shun's Empress Liang. While her sister was in power, she commanded the exclusive attention of the emperor, allowing him no other women. Her living quarters, clothing, and jewelry were more sumptuous than those of all previous empresses of the Han, says Fan Ye. Her influence declined after her sister died but, having no sons, she was jealous of all other women. Of those who became pregnant, "few came to term." Emperor Huan feared her brother, but saw her rarely. She "died of worry and anger" in 159, one month after which the emperor toppled her brother and destroyed the Liang faction.

Then there was Empress Deng Mengnü 鄧猛女 (whose name means "fierce woman"), who was deposed because of jealousy. She was a distant cousin of Empress Deng Sui. Emperor Huan elevated her to empress in 159 after the fall of the Liang family and at first favored her. But he had "many inner favorites and gathered a large bevy of palace women, who numbered up to five or six thousand" (帝多內幸, 博採宮女至五六千人). Proud and jealous, the empress once engaged in a battle of accusations with one of his favorites, after which she was deposed and in 165 "died of worry." Her clan immediately fell from power.

Finally there was Empress Dou Miao 竇妙, who almost took power in the same way as Deng Sui and Liang Na, but was overthrown by eunuchs. Her father was a classicist and low-level official who was a direct descendant of the powerful Dous of Emperor Guangwu's time. After deposing Deng Mengnü, Emperor Huan tried to promote Chosen Lady Tian Sheng 田聖 as empress, but was pressured to select Dou Miao instead, who became empress in 165. "But her visitations with him were extremely rare." While he was ill and confined to bed, he had Tian Sheng and eight other palace women elevated to the rank of honorable lady. He died in 168 without an heir, after which Dou Miao, still a young woman around twenty, enthroned the twelve-year-old Emperor Ling 靈 (reigned 168–189), another great-great-grandson of Emperor Zhang, and appointed her father as regent. She had Tian Sheng killed and would have done so with the other women recently pro-

moted, but eunuchs from her domestic staff dissuaded her. Her end came when her father devised a grand scheme to rid the government of eunuchs. Dou Miao (now empress dowager) hesitated, the eunuchs discovered the plan, and they destroyed her father and other members of the Dou faction. She was moved to a separate palace, where she died in 172.⁸

To sum up, dowagers and their families controlled the palace between 88 and 92 under Empress Dou, between 106 and 121 under Empress Deng Sui, and between 144 and 159 under Empress Liang Na. Two other dowagers took power but were soon defeated, Yan Ji and Dou Miao. After Dou Miao, the Han had only a few years to survive. As for the power of eunuchs, the problem went back to Emperor Guangwu, who inadvertently set in motion a system of hierarchy that resulted in their gaining political influence. He favored a special group of them who began to act as the informal heads of all other eunuchs. Their power increased during later reigns, especially Emperor Shun's. He ennobled eighteen eunuchs to help him overthrow a powerful dowager and her clan. Ennoblement allowed their adopted sons to inherit their titles and fiefs. This was an unprecedented move. Emperor Huan relied on eunuchs to remove the Liang clan, while eunuchs during Emperor Ling's reign overcame the Dous. Once victorious, Emperor Ling's eunuchs began to control officialdom and keep the ruler under close watch. He gave them high positions in both civil and military bureaucracies and ennobled many of them and members of their families. Then he died, shortly after which came the massacre of over two thousand eunuchs in 189, when the Han dynasty was already beyond saving. Their rise to power during this age became a reference point for all future dynasties.

The Last Empresses of the Han

Last empresses sometimes filled the role of sacrificial victims, portrayed by ancient historians as pitiable emblems of dynastic failure. An earlier example was Wang Mang's daughter, who threw herself into the fire when her father's enemies invaded the palace. Emperor Ling's first empress came from the same clan as the Song sisters of Emperor Zhang, had no son, and was not favored. The emperor consorted with many palace women, among whom there was much discord, says the

history. A powerful eunuch had wronged the empress's aunt and, afraid she would seek revenge against him, falsely accused her of using black magic. The emperor believed the eunuch and deposed her, after which she took herself to the women's prison and in 178 "died of worry." Emperor Ling dreamed that an angry Emperor Huan accused him of wronging the empress, who had appealed her case to the Heavenly Emperor (*shangdi* 上帝), who was outraged. The supervisor of the palace guard told the emperor to rebury her in order "to rest her wronged soul," but the emperor died before he could do so.

Emperor Ling's second empress instead fit the image of the meddling woman who hastened the dynasty's fall. She was a butcher's daughter, the fierce and jealous Empress He 何. Her family bought her way into the lateral courts, where she bore a son, was elevated to honorable lady, and was greatly favored. She became empress in 180. But she "struck terror in the women of the Rear Palace." When one of the consorts became pregnant, she was so afraid of the empress that she took medicine to force an abortion. But the medicine failed and in 181 she gave birth to a son. Empress He had the woman poisoned, for which the emperor wanted to depose her, but eunuchs dissuaded him, and the emperor's mother raised the boy herself. When the emperor died in 189 without an heir, Empress He established her son as emperor, but both she and he were exterminated by a general who instead enthroned the son of the murdered consort, thus Emperor Xian 獻.⁹

The last two empresses of the Han were portrayed as innocent victims. One was removed from her position by the eventual victor of the wars that led to the downfall of the Han, General Cao Cao 曹操 (155–220), who put his daughter in her place. As the last emperor of the Han, Emperor Xian reigned from 189 to 220, but never held true power. By 196 he was under Cao Cao's control. When Cao Cao deposed Emperor Xian's empress in 214, she left the palace with hair disheveled, wept, and cried out to the emperor, "Are we ever going to live together again?" The emperor had no idea what fate held in store for them. She died in the women's prison and both her sons by the emperor were poisoned. Cao Cao had already presented three of his daughters to Emperor Xian as consorts, of whom the second became the Han dynasty's last empress in 215. Cao Cao died in 220 and was followed by his son, Cao Pi 曹丕 (187–226), who forced Emperor Xian to abdicate. When Cao Pi sent for the imperial seals, Empress Cao—recalling Great

Empress Dowager Wang at the end of the Former Han—refused to hand them over. And again like Dowager Wang, she finally surrendered them by throwing them on the floor. The Han dynasty thus came to a close after four hundred years of rule.¹⁰

THE THREE KINGDOMS, 220–280

The Han was followed in 220 by the period of the Three Kingdoms, which were Wei 魏 (220–265/66) in the north, Shu 蜀 (221–263) in the southwest, and Wu 吳 (229–280) in the southeast. In the fight for supremacy among the three, as just mentioned, the victor was Cao Cao of the Wei, which became the next dynasty after the Han. It was followed by the Jin, after which China split into a series of dynasties and states in the north and south for almost two centuries before reunification under the Sui in 589. The Wei leaders took conscious steps to address the problems of women and eunuchs that they saw as the major cause of Han failure. Before the first ruler assumed the throne, his court ruled that eunuchs be prohibited from the high posts they held in the Later Han. After he became emperor, an edict of 222 stated that “Women participating in government is the root of disorder,” using the words of the *Zuo Tradition*. Henceforth empresses, dowagers, and their families were prohibited from direct participation in government, and members of their families were no longer to be awarded noble rank. The dynasty was too short to judge how effective the policies were, but no empresses or dowagers were ever as powerful as the ones in the Later Han.¹¹

The material on the empresses and consorts of the rulers of Wei, Shu, and Wu is tucked away in the dynastic history of the period, Chen Shou’s 陳壽 (233–297) *Records of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo zhi* 三國志). Chen Shou’s style is sparse and reserved and by itself would yield scanty information if it weren’t for the additional material supplied by a 429 commentator named Pei Songzhi 裴松之 (372–451), who supplemented Chen’s work with other sources. The combination of Chen and Pei somewhat resembles the combination of readings from official and unofficial history, with Pei corresponding to unofficial history and its expanded and sometimes alternate versions of reality. In the case of wife theft that follows below, Chen’s version makes little sense without Pei’s. Chen Shou, on the other hand, can be relied upon to supply

moral observation, as he does at the beginning of the chapter on empresses and consorts, where he comments on the failings of the Han. “In its later years it suffered from extravagance, indulgence, and unbridled licentiousness, which led to the resentment of men and women deprived of a proper mate” (而末世奢縱，肆其侈欲，至使男女怨曠). The resentment (*yuan* 怨) he referred to derived from the thousands of palace women hoarded but ignored by rulers and denied as wives to unmarried men (*kuang* 曠). In other words, overindulgent polygamists deprived other men of wives, an idea that was reiterated throughout Chinese history.¹²

A Little Imperial Soap Opera: Cao Cao Divorces Lady Ding

To a great extent, *Women Shall Not Rule* is about the marriage deals, love affairs, and scandals of ancient emperors and their many wives. Because of its vivid portrayal of a scene of divorce, the following story has more of the ring of soap opera and its pathos than usually seen so far. Empress Bian was the wife of General Cao Cao and mother of the first Wei ruler, Emperor Wen 文, whose personal name was Cao Pi. She was originally a prostitute whom Cao Cao took as concubine when she was twenty. He liked women and taking a prostitute as concubine was not unusual for a prominent man like him. There is even a legend about a sunken boat that used to carry his royal courtesans and that haunted people afterwards. Cao Cao first married Lady Ding 丁, but set her aside to marry Bian, who gave birth to four sons, including Cao Pi, who had altogether twenty-one half brothers born of numerous other consorts. Bian was known for good conduct and thus won Cao Cao’s admiration. How the divorce with Lady Ding took place is missing in Chen Shou’s *Records*. Pei Songzhi supplies an account copied from a privately written history, the *Wei Briefs*, which like other sources below has been preserved only because Pei Songzhi copied it. Prior to the divorce, Lady Ding raised Cao Cao’s eldest son, Cao Ang 昂, whose mother, a consort, had died. Cao Ang died in battle after giving up his horse to Cao Cao, whose horse had been wounded. Lady Ding grieved over Cao Ang and lamented to Cao Cao:

“You have killed my son and yet you give him no more thought.” She wept uncontrollably. Cao Cao became angry and sent her home,

hoping she would have a change of heart. Later he went to see her when she happened to be sitting at the loom. The attendants announced that His Lordship had arrived, but the Lady stayed seated as before. Cao Cao went up and gently touched her shoulders, saying, “Look at me and let us ride back together.” But she would not turn around, nor would she answer him. As he was about to leave, he stood outside the doorway and spoke once more. “There is still time to change your mind.” But again she made no reply. “Then these are the last words between us,” he said, and he broke off with her.

Empress Bian, however, continued to communicate with Lady Ding, sending her gifts and seeing her privately. Ding wondered how Bian could be so kind to a “castoff” like herself. Bian became queen in 220, shortly after which Cao Cao died and their son Cao Pi became the first emperor of the Wei (Cao Cao was never emperor, so Bian was referred to as empress only posthumously). She became an empress dowager during Cao Pi’s reign and a great empress dowager under his successor, Emperor Ming, dying in 230. The *Wei Briefs* adds a further detail that belies Cao Cao’s coldness in the above passage. Once when severely ill he said, “In affairs of the heart I have never betrayed anyone’s trust” (我前後行意, 於心未曾有所負也). But, he added, if his son Cao Ang were to come back from the dead and ask him where his mother was, he did not know how he would respond. Cao Cao’s reference to “mother” seems to refer to Cao Ang’s adopted mother, Lady Ding, about whom the passage implies that Cao Cao felt remorse after all.¹³

Cao Pi Steals a Wife from an Enemy: The Story of Empress Zhen

Warring men often stole their enemy’s wives. Empress Zhen 甄 was Cao Pi’s wife and mother of his successor, Emperor Ming 明 (Cao Rui 曹叡, 205–239). As her biography reports, she had been a bright girl who at nine years old could “memorize a character as soon as she saw it.” Her brothers jokingly wondered if she intended to become “a female erudite” (*nüboshi* 女博士). Her story—especially her unfortunate demise—provides another example of how Pei Songzhi’s commentary adds extra layers to Chen Shou’s *Records*, at times providing vastly different versions of the same event. In Empress Zhen’s case, the key fact is that Cao Pi stole her to be his wife. There are three versions of

the incident. Chen Shou's is plain and reserved, with no reference to the theft. According to Pei Songzhi, this is how a proper history should treat ugly deeds committed within the imperial family. The other two versions give slightly different accounts of how the wife was stolen. Cao Cao had just battled Yuan Shao 袁紹, who had married the woman to his son. Note that the historian refers to the stolen wife as Empress Zhen even though she was named empress only after she died. The custom was to refer to people by their eventual highest rank even when treating earlier parts of their lives. The following is Chen Shou's version: "During the Jian'an period [196–220], Yuan Shao married Empress Zhen to his middle son Xi . While Xi was away governing the province of You, she stayed behind to care for her mother-in-law. After Ji Province was pacified, Cao Pi married her at Ye. She was a favorite, and gave birth to Emperor Ming and the Princess of Dongxiang." The information in this passage is so minimal that we can hardly catch the fact that Cao Pi married an enemy's wife. Pei Songzhi adds more details from the *Wei Briefs*, which report that Cao Pi was with the army that breached the walled city of Ye. He entered the enemy Yuan Shao's house and saw Yuan's wife with her daughter-in-law, the future Empress Zhen, who was terrified and hid her head in her mother-in-law's lap. Cao Pi demanded to see her face and, when he saw how beautiful she was, praised her to Cao Cao, who had her taken and married to Cao Pi.

Another source, called *Accounts of the Times in the Wei and Jin*, goes into further detail, sounding realistic in the way we saw in the account of Cao Cao's divorce from Lady Ding. Cao Pi was the first to enter the house in which the future empress lived: "There was a woman with hair askew and her face covered in dirt. She stood weeping behind Yuan Shao's wife Liu. When Cao Pi asked who she was, the mother-in-law answered that she was Xi's wife. The woman gathered up her hair and wiped her face with a kerchief. She was stunningly beautiful. After Cao Pi left, Liu told the future empress that she need no longer fear for her life. With that, she was taken to be married and was greatly favored." How Empress Zhen experienced the event is unknown, but she was praised as a model of virtuous conduct. She practiced humility and self-deprecation. "She advised and encouraged women of the Rear Palace who were favored; and tutored and consoled those who were not." She encouraged Cao Pi to "seek widely for chaste beauties so that he

might increase his chances of progeny.” She once defended a woman he thought ill tempered and uncooperative, though he sent her away anyway. She cared for her mother-in-law, Dowager Bian, when she was ill. Nevertheless, she fell from favor after Cao Pi became emperor in 220 and began to see other women. “Empress Zhen, having grown unhappy, expressed her resentment. The emperor was enraged and in the sixth month of 221 sent an envoy permitting her to commit suicide. She was buried in Ye.”¹⁴

The story of her demise and death had an aftermath that continued in the biography of Cao Pi’s next main wife, Empress Guo 郭, who was eventually hounded to death because of the death of Empress Zhen. Empress Guo had been a smart strategist behind the scenes even before Cao Pi was designated heir apparent. As Chen Shou writes, “The death of Empress Zhen was due to the fact that the emperor doted upon Empress Guo,” where “doted upon” is a translation of *chong* (寵), a word that historians commonly used in such situations. When Cao Pi wanted to replace Zhen with Guo, he received a memorial criticizing his decision and citing ancient texts, including the famous oath that Duke Huan of Qi once swore, “Do not make a concubine your wife.” Cao Pi ignored the advice and named Guo as empress. But Guo displayed the same virtuous behavior as Empress Zhen. She insisted that she lacked the integrity of the ancient Emperor Shun’s two wives, who in marrying Shun willingly married below their social station. Likewise, she had no hope of emulating Jiang and Ren, the two virtuous matriarchs of the Zhou dynasty. If there were lapses on the part of palace women, she would cover them up or defend their behavior to the emperor.

The repercussions of Guo’s promotion to empress finally struck during the reign of the next ruler, Emperor Ming, who was deeply upset when he found out about the death of his mother, Empress Zhen. He blamed Empress Guo, who could not stand the accusation and died. According to the *Wei Briefs*, Emperor Ming found out about Zhen’s death from the consort in whose care Empress Zhen had placed him before her death. The consort told him that Empress Zhen had been slandered and improperly buried, with “disheveled hair covering her face.” Another of Pei Songzhi’s sources adds two more details: that “her mouth was stuffed with chaff” and that Emperor Ming was so angry with Empress Guo that he “hounded her to death.” A few centuries

later a completely different version of events emerged in a legend about a supposed love affair between Empress Zhen and Cao Pi's younger brother, Cao Zhi (曹植, 192–232). Empress Zhen died not from suicide but because Empress Guo murdered her, it was said. The legend, which was probably false, derived from a reading of a famous poem by Cao Zhi, "Rhapsody on the Goddess of the Luo," which was said to be his reaction to seeing Zhen's ghost.¹⁵

The Wei ended with Emperor Ming leaving no sons, even though he had a large harem. As the historian put it, he built many palaces, strained the people's labor, and recruited women to fill his rear palace, but his sons died one after the other. Like his father he preferred another woman to his empress, whom he "allowed to commit suicide" because of her display of jealousy. As the story went, he excluded her from a feast that he held with his new favorite and other ladies, which he tried to keep secret from the empress. The next day she asked if he had a good time at the feast. Besides having her commit suicide, he had more than ten people killed for leaking the information. In short, as the historian implied, the emperor failed to produce a successor because he failed to follow the rules of polygamy.¹⁶

Liu Bei, Struck by Her Piercing Coldness

Although the Shu and Wu kingdoms were not considered legitimate successors of the Han, they functioned like dynasties, and the historians recorded their marital affairs as they did those of other rulers. Like the other short-lived regimes that divided China until the sixth century, the irregularities of their polygamous households provided historians with rich story matter. Liu Bei 劉備 (161–223) was a descendant of the house of Han and became the first ruler of the kingdom of Shu. He and his son selected wives from families of immediate supporters. In one case, however, about a decade before establishing the kingdom of Shu, Liu Bei married the younger sister of Sun Quan, the future ruler of the kingdom of Wu. It was a marriage intended to seal a major military and political alliance, but Liu and Sun soon became enemies. The wife, known as Lady Sun 孫, was much younger than Liu Bei and was said to equal her brothers in courage and ability. Wherever she went, she had herself accompanied by over one hundred female servants armed with knives. "Whenever Liu Bei entered her chambers, he was struck by her

piercing coldness” (衷心常凜凜). Liu Bei’s chief strategist, the famous Zhu Geliang 諸葛亮 (181–234), distrusted her. They were married for two years when in 211 they broke off and she tried but failed to take the heir apparent back with her to Wu (the heir was not her son). Fictional versions of their marriage make more of her. In the Ming novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, at the beginning of their marriage she helps Liu Bei escape a dangerous trap set by an enemy and at the end drowns herself when she believes he is dead. In the 2008 movie, *Red Cliff*, she disguises herself as a man and infiltrates Cao Cao’s army on behalf of Sun and Liu, who are still allies at the time. As for Liu Bei’s heir and next emperor, Liu Shan 劉禪 (207–271), he was more interested in building a harem than his father was. After Liu Bei’s death in 223, Liu Shan ignored the admonishments of his palace attendants, who told him that ancient emperors had no more than twelve wives. He already had that many. Of his many wives, two were daughters of one of Liu Bei’s closest brothers-in-arms, Zhang Fei 張飛 (?–221). Comrades in arms often exchanged offspring in marriage. The elder sister became empress in 223 and died in 237, when she was followed by her younger sister. The Shu kingdom ended before Liu Shan’s heir could assume the throne.¹⁷

Sun Quan, Who Couldn’t Settle on an Empress

Sun Quan 孫權 (182–252) ruled Wu in southeast China during the wars of the Three Kingdoms and was emperor between 222 and 252. He was powerful as a military man and dynastic founder, but was not a well-disciplined polygamist. He favored one woman after another in a way that, in Chen Shou’s terms, failed to make the critical distinction between primary and secondary wives. In the following series of vignettes, each wife captures in miniature an emblematic quality of palace marital politics. A mother supports one candidate and ministers another, while Sun Quan exercises personal preference, and in the meantime the women have agendas of their own.

First there was Lady Xie 謝, who was from a worthy family. She was chosen by Sun Quan’s mother, who was a shrewd and powerful figure until her death, and who during Sun’s youth advised Wu leaders on many critical occasions. Sun favored Lady Xie for a while, but then liked

Lady Xu 徐 and wanted to place her above Lady Xie. Xie was unwilling to let this happen, lost her case, and died soon after.

Lady Xu was Sun's second cousin and was from a military family. A note on their intimate blood ties: her grandfather and his father were close friends; his father married his younger sister to her grandfather; Lady Xu was the child of that marriage. She was a widow when Sun Quan took her into his harem, but lost favor because she was jealous, says the history. Later his ministers wanted her appointed as empress, but by then he already favored Lady Bu 步.

Lady Bu won Sun's attention because of her great beauty. "He cherished her above everyone else in the Rear Palace," says the historian. She gave birth to two daughters, nicknamed Big Tiger and Little Tiger. "By nature she was unjealous and promoted many ladies to the ruler's bed. As a result, she was long the object of his loving treatment." He wanted to elevate her to empress, but because his ministers preferred Lady Xu, he was never able to do so, and Lady Bu died.

There was also Lady Wang 王, the mother of Sun Quan's second heir apparent, Sun He 孫和. Sun Quan was going to make her empress, but Big Tiger had long hated her and destroyed her with slander. Once when Sun Quan was ill in bed, Big Tiger said that Lady Wang was happy that he was ill. He was enraged, and she "died of worry."

He finally enthroned Lady Pan 潘 as empress, choosing her for her beauty. She and her sister had originally been sent to the weaving room as slaves because their father had been convicted of a crime and sentenced to death. Sun saw Lady Pan one day and summoned her to the rear palace, where she became pregnant and gave birth to Sun Liang 亮, who replaced Sun He as heir apparent. She was made empress in 251. According to Chen Shou, Lady Pan was "viciously jealous of other beauties and charmers," slandering one woman after another. Then she did something that brought a violent end to her life. While Sun Quan was ill, she made inquiries about how Empress Lü took power after Liu Bang died. Not long after, she fell ill while taking care of the emperor, and a group of courtiers strangled her in her sleep. A very different story about her emerges in the Jin dynasty, which said that she was so beautiful that other women in the weaving room referred to her as a "goddess." "They respected her and kept their distance" (*jing er yuan zhi* 敬而遠之)—this uses the same words that appeared in the *Analec* to refer to Confucius's attitude toward gods and the supernatural. Sun

Quan heard of her, asked to see her portrait, then had her moved to the rear palace. Although they enjoyed each other's company, she always insisted that, "Happiness was bound to be followed by sorrow." Indeed, years later her enemies slandered her and she lost favor and was sent away. Neither Chen Shou nor Pei Songzhi refers to this story.¹⁸

Clubbing Her to Death, Then Missing Her

There were other rulers and wives in the Wu, but none with as gruesome a story as Sun Hao 孫皓 (242–284), the fourth and last emperor, who reigned from 264 to 280, when the Jin dynasty finally defeated him. He fulfilled the definition of the bad last ruler: "He was crude, violent, arrogant, and full of himself, driven by fear and superstition, and he was a drinker and womanizer" (麤暴驕盈, 多忌諱, 好酒色). He wanted to depose his empress, who had no children. But Sun Hao's mother defended her, while an astrologer told him that the empress could not be deposed. So the emperor kept her, but he acted cruelly and bizarrely with another consort. In an account cited by Pei Songzhi, Sun Hao favored the daughter of a man who was once his ally but whom he later executed. One day he asked the daughter what happened to her father. She was defiant in her reply: "He was killed by a bandit." This so enraged Sun Hao that he clubbed her to death. Later he missed her and had artisans carve her likeness so that he could keep it at his side. Then he learned that the woman had a sister who was married, but he summoned her nevertheless and favored her extravagantly, to the extent that he "ignored governmental duties" and wasted palace resources. When she died, he grieved deeply, gave her a lavish funeral, and refused to leave the inner apartments for months.

In his final word on Sun Hao, Chen Shou reports a grave impropriety among Sun's consorts: "Many were Hao's favored consorts who wore the seals and ribbons [*xifu* 璽紵] of an empress." Chen cites a classic theme from the *Book of Changes* that he had already cited at the beginning of his account of empresses and consorts of the Wei. "If the family is in order, the world will be at peace" (正家而天下定). Sun Quan was a brilliant hero, Chen Shou continues, but he "did not distinguish between main wife and concubines" (*di shu bufen* 嫡庶不分). Thus the chaos in the women's apartments of Wu "made them a laughingstock of history."¹⁹

THE JIN DYNASTY, 265–317

Both the Wei and Wu dynasties eventually fell to the Jin 晉, which unified north and south once again, but only lasted until 317. It was called the Western Jin to distinguish it from the smaller Eastern Jin that ruled in the south after the Jin fell. Two stories of imperial excess stand out and mark the beginning of the messy period that followed the fall of the Han and Three Kingdoms: one of an emperor with ten thousand consorts and the other of a woman ruler who, it was said, smuggled men into the palace for sex. There was also the father who assigned one of his consorts to initiate his heir apparent in sex and the empress who was glad to be captured by her more virile enemy. Other characters included an imperial mother eulogized for her frugality and an ugly but brilliant consort remembered for ages for her poetry. The source of these accounts is the *Jin History* (*Jinshu* 晉書), which was compiled centuries later in the Tang dynasty and was early on criticized for failing to uphold the standards set by earlier histories. It lacked objectivity and failed to use sources correctly.²⁰ Compared to Chen Shou's *Records of the Three Kingdoms*, the *Jin History* included the kind of undignified detail that Chen Shou left out, but that Pei Songzhi reincluded.

The Goats Choose His Women for Him

The Jin was ruled by the Sima 司馬 family, a long-established clan that had been powerful during the Wei. The emperor with ten thousand women was the first ruler, Sima Yan 司馬炎 (236–290), who reigned as Emperor Wu 武 from 265 to 290. His daughter-in-law, Jia Nanfeng 賈南風, was the other main character of the Jin, and was said to have men secretly delivered to her in the palace. Emperor Wu was a prolific polygamist, with twenty-five sons and eleven daughters. His entourage included several virtuous and exemplary women, beginning with his mother, Wang Yuanji 王元姬, a revered exemplar among imperial women in Chinese history. A mother of six, she was known for her insistence on frugality even though she lived in the royal palace. As her biography reports, at eight she was fluent in the *Classic of Poetry* and the *Analects*, while at nine she took diligent care of her sick mother. When her son assumed the throne, she became empress dowager and was a wise administrator of the inner quarters. Yet she remained loyal to

her old values and still practiced weaving at the loom, ate plain food out of plain utensils, and wore “much-laundered clothing” (*huanzhuo zhi yi* 浣濯之衣), that is, she wore clothes many years before discarding them. Wearing much-laundered clothes when one could easily discard them for new ones became a model trait for imperial women for ages to come.

Besides Emperor Wu’s mother, there was also Empress Yang Yan 楊艷 (238–274), his first wife, whom he greatly prized. Their heir apparent was Sima Zhong 衷, whom the emperor thought mentally unfit to rule, but whom Empress Yang insisted on promoting. She played a classic role in the emperor’s selection of consorts, for whom he initiated an empire-wide selection in 273. Since women who became imperial consorts were likely never to see their families again, people were known to react to such announcements by hurriedly marrying off daughters to avoid selection. The emperor therefore issued an advance decree prohibiting marriage throughout the empire while the recruitment took place. He followed the decree with two exemplary acts of polygamous propriety. First, he proclaimed that he would never enthrone a concubine as empress and, second, that he would submit all choices to Empress Yang, who reportedly selected tall and fair-skinned women and weeded out the exceptionally beautiful ones. In spite of his decree, it was said that many families still avoided selection by disguising their daughters to look lowly and ugly.

One of the most famous of Emperor Wu’s wives was the talented Lady Zuo Fen 左芬, the younger sister of the poet Zuo Si 左思 (ca. 255–ca. 306). As noted previously, the lateral courts held the greatest concentration of learned women in China. Emperors liked to have such women in their harems, and Emperor Wu was no exception. He sought Zuo Fen because she was known for her talents as a scholar and writer and in 272 appointed her lady of cultivated deportment, one of the nine lady guests, the second-highest level beneath the empress. But Zuo Fen was ugly and not favored. Nevertheless, “the emperor treated her respectfully because of her virtue and talent. She had a delicate constitution and was frequently ill. She lived in simply furnished chambers. Whenever the emperor toured the Hualin Park, he would have his carriage taken by her residence. Every time the conversation turned to literature, she spoke clearly and eloquently, to the unanimous praise of all in attendance.” The emperor once issued an edict for her to com-

pose a piece on her “sorrowful thoughts,” which she did to the title “A Rhapsody on Feelings of Separation.” In it, she lamented that palace regulations sequestered her in the palace and forbade her from seeing her family. One of the lines read, “Relatives of bone and flesh / are now as if strangers” (骨肉至親, 化為他人). Later she advanced to honorable lady guest, one of the three ladies, the highest level beneath the empress.

The most notorious story about Emperor Wu’s marital life told of his method of choosing which woman he would sleep with. When he conquered the kingdom of Wu in 280, he acquired the palace ladies of Sun Hao, the last Wu ruler. After this he was said to have about ten thousand women in his harem, an unusually large number in Chinese history. But now he had a problem: “The emperor liked many women at the same time and never knew whom to visit. He used to ride along in a goat-drawn carriage, letting the goats stop wherever they liked. Where they stopped, there he slept [*zhi bian yan qin* 至便宴寢]. The palace ladies took to sticking bamboo leaves around their doors and sprinkling the ground with tasty sauces, hoping to attract the emperor’s goats.” The story of palace women sprinkling sauces around their doorways to attract the emperor’s goats became famous in Chinese history. It marked an extreme of imperial indulgence, though not as extreme as what historians saw in women like Jia Nanfeng and men in later regimes who indulged in orgies and violence. In contrast, Emperor Wu was a case of relatively harmless extravagance.²¹

Jia Nanfeng, Cruel and Licentious

Empress Jia Nanfeng 賈南風 (257–300) was the wife of Emperor Hui 惠 (reigned 290–306), the son and successor of Emperor Wu. Although Emperor Hui was mentally unfit for the duties of emperor, both his mother and wife shielded him, each in her own way. As the history tells it, Emperor Wu had opposed his son’s marriage to Jia Nanfeng and instead favored another woman, whose family he insisted was known for beautiful, tall, and virtuous women capable of producing many sons. Although the Jia family had helped him gain power, he insisted that they produced jealous women who bore few sons and were ugly, short, and dark skinned. His wife prevailed and at fifteen Jia Nanfeng was married to the heir apparent, then thirteen years old. According to the

Jin History, “she was jealous and full of conniving schemes; and the heir apparent feared her and was bewitched by her” (妒忌多權詐, 太子畏而惑之). She allowed few consorts to see him. Jia Nanfeng defended her husband because if he were deposed, she would lose power too. She was said to be cruel and abusive and even killed people with her own hands, including pregnant consorts. Emperor Wu was furious and wanted her deposed, but she had strong protectors who reminded the emperor of the stature of her father. After he died, she had his second empress put in isolation, where she starved herself to death in 292.

The most scandalous story about Jia Nanfeng told that she secretly brought men into the palace to have sex. One of them was caught because he possessed items that no one like him could own unless they were stolen from the palace. He explained that one day he met an old woman who told him that someone was ill in her home and that a diviner had said that she needed a young man from south of the city to treat the illness. Since the young man was from south of the city, he went along, riding a long way in a curtained carriage until he arrived at a splendid place. When he asked where he was, he was told it was heaven. He was given a bath in perfumed water, was fed and clothed, and then he met a woman of thirty-five or thirty-six, short and dark skinned, with a mole above her brow, with whom he spent several nights. When he left, she gave him the things he was later found possessing. The story has it that she killed her other lovers, but let this one go because she liked him.

After a coup in 291, Jia Nanfeng and her family took control of the government. Eventually members of the Sima family intervened and had her deposed, imprisoned, and forced to commit suicide in 300. The instability that followed resulted in the removal of the capital to the southern city of Jiankang, where the Eastern Jin began in 317 and lasted until 420. The story of Jia Nanfeng’s promiscuity recalls that of Zhao Feiyan and her sister. How much is true is impossible to tell, but suffice to say that the definition of the meddling, wanton woman was firmly in place by now. According to that definition, such a woman was sexually insatiable and unable to tolerate the absence of a virile husband.

Accounts of two other imperial wives likewise evoke the theme of the lack of virility in Emperor Hui. Emperor Wu had a consort from a poor and lowly family whose father was a goat butcher. She was bright,

chaste, and beautiful, and therefore was chosen to enter the emperor's harem. In the end, however, the emperor gave her to his son, the future Emperor Hui, who "was still young and did not yet understand the affairs of the marriage chamber" (未知帷房之事). Her mission was to "attend him in the bedroom" (*shi qin* 侍寢). She bore him his only son, whom Emperor Hui did not even know until one day he saw a group of boys playing together and was told by his father that one of them was his son. The boy was made heir apparent but Jia Nanfeng had both him and the consort murdered in 300.

The Jin's last empress, who was wife to two rulers, was also sur-named Yang. In 300, she became Emperor Hui's empress after Jia Nanfeng was deposed, then in 311 she was captured by the first ruler of a new state called Han Zhao 漢趙 (304–329) and made empress. The Han Zhao was one of the so-called Sixteen Kingdoms, which were short-lived states that arose during the decline of the Jin and lasted until they were taken over by the Northern Wei in 439. When the Han Zhao ruler asked Empress Yang how he compared with the men of the Sima family, she complimented him by saying, "Now I finally understand what a true man is like" (始知天下有丈夫耳). Is this Empress Yang speaking, or the historian making a joke about the ill-fated Emperor Hui?²²

NOTES

1. Fan Ye, *Hou Hanshu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1995), 10a.400. About clan politics and Later Han imperial marriage, see Hans Bielenstein, "The Restoration of the Han Dynasty," *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 51 (1979): 1–300, especially 107–27, regarding such politics explained in "personal terms." See also Bielenstein, "Wang Mang, the Restoration of the Han Dynasty, and Later Han," in *The Cambridge History of China*, edited by Denis Twitchett and Michael Loewe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 1:223–90.

2. See *Hou Hanshu*, 10a.403, and on Empress Guo's lack of virtue, 10a.406. On the switch of empresses, see Bielenstein, "Wang Mang, the Restoration of the Han Dynasty, and Later Han," and "The Restoration of the Han Dynasty," 114–21.

3. See *Hou Hanshu*, 10a.408–410.

4. See *Hou Hanshu*, 10a.416.

5. *Hou Hanshu*, 10a.417–23, 425, and 428.
6. See *Zhouyi zhengyi* 周易正義 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1999), 110, referring to hexagram twenty-three, *bo* 剝, meaning “splitting apart.”
7. See *Hou Hanshu*, 10b.438–40. The brother was Liang Ji 梁冀.
8. See *Hou Hanshu*, 10b.444–45.
9. On Empress Song and Lady Wang, see *Hou Hanshu*, 10b.448–50. Song’s son was Liu Bian 劉辯; the murdered consort was Lady Wang, whose son was Liu Xie 劉協.
10. The deposed empress was Fu Shou 伏壽; see *Hou Hanshu*, 10b.454. Cao Cao’s daughter was Cao Jie 曹節; see *Hou Hanshu*, 10b.455.
11. Chen Shou, *Sanguo zhi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), 2.58, 2.80. A translation of the chapters on empresses and consorts is in Robert Joe Cutter and William Gordon Crowell, *Empresses and Consorts: Selections from Chen Shou’s Records of the Three States with Pei Songzhi’s Commentary* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999), 89–90, which has been instrumental in compiling this section.
12. See Chen Shou, *Sanguo zhi*, 5.155.
13. See *Sanguo zhi*, 5.156–57. The *Wei Briefs*, *Weilue* 魏略, were by Yu Huan 魚豢. On the legend of the sunken boat, see the collection of tales *Tracing the Divine and the Supernatural* by Gan Bao 甘寶, written between 335 and 349, in Wang Shaoying 汪紹楹, ed., *Soushen ji* 搜神記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979), 196.
14. See *Sanguo zhi*, 5.159–61. *Accounts of the Times in the Wei and Jin*, *Wei Jin Shiyu* 魏晉世語, was by Guo Ban 郭頒.
15. See *Sanguo zhi*, 5.164–65, 167, as translated by Cutter and Crowell, 110. For a translation of the poem, see Wilt Idema and Beata Grant, *The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2004), 85–91. The reference to the mouth stuffed with chaff comes from the *Springs and Autumns from the Han to the Jin* (*Han Jin Chunqiu* 漢晉春秋).
16. See *Sanguo zhi*, 24.686 and 5.168 (the empress’s suicide).
17. See *Sanguo zhi*, 37.960.
18. See *Sanguo zhi*, 50.1198–1200. See Cutter and Crowell, *Empresses and Consorts*, 220–22n56, for a full translation of the Jin-dynasty story of Lady Pan, in Wang Jia 王嘉, ed. Qi Zhiping 齊治平, *Shiyi ji* 拾遺記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1988), 8.181–82.
19. See *Sanguo zhi*, 48.1163, 50.1202 and 1203. Pei’s source is the *Biographies from beyond the Yangzi* (*Jiangbiao zhuan* 江表傳). For a full translation, see Cutter and Crowell, *Empresses and Consorts*, 132–33 and 228n83.
20. See Fang Xuanlin 房玄齡 et al., *Jinshu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 2, compiled between 646 and 648.

21. See Fang Xuanling, *Jinshu*, 31.950 (much-laundered clothing); 3.63, 31.952–53 (selection of wives); 31.957–58 (Zuo Fen); and 31.962 (goats). Zuo Fen's poem is translated in Idema and Grant, *The Red Brush*, 44–46.

22. Emperor Wu's second empress, a cousin of the first, was Yang Zhi 楊芷 (259–292), whom Jia Nanfeng wrongly thought had plotted against her. See Fang Xuanling, *Jinshu*, 31.963–65 (Jia Nanfeng); 31.968 (Consort Xie Jiu 謝玖, sent to initiate Emperor Hui in sex); and 31.967 (the second Empress Yang, named Yang Xianrong 楊獻容, whose second husband was Liu Yao 劉曜).

CONCLUSION TO PART I

A Review of Themes from the Biographies of Empresses and Consorts

From the material we have seen so far, let us make a few generalizations about the practice of imperial polygamy and the behavior of emperors, empresses, consorts, and other palace women under that system. If we follow the historian's simplest level of categorization, we can divide the women into two groups, one jealous, the other unjealous, which define two main strategies of survival in the palace. Jealous behavior includes slandering and harming female rivals and their sons. Being virtuous and unjealous includes encouraging the emperor to seek a wide range of women so that he may have more sons, mentoring junior women, and in general making alliances among palace women in order to foster their good behavior. The jealous woman attempts to monopolize the emperor by excluding all rivals. The unjealous woman attempts to keep the emperor from being monopolized by bad women by as much as possible herself choosing the women he consorts with. Jealousy and unjealousy perhaps overlap when, for example, a woman choosing consorts for the ruler attempts to manipulate his feelings and eliminates women she does not like. On their part, men demonstrate their need to be corralled and constrained. Institutional rules sequester their women from the emperor and other men and also regulate the affairs of selection, ranking, visitation, punishment, and reward. Rulers are criticized for having too many concubines, failing to strictly distin-

guish between primary wife and consorts, and exclusive favoritism. At their worst, polygamous rulers neglect government because of fascination with consorts, derail the process of imperial succession, and mortally weaken the reign or even the dynasty itself.

In spite of the inherent risks of polygamous marriage, it was a deeply embedded practice. Emperors consolidated their status as supreme leaders by building harems. A leader was great if he had many women. What “many” meant reached almost ten thousand in the lateral courts of Jin Emperor Wu. However, even he ostentatiously observed one of the cardinal rules of Chinese polygamy by accompanying his announcement of an empire-wide recruitment of women with a proclamation that he would never elevate a concubine to an empress. However hollow such a gesture may sound, it showed the need he felt to appear proper and conscious of precedent in his exercise of polygamous privilege.

A final point has to do with the difference between the ruler’s relationships with his empress and with his consorts. As noted previously, marriage with an empress was a political arrangement that in some cases hardly involved sex, and possibly did not involve sex at all. Hans Bielenstein has gathered striking statistics from the Wu and five other southern dynasties (the Eastern Jin, Liu Song, Southern Qi, Liang, and Chen) showing that, during those 360 years, emperors had altogether nine sons by their empresses, but 247 by their concubines. Of the emperors of these six dynasties, only four were born of empresses, while twenty-one were born of concubines. The numbers lead one to conclude that emperors tended mainly to have sex with their consorts. Of the thousands of women in the harems, most never saw the emperor at all, and many saw him for only a little while. The records about these women are sparse and uneven. One favored consort in the Liu Song, for example, bore her emperor twelve sons, yet there is no biography for her in the dynastic histories.¹

NOTE

1. See Bielenstein, “The Six Dynasties,” vol. II, *The Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 69 (1997), 33 on the mother of twelve and 36–37 for the statistics.

II

**The Eastern Jin to the Reign of Wu Zetian,
317–712**

THE PERIOD OF DISUNITY, 317–589

NOMADIC CONQUERORS AND WOMEN IN POWER

After the fall of the Jin, China split into a succession of states in the north and south, few of which lasted long. Of the southern ones, the Wu lasted thirty-six years; the Eastern Jin, 103; the Liu Song, fifty-nine; the Southern Qi, twenty-three; the Liang, fifty-five; and the Chen, thirty-two. The northern dynasties were fewer in number, with the Northern Wei lasting 148 years, the Northern Qi twenty-seven, and the Northern Zhou twenty-four. Extreme brutality and loose morals characterized many of the imperial men and women of the Period of Disunity, as described in the histories. Thus they had brief existences, but there are a large number of stories about them. The Liu Song and Northern Qi, for example, were brief and hardly stood up, but their histories contain some of the most outlandish stories of jealousy, promiscuity, and men and women unfit to rule. A new theme emerges in the form of the clash and mix between Han civilization and non-Han conquerors who were nomads from the north. The northern dynasties were all governed by these conquerors, whose customs contrasted drastically with the imperial practices established since the Han, especially in terms of polygamy, selection of successors, and standards of female behavior. The nomadic leaders originally had multiple wives of roughly equal rank, not strictly divided between main wife and concubines. At first they did not believe in primogeniture (that is, selecting the first-born son as successor) or in selecting a successor while he was still a

child. Women rode horses, traveled long distances, and participated in hunts, unlike Han women. They took greater part in political and military decisions. Differences like these remained for the rest of dynastic history.

Part II takes us from the breakup of the Jin to the Tang-dynasty reign of Wu Zetian, the first and only female emperor in Chinese history. One of the main themes will be how the northern regimes adjusted to Han culture in terms of polygamy, succession, and standards of female behavior. Why and at what points did they change or refuse to change their ways? Also, since two of China's most famous women rulers appeared during this period, what further precedents for female rulership may they have created? Two other important topics are women who took lovers and the issue of jealousy, both having to do with women asserting themselves or their frustration at not being able to do so. In general, privileges accrued to people in power. In the case of women rulers, it appears that their power made them freer than usual in terms of sexual relations. As for jealousy, although historians and moralists made it sound as if it were a petty and unnecessary emotion, it can also be seen as a dedicated attempt to exert control over both men and other women.

Women Who Took Lovers

The combination of women exerting political power and being promiscuous is a recurrent motif in Chinese history, as can already be seen in the cases of Zhao Feiyan and Jia Nanfeng. There are more such women in the Period of Disunity. Promiscuity and wantonness are the negative labels attached to women who misbehave sexually. Less biased, more descriptive words are having lovers, having extramarital affairs, or gathering male favorites, with or without sexual relations. In many cases it is difficult to verify what actually happened. It may be that historians and others simply invented such stories in reaction against women who meddled in politics or otherwise attracted notoriety. When people accused powerful women of promiscuity, were they also in a subtle way accusing the women of adopting the privilege of polygamy, or at least a shadowy form of it? Were women actually doing so?

Other eras and cultures provide parallels that help frame the sexuality of women rulers. Catherine the Great of Russia (1729–1796) is one

of the most prominent examples. Both before and after her husband died she had a series of male favorites, most of whom took part in state affairs, most famously Grigory Potemkin. He was ten years younger and remained her close friend and advisor even after she replaced him with other favorites (of whom he generally approved). She had male favorites until the end of her life. She once wrote that she needed the company of young men and that one should not repress such desires. She had children by more than one of the men, but, as it turns out, her son and successor, Paul, decreed that no woman should rule Russia ever again. Eleanor of Aquitaine (1122–1204) is another example. After initiating divorce from her first husband, Louis VII, she wanted to avoid being married to someone else not of her own choosing and found herself a second husband, Henry Plantagenet, who was nine years younger and with whom she had many more pregnancies than with Louis VII. Both women generated scandalous but false stories about their sexual lives: Catherine the Great that she had sex with horses and Eleanor of Aquitaine that she had an affair with a Muslim prince.

Byzantine empresses are yet another example. A few took lovers and/or married multiple times. Zoe Porphyrogenneta (ca. 978–1050), for example, had one of her lovers kill her emperor husband, married the lover, and had him assume the throne. She was in her fifties at the time. After the second husband died in 1041, she took the throne in 1042, but not wanting power all to herself, found a twice-married man, Constantine IX Monomachos (ca. 1000–1055), with whom she had already been intimate long before. She married him and had him assume the throne in the same year. Meanwhile, he had a mistress, whom he insisted on keeping and whom Zoe allowed to move into the palace. In general, like Catherine the Great and Eleanor of Aquitaine, Byzantine empresses and other such women succeeded because they had status and legitimacy—Zoe was the daughter of an emperor. Otherwise they could not have gotten away with such behavior.¹

When these stories come up against cases in China, the latter do not seem so unusual. While the stories about Flying Swallow Zhao, her sister, and Empress Jia Nanfeng can never be verified, their supposed taking of lovers could at least be explained as a matter of taking sexual matters into their own hands, somewhat like Catherine the Great and the other women just mentioned. A couple of stories below about women in the Period of Disunity suggest that some men felt the need to

redress the imbalance between men and women by assigning a woman male concubines. To be sure, these stories were often told as jokes and produced no follow-up in terms of anything like normalizing male concubines for imperial women. Two Northern Wei empresses took the reins of government and, if the historians can be believed, had extramarital lovers who were more than mere concubines in that they served as imperial advisors, somewhat like in the cases of Catherine the Great and Zoe Porphyrogeneta. Other palace women in the Period of Disunity were said to have had affairs mainly for the sake of pleasure, which was similarly said of women in other cultures, the Mughals in India, for example.² Empress Wu, discussed in the next chapter, supposedly had lovers even in her old age, mainly for companionship and entertainment. As even the historians who criticized her said, her affairs did not seriously interfere with her exercise of political and military power. Although reports about women who took lovers have to be read with suspicion, in general women were freer and/or more daring up to and including the time of Empress Wu. The trend in her aftermath was towards stricter adherence to standards of female chastity, especially from the Song dynasty on.

Jealousy in the Imperial Palace

Historians often report that an empress or consort was “jealous” or “viciously jealous,” and that she restricted the emperor’s access to women in the lateral courts. If a history of jealousy were written, the Period of Disunity would stand out because of its striking stories about jealous women both inside and outside the imperial palace. The use of the word jealous must be seen as a reference to real actions and events in the form of rivalry among women and their assaults upon men, women, and children, but it must also be seen as the imposition of a set of standards upon women’s behavior. Those standards idealized tolerant women who did not interfere with the emperor’s access to multiple women. The ideal woman rose above jealousy and encouraged other women to do so as well. At the same time, however, everyone knew that jealousy would never go away and that it was impractical to imagine women being able to banish that feeling. To expect that women should banish jealousy downplayed the fact that they were expected to join in marriages to one man and to do so without objection or bad feelings.

Yet there was also an underlying sense of comedy as jealous women and henpecked men became the butt of jokes. There was a centuries-long comic refrain about the beleaguered man who could never relax and enjoy his multiple wives. Even emperors were subject to the eyes and ears of the jealous woman, as we will see in the case of a Northern Wei ruler below.

At its violent extreme, jealousy involved acts of atrocity, such as Empress Lü's torture of Lady Qi. But there was also the cold war of jealousy, which consisted of the more or less contained attempt among women to maintain peaceful relations with each other. Women kept an eye on each other and on their husband to prevent him from overindulging himself. Women who stepped out of line were admonished and sidelined. Dowagers and empresses took charge of drafting women who joined the harem, even the maids who did nothing more than deliver hot water for the empress or consort to wash her face. When an empress or consort introduced a woman to the emperor, she may have been doing so in order to promote what she thought was a safe choice. She may have wanted to divert the emperor's attention from a rival. Or she may have wanted to improve her standing in the emperor's and other women's eyes by appearing to be generous. Rising above jealousy, in other words, could also be a form of channeling jealousy, another important form of which was simply occupying oneself and others with the long-term, everyday tasks of inner palace life, such as raising children, women's handiwork, and affairs such as banquets, entertainment, marriages, funerals, festivals, and other ritual occasions. Engaging in these activities was traditionally considered the highest expression of feminine virtue.

THE NORTHERN WEI, 386–534

After the fall of the Jin in the north, northern China came under the rule of non-Han peoples who were nomadic in origin, the eventual strongest of whom was the Xianbei 鮮卑. Under a general named Tuoba Gui 拓拔珪 (371–409), they formed the dynasty called the Northern Wei (Bei Wei 北魏), which lasted from 386 to 534. They were an alliance whose main group was the Tabgatch, Tuoba 拓拔 in Chinese, which is why the Northern Wei is often referred to as the Tuoba Wei

(to distinguish it from the Wei dynasty of the Cao family). A basic feature of nomadic culture is the periodic movement of people and possessions over long distances. Over time, in particular after the fourth century, the Northern Wei became increasingly Chinese-like. In the fifth century it moved its capital to the ancient Han capital of Luoyang, which was south of the native nomadic homelands, whose economies declined in the fifth and sixth centuries. In general, women of the Northern Wei nomads and seminomads had more freedom of movement than Han counterparts. Even Han women living under the Northern Wei adopted foreign ways. Horseback riding, archery, and travel over long and rugged distances were not unusual for Northern Wei women. A poem from the time writes of a young woman who “galloped in pants and skirt in an agile streak” as she “shot from the left and shot from the right, one arrow hitting on top of another” (褰裙逐馬如卷蓬，左射右射必疊雙). Women took part in governing decisions, the defense of cities, and the punishment of bandits and rebels.³

The source for the following accounts is Li Yanshou's 李延壽 *History of the Northern Dynasties* (*Beishi* 北史), written during the Tang dynasty in the mid-seventh century. The original account of empresses and consorts of the Northern Wei was written for the *History of the Wei* (*Weishu* 魏書), by Wei Shou 魏收 (506–572), but this and other parts of the history were later lost, probably suppressed because of objections to their contents by readers in Wei Shou's time and in the Tang. During the time he was writing, Wei Shou had to be careful not to offend members of competing factions who were still alive, but he evidently could not be careful enough. The chapter on empresses and consorts in the currently existing *History of the Wei*, which is substantially the same as the chapter in the *History of the Northern Dynasties*, is a later revision that readers must interpret with an extra amount of caution and cross-referencing with other chapters and sources. Chinese historians writing about the Northern Wei tended to suppress or revise information that did not conform to Chinese customs and historiographical principles. As we have seen already, they favored “protective, wise, and retiring” empresses and vilified as jealous and promiscuous the ones they considered unworthy.⁴

Nomadic Customs of Marriage, Succession, and Choice of Empress

The Northern Wei was one of the largest and longest of the many non-Han dynasties whose rulers came from the nomadic areas outside of China proper. Marriage and royal succession were two of the most fundamental areas of difference between nomads and the Han throughout Chinese history. Like other nomads, Tabgatch chieftains had both multiple wives and concubines. Designating only one woman as main wife and empress was a Han custom foreign to them. When nomads chose a successor, the most important factor was military capability, which could not be determined until a boy was sufficiently grown up. Fraternal succession was a common method of choosing the next ruler, which meant that fierce competition among male relatives frequently occurred. In the Northern Wei and other northern dynasties of the Period of Disunity, these customs eventually succumbed to Chinese precedent, though exceptions occurred. By the end of the fourth century, the Northern Wei for the most part settled on the Han custom of primogeniture, making the eldest son the successor to the throne. As for designating one woman as empress, the Northern Wei adopted the custom but remained cautious in that, even up to the fifth century, a number of rulers either never named an empress or did so late in their reigns. The concern was the potential interference of imperial women and their families in dynastic politics. In doing so, emperors kept power out of the hands of any one woman and her family. The Northern Wei also discontinued another of their marriage practices, known as the levirate, where a widowed woman married a younger brother or nephew of her deceased husband. The custom was common among the Tabgatch and other nomadic conquerors, but was alien to the Han.

Two customs that demonstrated anxiety over the role of empresses seem to have arisen after the establishment of the dynasty. One was the selection of the empress by metal divination, a method perhaps borrowed from another nomadic group. Images of each candidate for empress were cast in metal and whichever was cast most successfully determined who was chosen as empress. In one early case, the casting succeeded and the woman was selected; in another case, the casting was unsuccessful and the woman was not named empress but remained a consort.⁵ The other custom was the law forcing the death of the woman

whose son was selected as heir apparent. In the first recorded case in 409, after selecting his son as heir apparent, the first emperor forced the son's mother to commit suicide (she was posthumously promoted to empress). The Chinese authors of her biography refer to the practice as an old custom.⁶ However, the law is nowhere referred to in previous biographies, and both ancient and modern scholars suggest that the custom was adopted as part of the adjustment to Han practices of dynastic succession. Whatever its origin, the law demonstrated the anxiety about potential interference in dynastic politics by powerful mothers of young crown princes and emperors. Exceptions to the law were common, and sometimes the rule was applied only when someone saw a political advantage in the death of the heir apparent's mother.⁷ Other Northern Wei practices included taking the eldest son from his mother and placing him in the care of another woman, often a concubine; and when rulers did name empresses, taking them from royal families of non-Chinese states that they had recently conquered. Women like these would have few or no influential relatives nearby who might interfere in politics.

A Wet Nurse Becomes Dowager

The Northern Wei was notable for two strong female rulers, Empress Dowager Feng and Empress Dowager Ling. Prior to them, a woman who had been wet nurse to the fifth Northern Wei ruler rose to the rank of dowager. Although she did not exert as much power as Feng and Ling, she was remarkable as a type of low-ranking woman who occasionally in Chinese history achieved great privilege. Wet Nurse Chang 常 came from an official's family that had fallen on hard times in the Northern Yan 燕 kingdom of northeast China. She entered the lateral courts, where she was selected as wet nurse for the baby who would be the future Emperor Wencheng 文成 (440–465). She performed her job with care and devotion, the history says. His mother died soon after the boy became emperor in 452 at age twelve (the circumstances of her death are not given), when Wet Nurse Chang was enthroned with a special title as nurse empress dowager (*bao taihou* 保太后). One of the reasons she was able to rise so high was because she was on the side of the forces that defeated an attempt against the heir apparent's life. As dowager, she served for eight years, during which she played a role in

the politics of succession and provided benefits of rank, wealth, and honor to members of her natal family. At one point she learned of a secret liaison between the young emperor and a palace woman, who became pregnant and gave birth to a boy in 454. The young woman was installed as imperial consort at the rank of honorable lady, the boy was declared heir apparent, and in 456 Dowager Chang ordered the woman to commit suicide.⁸ The wet nurse dowager died in 460.

Empress Feng, Who Ruled Like an Emperor

The first powerful woman ruler in the Northern Wei was Empress Dowager Feng 馮 (442–490), granddaughter of the last ruler of the Northern Yan. She and her family were at home in both Chinese and Tabgatch cultures. Her mother was from an old clan of the Chinese aristocracy in the northeast; her father had been granted a fief in which he served as a regional inspector. But he was executed because of an offense, after which the empress entered the palace under the care of an aunt who had been a consort of the third Northern Wei emperor. In 452 the young Feng became an honorable lady to Emperor Wencheng, Wet Nurse Chang's former charge, and was enthroned as his empress the following year. She was still relatively powerless, but when the emperor died in 465, he was succeeded by his eleven-year-old son, Emperor Xianwen 獻文 (454–476). Feng became empress dowager and in a coup in 466 declared herself regent in place of the original one, though she was forced to abdicate within a year (some sources say she abdicated voluntarily).

The history compliments Dowager Feng's abilities, saying that early on she gained a rough knowledge of writing and calculation such that, when she took power, she was ready and able to engage in all aspects of government. She promoted reforms in administration, land taxation, and social custom. She engaged in one practice, however, that was unforgivable in the historian's eyes: she employed male favorites, some of whom were said to be lovers. The tendency of historians, as we know, was to concentrate on the woman ruler's immorality to the exclusion of her political accomplishments. Whether or not her male favorites were sexual ones is questionable, but in her case they were all talented advisors and officials; the histories report no children born of them. The first—referred to by the old term “inner favorite” (*neichong* 內寵)—

was an official named Li Yi 李奕. Emperor Xianwen found out about the affair and had the man, his brother, and others of his clan executed, which the young Dowager Feng deeply resented. The emperor retired from the throne in 471 and named as successor his three-year-old son, who became Emperor Xiaowen 孝文 (467–499; born of a palace woman who had died). The retired emperor still held power, but Dowager Feng had him killed in 476 and became regent for the second time, now ruling virtually as if she were emperor. Nine years old at the time, Xiaowen feared and respected her, the biography reports. She was swift in decision making and adept at meting punishment and reward. Avoiding the mistakes of previous women rulers, she employed respected officials not from her family. She had at least two more handsome favorites, including Wang Rui 王叡, a non-Han man who “had free access to her bedroom” (*churu wonei* 出入臥內). He was an expert in astronomy and divination. The dowager made him an official in the central administration and extravagantly rewarded him. He died in 481 at age forty-eight and was given a sumptuous funeral, at which both emperor and empress dowager were prominent mourners. Another man, Lin Chong 林冲, likewise “received favor within the curtained chambers” (*jianchong weiwo* 見寵幃幄) and was richly rewarded. He was said to have been an astute advisor to the dowager, even continuing as one to Emperor Xiaowen after she died. According to the history, he was still handsome and youthful at age forty.

Dowager Feng was strict with her favorites, whom she reportedly never overindulged. Eunuchs were among them. She punished even minor infractions, for which the penalty was caning. But she did not store grudges. In a little while she forgave the man and might even reward him with further riches. “For this reason they all yearned for profit and remained loyal to her until death.” During a birthday celebration for Emperor Xiaowen, she sang to his accompaniment and had each of the ministers make statements, after which over ninety people joined in song. She liked this kind of occasion. She died at age forty-nine, causing the emperor great grief, it was said. He refused to eat or drink for five days and abstained from liquor and meat for three years.⁹

Empress Feng Run and Her Affair with a Eunuch Monk

The next notable woman was Empress Feng Run 馮潤, who was notorious for her affair with a eunuch. She was Emperor Xiaowen's cousin and second empress. He waited three years after Dowager Feng's death to name an empress, until 493, the same year in which he moved to Luoyang, not returning north again until 499. He was about to marry Feng Run, but she was ill, so he married her sister instead and enthroned her as empress. Dowager Feng had promoted both sisters to him. When Feng Run recovered, however, she became a concubine and plotted against her sister, who was deposed in 496 and became a Buddhist nun. Feng Run became empress the next year.

Emperor Xiaowen took part in military campaigns for years on end, during which time, as her biography says, Feng Run “engaged in illicit deeds with the eunuch Gao Pusa” (遂與中官高菩薩私亂). The words “engaged in illicit deeds” indicate a sexual affair, although Gao Pusa was a eunuch. Pusa is the Chinese name for a Buddhist bodhisattva, but in this case is probably a nickname for an offbeat monk. Was he a real eunuch or a monk in disguise? No details are given. During a period in which the emperor was ill, the empress became even more “openly flagrant in her vices.” She leagued with another eunuch to arrange the marriage between her younger brother and a princess from the Liu Song kingdom in the south. The princess did not agree to the marriage, fled to Emperor Xiaowen, and told him about the illicit behavior of the empress and the eunuch. The emperor was shocked, went to Luoyang, and summoned the empress and her eunuch favorites for a dramatic interrogation.

Because he was ill, the emperor slept in the special Chamber of Insulated Warmth. He summoned the empress at night and had Gao Pusa and others wait outside the door. Before she entered, the emperor had her searched and gave the order that if she was carrying so much as the tiniest knife, she should be beheaded. The empress kowtowed and wept in apology. He granted her a seat in the east wing of the room, several yards from his bamboo mat. Xiaowen ordered Gao Pusa and the others to present their confessions and told the empress what he was accusing her of. “You have been engaging in sorcery. You must confess everything!”

Because she wanted her confession kept secret, the empress begged that all those in attendance leave the room. Xiaowen ordered the eunuch attendants to exit, but kept the eunuch chamberlain Bai Zheng at his side and had him armed with an imperial guard's spear. But the empress still refused to speak. Xiaowen then stuffed Bai Zheng's ears and tested the result several times by calling to him in a soft voice. After Bai made no sign of hearing him, the emperor ordered the empress to speak. But the matter was kept secret, and no one knows what she told him.

Although the emperor refrained from deposing Feng Run, he determined to sever relations with her.

Another of her transgressions had to do with her attempt to manipulate the heir apparent, whose mother some say she had killed. The mother was Lady Gao 高, who was the younger sister of a minister of education and was from a family of one of the eastern tribes. Impressed by her as a young girl, Dowager Feng brought her into the lateral courts at age thirteen. As a girl, Gao once dreamt that she was in a room bathed in hot sunlight. Whenever she tried to move out of the light, the sun's rays would curve and follow her. This went on for many nights. Someone interpreted the dream to mean that she would be chosen by the emperor and would give birth to a ruler. Indeed, in 483 she gave birth to a son who was declared heir apparent in 497 and two years later succeeded Xiaowen as Emperor Xuanwu 宣武 (483–515). But Gao came to an unfortunate end, supposedly because Feng Run “secretly desired to raise the heir apparent herself as foster-mother.” On her way from Dai to Luoyang, Gao “died suddenly,” after which Feng Run raised the boy and lavished him with motherly care, even to the point of “personally supervising his bath and the dressing of his hair.” Unfortunately, in 499 Feng Run was put to death; Emperor Xiaowen died later the same year. Lady Gao was named empress posthumously.¹⁰

Even Emperors Can't Escape a Jealous Woman

The next Empress Gao was the source of an emperor's public remark about jealousy. She was the niece of the earlier Empress Gao, began as honorable lady guest, and after giving birth to a son became empress, Xuanwu's second, in 508. Her son was declared heir apparent. Some say that she was behind the death of Xuanwu's first empress, a reticent,

generous, and unjealous woman, according to the historian, who “died suddenly” in 507 after giving birth to an heir apparent who died. Empress Gao blocked the emperor’s access to palace women, but he managed to beget a son anyway and had him designated heir apparent in place of Gao’s son. The boy was raised separately from both Empress Gao and his mother, who survived to become the next powerful woman ruler, Empress Dowager Ling 靈. The emperor died in 515, after which his heir apparent took the throne at age five as Emperor Xiaoming 孝明 (510–528). A struggle broke out between factions supporting Gao and the future Empress Dowager Ling, who won and had Gao killed in 518. At this point, the historian inserted a comment on jealousy that Emperor Xiaowen once made to his ministers. He told them that a jealous woman’s control of access to the harem was a problem that even rulers couldn’t avoid. How much more so, he said, in the case of officials and commoners? Empress Gao’s jealousy, the historian continued, was such that in the span of twenty-odd years the only imperial son to survive to adulthood was Emperor Xiaoming.¹¹

Empress Dowager Ling, De Facto Emperor

Empress Dowager Ling, surnamed Hu 胡, was the second great woman ruler in the Northern Wei. She was never an empress but became dowager and regent after her son assumed the throne. In writing her biography, the historian was expected to portray her in a negative light, as if she were a depraved ruler who sealed the downfall of the dynasty. She was Chinese in origin, the first such person to gain control of the Northern Wei. She was also the dynasty’s last independent ruler, the later ones being mere puppets. She was regent twice, from 515 to 520 and from 525 to 528. As regent she ruled as if she were emperor, using terminology that only an emperor normally used. Instead of “your highness” (*dianxia* 殿下), which was used to address an empress or empress dowager, she had herself addressed as “your majesty” (*bixia* 陛下). She issued what she called “edicts” (*ling* 令), rather than the humbler “instructions” (*zhao* 詔). She used the special word for “I” (*zhen* 朕), which was usually reserved for emperors alone (Han empress Lü had used it as well). She performed sacrifices that only male emperors had performed, went on tours to scenic spots, took part in archery contests, consulted with officials in the palace audience hall, and personally

sought petitions about injustice as she rode in a carriage outside the palace (this being an ancient custom, but one not carried out by women). She granted her father a posthumous title normally reserved for the royal family only. The history reports these things matter-of-factly, but they are in fact extraordinary. Dowager Feng participated in similar activities and likewise was not considered unusual during her time—though to Confucian historians, especially from the Song dynasty onward, such activities were absolutely unfeminine.

Dowager Ling suffered from the politics of her predecessors, who left her serious social and economic problems. By 525, North China was in grave disarray. Furthermore, she was not as accomplished as Dowager Feng, failed to select good advisors, and was lavish with her family and followers. In one noted case she showed insufficient regard for propriety. She once led over one hundred princesses, concubines, courtiers, and officials to a palace storehouse, where she ordered them to take all the silk they wanted. A great rush occurred in which a duke and a prince notorious for their greed fell and injured themselves while carrying large loads. In contrast, when the dowager asked one of her upright officials why he carried so little, he replied that he was carrying as much as a decent person should carry. The historian's message, in short, was that the dowager allowed the officials and others to jostle together in an undignified way, which was unbecoming to her as ruler.

The dowager's biography records the same kind of illicit sexual behavior that we saw in the account of Dowager Feng. Here is an account of her first affair. "The empress dowager forced the Prince of Qinghe to favor her and gave reign to licentiousness and unrestrained feelings that aroused the outrage of all under heaven [太后逼幸清河王懌, 淫亂肆情, 為天下所惡]. The Commander of the Armed Forces, Yuan Cha, the eunuch Chamberlain, Liu Teng, and others took Emperor Xiaoming to the Xianyang Hall and imprisoned the empress dowager in the northern palace. They killed the Prince of Qinghe in the Forbidden City." This was the end of the empress dowager's first regency. In fact, the Prince of Qinghe was a capable administrator whose demise was due to the enmity of Yuan Cha and Liu Teng. The dowager was eventually released, but was sequestered from her son the emperor until after Liu Teng died and Yuan Cha was forced to commit suicide. As the biography tells it, dynastic affairs worsened and further acts of licentiousness followed. A man named Zheng Yan, with whom the empress supposedly

had an affair before her imprisonment, “defiled the palace harem” (*han luan gongye* 汗亂宮掖). Whenever he went on leave from the palace, she had a eunuch accompany him, such that “when he saw his wife, he could only talk of family matters.” Two other men received similar special treatment, rose to high rank, and “were openly licentiousness at court” (*xuan yin yu chao* 宣淫於朝), as the historian writes. *Xuan yin*, to spread licentiousness openly, was a standard expression in the moralizer’s vocabulary. Finally, a rift developed between Dowager Ling and her son, whom she had murdered in 528. Her end came the same year when a Northern Wei general led his forces to Luoyang, captured the dowager and the new heir apparent, and had them drowned in the Yellow River. His soldiers killed thousands of Chinese officials and their families. The Northern Wei never recovered and eventually split into two short-lived dynasties, the Northern Qi (550–577) and the Northern Zhou (557–581), which were followed by the unification of the north and south under the Sui dynasty in 581.¹²

THE EASTERN JIN AND THE LIU SONG, 317–479

A number of southern dynasties were concurrent with the Northern Wei, beginning with the Eastern Jin and the Liu Song 劉宋, both ruled by Han. The Eastern Jin was established when the Western Jin capital fell in 317, its leader a prince in the south near modern-day Nanjing named Sima Rui 司馬睿 (reigned 317–323). Numerous neighboring states existed at the same time, each with its own royal family. During one of the Eastern Jin reigns, for example, there were the Later Yan, Later Qin, Western Qin, Later Liang, and the Chouchi, a principality. Among these six there were altogether two emperors, three kings, and one duke. But all were considered so minor that they were not counted among either the northern or southern dynasties.¹³

Before beginning the stories of the imperial wives of this period, let us list the ranking system for palace women from the Jin to the Southern Qi, since it varies somewhat from that in the Han and it is useful for gauging the status of the women (the systems for the Liang and the Chen are unknown). Emperor Wu 武 of the Jin placed the three ladies (*sanfuren* 三夫人) at the top, who consisted of the honorable lady guest (*guipin* 貴嬪), the lady (*furen* 夫人), and the honorable lady (*guiren* 貴

人). Below them were the nine lady guests (*jiupin* 九嬪), consisting of the chaste consort (*shufei* 淑妃), chaste beauty (*shuyuan* 淑媛), lady of chaste deportment (*shuyi* 淑儀), lady of cultivated splendor (*xiuhua* 修華), lady of cultivated countenance (*xiurong* 修容), lady of cultivated deportment (*xiuyi* 修儀), favorite beauty (*jieryu* 婕妤), glamorous lady (*ronghua* 容華), and lady of accomplished splendor (*chonghua* 充華). Then came beautiful ladies (*meiren* 美人), talented ladies (*cairen* 才人), and middle talented ladies (*zhongcairen* 中才人). As in the early Han, all of these corresponded with ranks in the male bureaucracy, with a major distinction between the three highest and the nine next highest, on the one hand, and the rest, which held the most women. Some ranks were abolished, modified, or uniquely established by certain emperors. For example, lady of chaste deportment and lady of cultivated splendor were creations of Emperor Wu of the Jin. Later a Liu Song emperor did away with several titles and replaced them with new ones, including honored consort (*guifei* 貴妃), which was among the top ranks and which lasted to the end of dynastic history.¹⁴

The First Dowager Regent to Use a Curtained Divide

Failing to have a son meant that a ruler had either to acquire more wives or seek more carefully among the women he had. In the case of the eighth Eastern Jin ruler, Emperor Jianwen 簡文 (reigned 371–372), he sought the help of a diviner. He was still a prince at the time. The diviner pointed him in the direction of the rear chambers, where the emperor began to search but without success. He had a face reader (*shanxiangzhe* 善相者) examine each of his favorite concubines, including their maids. There was a woman in the weaving room who was tall and dark skinned, whom the other women called Kunlun 崑崙, a term for dark-skinned people from the south. When the face reader saw her, he exclaimed, “This is the one.” She was chosen and later gave birth to a princess and two boys, one of whom became Emperor Xiaowu 孝武 (reigned 373–396). Her name was Li Lingrong 李陵容 (died 400). After Jianwen assumed the throne in 373, she began to rise through the ranks, first as chaste consort (one of the nine lady guests), then honorable lady, then lady (from the ranks of the three ladies). After the emperor’s death, she became dowager consort (*huang taifei* 皇太妃) and finally great empress dowager (*taihuang taifei* 太皇太后) in 394.¹⁵

Three more women are worth brief mention, one because of her longevity and power, another because of her excess drinking, and the last because of her crime of murder. Since Emperor Xiaowu was very young when he assumed the throne, a dowager served as regent. She was Chu Suanzi 褚蒜子 (324–384), who had been empress to the fourth ruler, with whom she had no sons and whom she outlived by forty years. She served as dowager for five of his successors and as regent for three. She is also notable for being the first dowager-regent to separate herself from courtiers with a curtained divide, a practice that became the rule by the Song dynasty and was one of the most prominent rituals of proper female rulership. As the history says, “the dowager put up a white gauze curtain in the Taiji Palace and held court with the emperor in her arms” (皇太后设白沙帷於太極殿，抱帝臨軒).¹⁶ The drinking empress was Wang Fahui 王法慧 (360–380), who was the daughter of a highly respected man and in 375 was selected as empress for the young Emperor Xiaowu. She came with strong recommendations. A major Jin statesman visited her at her parent’s home to verify her beauty and good character. Others confirmed his opinion. But after becoming empress, she became fond of drinking and was proud and jealous, says the history. The emperor was disturbed and had her father summoned to the palace to speak to her. She “somewhat” changed her behavior, but died in 380 at age twenty-one.¹⁷

Emperor Xiaowu met an unfortunate end. He was murdered by a concubine, a unique event in Chinese history (although centuries later concubines attempted to murder a Ming-dynasty emperor). He began devoting himself to wine and women and liked to stay up all night drinking. As the *Jin History* reports, in his last year a comet appeared in the sky, which he hated very much. He raised his glass and addressed it, saying, “Comet, I urge you to drink a glass of wine. Since olden times, when has there ever been an emperor who lived for 10,000 years?” Meanwhile, Venus had appeared in the morning sky for several years in a row, which as noted above was considered a sign of dynastic change. There were earthquakes, floods, and droughts. The emperor was rarely sober, and there were no upright people to give him proper advice. He never came around. “At the time Honorable Lady Zhang 張 was his favorite. She was about thirty years old. The emperor joked with her one day, saying, ‘Someone your age should be replaced.’ She seethed with rage. When night came and the emperor was drunk, he died a

violent death.” The words of the *Jin History* leave it at this. Since the heir apparent was mentally unfit and Lady Zhang managed to cover up her crime, no charges were brought. The heir apparent assumed the throne in 396 and ruled as Emperor An 安 until 419, when Liu Yu 劉裕 (363–422), an Eastern Jin general, had him strangled to death. Emperor An’s brother became the next and last emperor of the Jin before General Liu took over and in 420 established a new dynasty.¹⁸

An Empress’s Ghost Saves a Wronged Consort

After forcing the last Eastern Jin emperor to abdicate, Liu Yu became Emperor Wu 武 of the Song dynasty, reigning from 420 to 422. To prevent confusion with the Song dynasty of a few centuries later, this one is customarily called the Liu Song. It began vigorously, but then tore itself apart, in the end succumbing to one of its own prominent generals. In 487–488, Shen Yue 沈約 (441–513), a famous writer and official in the Song, Qi, and Liang, edited the *Book of Song* (*Songshu* 宋書), which records some of the most dissolute behavior in the Period of Disunity.

The accounts of the first few women in *Book of Song* are brief until Empress Yuan Qigui 袁齊嬀 (405–440), wife of the third ruler, Emperor Wen 文 (407–453), who reigned from 424 to 453. He had at least thirty children by at least nineteen women. Although the emperor treated her with “deep love and respect,” as the history says, she thought that he was stingy with her and lavish with another consort. In a show of resentment, Yuan claimed illness and refused to see the emperor, leaving whenever he tried to visit her. In 440 when she was severely ill, the emperor finally found her. Weeping, he held her hand and asked what she wanted. She looked at him steadily for a while, then covered her face with her blanket. She died that year at age thirty-six. In a strange anecdote, the historian reports that when Yuan Qigui gave birth to Liu Shao 邵 (426–453), the future heir apparent, she examined the baby and concluded that he would grow up and “destroy the kingdom and family.” She was about to kill him, but the emperor stopped her just in time. It turned out that the empress was right. Years later the emperor was about to depose Liu Shao, but when Shao heard the news he assassinated his father and took the throne for himself. He only served briefly, however, and was never counted as an emperor. His half broth-

er killed him and became the next ruler in 454, thus Emperor Xiaowu 孝武 (reigned 454–464), the Song's fourth. Another strange anecdote about the empress told that her ghost occasionally appeared in the palace. Beautiful Lady Shen 沈, a favorite of Emperor Wen's, was once accused of something she did not do and sentenced to death. She went to Empress Yuan's former chambers, which had been shut up since she died, and cried out, "I have been sentenced to death for a crime I did not commit. If the ghost of the Former Empress can hear me, let her know of this!" The windows and doors of the chambers suddenly flew open. The emperor was informed, sent someone to inspect, and gave Lady Shen a reprieve.¹⁹

A Depraved Emperor and His Polygamous Sister

Emperor Xiaowu rivaled his father in number of children, in his case over thirty, and according to the historian was lax in regulating the women's chambers. There were ugly rumors among the people because of the fact that when he received a woman, he often stayed with her in his mother's rooms. The historian could not spell out the nature of the rumors because, as he said, "the affairs of the Lateral Courts were secret and impossible to discern." Scandalous detail was more plentiful for Xiaowu's successor, his eldest son, Liu Ziyue 劉子業 (449–466), who was fifteen when he assumed the throne in 464. He ruled for two years, was murdered, and was posthumously deposed. He eventually became known as the Former Deposed Emperor in parallel with the later ruler known as the Later Deposed Emperor.²⁰ Emperor Xiaowu often scolded his son while he was heir apparent, but the boy continued behaving outrageously, even after assuming the throne. He was blatantly unfilial to his mother, Wang Xianyuan 王憲嫄 (427–464), who was Xiaowu's main wife and was now empress dowager. When gravely ill, she summoned her son to her chambers, but he refused to go, saying that there were ghosts in the rooms of sick people and that he could not possibly visit her. She was furious and told her servants: "Bring me a knife and cut me open. Then we'll see where a nice baby boy like him comes from." She died shortly after.

The Former Deposed Emperor and his sister, the Princess of Shan-yin 山陰, were both children of Wang Xianyuan. In a famous story, the

princess once complained to her brother that it was unfair that men, but not women, could have multiple spouses.

“Your Majesty and I differ in that we are male and female, but we are both children of the Deceased Emperor. Yet you have your thousands of women in the Six Palaces, while I am allowed one lone prince. It is unfair!” The emperor responded by granting her thirty handsome male concubines [面首左右三十人]. He elevated her to the rank of Princess of Kuaiji Commandery, equivalent to a commandery prince, and gave her a fief of two thousand homes for income and provisions. In addition, he awarded her a band of drummers and horn players, plus a troupe of twenty swordsmen. . . .

She liked a certain good-looking man named Chu Yuan, who was a Gentleman Attendant in the Ministry of Personnel, and requested that the emperor have him serve her as attendant. The emperor approved and Chu Yuan stayed with her for ten days. During this time she did all she could to force him to comply, but he was determined to suffer death before submitting. She finally let him go.

The special term for male concubines, *mianshou* 面首, has been remembered ever since, even though it never became common for women to have them.

The reign of the Former Deposed Emperor was especially dangerous. He had many people executed for minor infractions, plots, and suspected plots. He was brutal to his victims, once even eviscerating a man. His great-aunt, a princess, was the seventeenth daughter of the Former Deposed Emperor’s grandfather, Emperor Wen, and was married to a general. The Former Deposed Emperor took a liking to her and had her brought to the rear palace as consort. He created a cover-up by announcing that she had died, then had a maid killed in her stead, sent the maid’s corpse to the general, and claimed that it was the princess. Later the emperor grew suspicious of the general and had him killed as well. At the end of his reign he summoned the aunt of a deceased uncle and ordered his attendants to “force” themselves on her in front of him. When she refused, he told her that he would have her three sons executed. When she still refused, he had her sons (two princes and a marquis) executed and had her whipped with one hundred lashes.

山陰公主



Figure 4.1. The Princess of Shanyin. (*Baimei xinyong tuzhuan* [1870], 46a. Hathi Trust Digital Library. Original in Harvard Library.)

His end finally came one day when he ordered palace women to chase each other around naked. When one of them refused, he had her beheaded. Then he dreamt of a woman who cursed him and said that he would die within a year. He had a search conducted in the women's quarters, found a look-alike of the woman in his dream, and had her executed. But he had another dream in which the woman he executed brought her case to the Heavenly Emperor. The emperor, the Princess of Shanyin, and others conducted a ghost-catching ceremony, after which a group of attendants assassinated him. He was seventeen years old.²¹

Jealousy in the Liu Song and the Status of Princesses

In the midst of his biographies of empresses and consorts, the historian Shen Yue wrote of the notorious jealousy of Song-dynasty princesses. He gave the example of the Princess of Linchuan 臨川, whose husband favored a certain concubine. The princess persuaded her nephew, the Former Deposed Emperor, to put her husband in jail, where he died. The Former Deposed Emperor was followed by Emperor Ming 明 (reigned 466–472), who hated jealous women. He once had the wife of a magistrate sentenced to death for jealousy and commissioned a court minister to write a special report on jealousy. When a man was asked to marry one of Emperor Xiaowu's daughters, Emperor Ming had a writer compose a piece on the man's behalf eloquently declining the marriage and citing cases of men who suffered bizarre restrictions because of jealous wives. Literature about jealous wives was a steady subgenre in China for centuries to come, deriving many of its earliest stories from accounts like these in the Period of Disunity.

If women like the Princess of Shanyin or the Princess of Linchuan seem unusual, there are reasons to explain their behavior. They enjoyed unique privileges among women. Princesses consisted of imperial sisters and daughters who, when they married, took husbands who were lower in social status. Men did not necessarily see advantage in such marriages, as the story of Emperor Xiaowu's daughter shows. A princess's title and fief could be passed to her children and her husband's family. Unlike the brothers of emperors and crown princes, who had to live away from the capital and stay out of imperial politics, the princess-sisters of emperors and crown princes were allowed to live in the capital

and had access to the inner palace. They may not have had as much power as empresses and dowagers, but they enjoyed more social freedom, especially freedom of movement. One of the routes to power that princesses took was marrying a daughter to an heir apparent—although empresses and dowagers generally opposed such marriages. But if a princess was close to her brother, she might be able to outmaneuver the other female interest groups, including other princesses.²²

An Empress Refuses to Look at the Emperor's Naked Women

The Former Deposed Emperor was followed by the man who engineered his death, Emperor Ming, the sixth Song ruler and the eleventh son of Emperor Wen. Because many of his rivals refused to accept his succession, he had them killed, including sixteen nephews, some as young as four years old. In a renowned scene, he once outraged his empress during a grand gathering when he had everyone watch a group of palace women take off their clothes. Unwilling to take part, Empress Wang 王 covered her face with her fan. When she criticized the emperor for taking pleasure in such things, he became angry and ordered her to leave. Centuries later, a picture of the disrobing scene appeared in a Ming-dynasty book about the lives of virtuous women, *The Illustrated Biographies of Exemplary Women*.²³

It was said that Emperor Ming could not beget children and that his sons were actually born of his younger brothers' concubines. He would have the mothers killed and the sons raised by his own women. He was succeeded by his supposed eldest son, Liu Yu 劉昱 (born 463), who was murdered in 477 and become known as the Later Deposed Emperor (reigned 473–477). Empress Wang became dowager and, in reaction to Liu Yu's dissolute behavior, urged him to mend his ways. At first he listened, then grew intolerant and wanted to poison her. Fortunately his attendants persuaded him not to. He was followed by Emperor Shun 順 (reigned 477–479), Emperor Ming's third son, who was murdered at age eleven by order of the founder and first emperor of the next dynasty, the Southern Qi.



Figure 4.2. Empress Wang covers her face as the emperor orders his consorts to disrobe. (*Huitu lienü zhuan*. Zhibuzu zhai edition [1779]. Taipei: Zhengzhong shuju, 1971, 7.14b–15a. Permission of Zhengzhong shuju.)



Figure 4.2. Continued.

A Consort Traded between Three Men

A further sign of marital irregularity during the Liu Song took the form of a consort traded between two emperors and an attendant. Although emperors and other prominent men often took wives or concubines who were previously married, this case was unusual. Her name was Chen Miaodeng 陳妙登, and she had first belonged to Emperor Ming's brother, then Emperor Ming, and next to a third man before Emperor Ming took her back. Some said that the son she had with Emperor Ming was actually the son of the third man. That son was the Later Deposed Emperor, Liu Yu. The story went that Emperor Xiaowu liked to conduct searches among the commoners for beautiful women. Once he saw a humble thatched house and sent the family money to build a better home. Chen Miaodeng was the only one there when the messenger arrived with the money. The daughter of a butcher, she was twelve or thirteen and good looking. The emperor had her taken to his mother's palace, but since he soon forgot about her, his mother, the empress dowager, decided to give her to the emperor's younger brother, the future Emperor Ming. He favored her for a while but likewise forgot about her. Next Lady Chen went to one of the emperor's attendants, but was soon taken back and gave birth to a son, the Later Deposed Emperor. Thus the rumor that the Later Deposed Emperor was actually the attendant's son. When Emperor Ming assumed the throne, he made Chen an honored consort and her son the heir apparent. She became consort dowager during her son's reign, which like that of the Former Deposed Emperor was short and brutal.²⁴

THE SOUTHERN QI AND THE LIANG, 479–557

Also concurrent with the Northern Wei were the Southern Qi and the Liang dynasties. The Southern Qi began when Xiao Daocheng 蕭道成 (427–482), a general under the last two rulers of the Liu Song, forced the last Song emperor to abdicate, had him killed, and enthroned himself as emperor. He reigned from 479 to 482 and was succeeded by his son, Xiao Ze 蕭蹟 (440–493), who was only thirteen years younger than he and ruled as Emperor Wu 武 from 482 to 493. Like other northern and southern dynasties, the Qi never truly solidified and was the short-

est dynasty in the Period of Disunity. After the first two emperors, its rulers fit the historian's category of the morally unfit. Li Yanshou of the Tang wrote the *History of the Southern Dynasties* (*Nanshi* 南史), which parallels his *History of the Northern Dynasties* and is our source for the Southern Qi. It contains further examples of imperial women taking lovers and contributes one of the first false accounts of the later custom of bound feet.

A Dowager with Thirty Male Attendants

There were five more rulers after Emperor Wu, the next two of whom reigned very briefly and were brothers, the Prince of Yulin 鬱林王 (473–494) and the Prince of Hailing 海陵王 (480–494). Although they ruled as emperors, they were both deposed and were posthumously referred to as princes because they were considered unworthy to be called emperors. Empress Dowager Wang Baoming 王寶明 (455–512) was the mother of the first. She would have been empress, but her husband, the oldest son and heir apparent of Emperor Wu, died in 493, after which their son, the Prince of Yulin, assumed the throne. When he was heir apparent, her husband had been generous with other palace women, but in Wang Baoming's eyes not with her. To repair the imbalance, when her son became emperor, he made her empress dowager and gave her “thirty male attendants, something that no other dynasty had ever done” (男左右三十人, 前代所沒有也). The biography does not clarify what the men were for, but the term “attendants” (*zuoyouren*) usually refers to concubines, while the number thirty is the same as the number of male concubines the Former Deposed Emperor of the Song gave to his sister, the Princess of Shanyin. Wang Baoming was dowager for the last four rulers of the Qi and survived into the next dynasty, the Liang 梁, to whose founder she surrendered the imperial seal and cord.²⁵

He Jingying 何婧英 was another empress who took lovers. She was the wife of the Prince of Yulin and the daughter of a high official who served the first two Southern Qi emperors. Her father's main wife was none other than the polygamous Princess of Shanyin. According to the *History of the Southern Dynasties*, He Jingying was “by nature lascivious and dissolute” (妃稟性淫亂).

When her husband was Prince of Nan Commandery, he consorted with worthless men, the handsome of whom He Jingying would pick for herself to have an affair. Ma Cheng was one of them, a calligrapher for the prince and a good-looking young man. He Jingying liked him and used to arm wrestle with him, to the prince's amusement. . . . In 493 while she was Princess of the Heir Apparent, she was charmed by another handsome man, the son of a shamaness, Yang Minzhi, and lived with him as if they were husband and wife.

The Prince of Yulin also favored Yang Minzhi, says the history. But when the prince became emperor, the rumors about the threesome became so intolerable that advisors recommended Yang's execution. At first the emperor refused, while the empress wept and pleaded on Yang's behalf, but the emperor finally had him executed. The final words on the emperor and empress were: "The empress was lewd and promiscuous, and she and the emperor loved each other lustfully [又與帝相愛褻], therefore he indulged her." He even allowed her family to live in the palace, something never usually done.²⁶ The Prince of Yulin was assassinated by a nephew of Emperor Gao, Xiao Luan 蕭鸞, who enthroned the next ruler, the Prince of Hailing, then himself took over, thus Emperor Ming (reigned 494–498). When Xiao Luan led armed men into the Prince of Yulin's palace, the prince fled to the rooms of his favorite concubine, where he tried to commit suicide. He failed, after which he and his favorite were killed. Before this, Xiao Luan had already ordered the deaths of all possible rivals in the male line of succession and, after becoming emperor, had many more killed, including sixteen of Emperor Wu's sons. Hence a brief but solid lesson about polygamy and its rich production of offspring, namely that having many sons meant that your enemies might kill many of them.

Favorite Consort Pan and the Origin of the Golden Lotus

The ruler after Emperor Ming was the Marquis of Donghun 東昏 (483–501), Emperor Ming's second son. He was emperor from 499 to 501, but because of poor rulership was posthumously referred to as marquis, not emperor. A famous anecdote emerged from his reign. He had a favorite consort named Pan Yunu 潘玉奴 (died 501) upon whom he spent lavishly, even taking precious decorations from major temples and using them in the construction of her palace. The famous episode

had to do with a special floor he had built for her, which he had inlaid with lotus flowers carved in gold. As Consort Pan walked over them, he became dazzled by her grace and beauty and exclaimed, “With every step there grows a lotus!” (此步步生蓮華也). Although women did not yet bind their feet at the time and would not do so until many centuries later, golden lotus (*jinlian* 金蓮) eventually became a popular term for the bound foot. For centuries speculators wrongly cited this episode to prove that the custom already existed during the Southern Qi; instead, it probably arose during the tenth or eleventh centuries. The marquis also loved to play. He was strong and vigorous and fond of charging around on horseback, no matter what kind of weather. He had a retinue of fifty or sixty eunuchs and, when he went on hunts, took along hundreds of lackey soldiers. He liked to construct large-scale playgrounds. He had an imitation market town built on the palace grounds, where he appointed Consort Pan as “director in charge of commerce,” while he served as “subofficial office manager.” He had a canal dug and dragged the boats along it by himself. He even had stores built on the banks, in one of which he pretended to be a butcher.²⁷

An Empress Dies and Turns into a Dragon

The founder of the Liang dynasty was Xiao Yan 蕭衍 (464–549), who was born during the Song and was a distant cousin of the founder of the Qi. He and his followers rebelled against the Qi in 500, killed the Marquis of Donghun in 501, and established the Liang in 502. He was known as Emperor Wu. He had sixteen children and six consorts besides his main wife, who died before he became emperor. He never took another empress. His reign was one of the most stable and splendid of the northern and southern dynasties. He lost the throne and died in 549 at age eighty-six when the rebel Hou Jing 侯景 took over the capital at Jiankang and installed the emperor’s son, who ruled until 551. The gist of the rest of Liang-dynasty history is as follows. The rebel Hou Jing deposed Emperor Wu’s son and had him and the heir apparent murdered, declaring himself emperor and hoping to start his own dynasty. Others, including Chen Baxian 陳霸先, the first emperor of the next dynasty, defeated Hou Jing and helped enthrone two more emperors until in 557 Chen forced the last emperor to abdicate and estab-

lished the Chen dynasty. The Liang was the fifth of the six southern dynasties.

Two notable stories were told about the wives of Liang rulers, the first about the founder's wife, Empress Chi Hui 郗徽 (468–499), whose ghostly jealousy was portrayed as protecting the emperor from illness. The second story was about the third ruler's wife, who gave rise to an irreverent saying about older women who still liked to have sex. Chi Hui was bright as a young girl, a good calligrapher, well read in history and biography, and thoroughly skilled in women's arts. Twice she evaded marriage using the excuse of illness, first with the Later Deposed Emperor of Qi, and second with a Qi prince. She married Xiao Yan in 482, gave birth to three daughters, and died at age thirty-two while Xiao was still regional inspector. Her biography in the *History of the Southern Dynasties* reports that she was viciously jealous, but gives no details and instead leaps into the supernatural by saying that, after she died, she turned into a dragon and went to live in a well in the rear palace. From there she used to appear in the emperor's dreams, curing him whenever he was on the verge of illness. "As a result, the emperor never took another empress," says the history.

What form her jealousy actually took only emerges in the biography of one of Emperor Wu's consorts, Ding Lingguang 丁令光 (485–526). In the cases of both Chi Hui and Ding Lingguang, light filled the room at their births, in Chi's case red, in Ding's purple. Phenomena like these were often part of stories and biographies of prominent or would-be prominent figures. More of the supernatural emerges in the episode about how Emperor Wu found Consort Ding. On the day before he became emperor, he looked out from a high building and saw what appeared to be a five-colored dragon, underneath which was a girl bleaching silk. It was Ding Lingguang. Another story had it that he heard about her from a diviner, gave her a gold ring, and took her as consort at age fourteen. Chi Hui's jealousy was such that, if she saw fault with Ding (younger than her by seventeen years), she penalized her by ordering her to husk five bushels of grain before the end of the day. In spite of this, says the history, Ding was never disrespectful to the empress. She became honorable lady guest in 502, the year Xiao Yan became emperor and three years after Chi Hui died. She was kind and understanding, shunned luxury, and was a faithful Buddhist like the emperor. She gave birth to the first heir apparent, Xiao Tong 蕭統

(501–531), who died before he could become emperor, but who was famous as the compiler of one of the most important literary compilations in Chinese history, the *Anthology of Literature*.²⁸

A Qing-Dynasty Novel about Emperor Wu and Empress Chi

Chi Hui's jealousy and the supernatural elements of her biography inspired a fictional expansion many centuries later in an early Qing-dynasty novel called *The Buddhist Enlightenment of Emperor Wu of the Liang*. The story is mainly about how Xiao Yan established the Liang, how he warred for years against the Northern Wei, then felt guilty for the number of deaths he caused and decided to dedicate himself to Buddhism. The life of Chi Hui forms a parallel plot in which, instead of dying before he assumes the throne, she survives and turns from a virtuous and loyal wife into a viciously jealous shrew who plots against the other consorts. Her story begins when she is taken aback by the number of concubines the emperor recruits once he takes the throne. She broods one night about her loss of looks next to the beautiful young women. Although she acts pleased that he enjoys himself with them, she secretly plots against the women one at a time. Finally the ghost of a consort she tortured to death appears in a dream seeking redress and causes her to fall ill and die. Instead of a dragon, she turns into a giant snake that pleads with the emperor to do good deeds to undo their karmic debts. But the emperor devotes himself to Buddhism so deeply that he loses the throne to the rebel general Hou Jing, who is a reincarnation of the last Qi emperor. Dynastic histories usually do not rely on the logic of reincarnation and karmic debt to explain historical behavior, but that logic is central to many fictional works in the Ming and Qing. Nor do historians pretend to know what an empress brooded about on a particular night (unless she provided evidence by writing a poem about it). Otherwise, however, strange apparitions and dreams of wronged souls are common to both history and fiction, as are portraits of vicious shrews.²⁹

A Woman Past Her Prime Who Still Took Lovers: The Origin of an Old Saying

Chastity in women was always important but was not the supreme value that it would become in the Song dynasty and after. The stories we have seen about women taking lovers or going from one husband to the next reflect this fact. The third ruler of the Liang was Emperor Yuan 元 (508–555), the son of Emperor Wu and a woman who had been the wife of a Qi prince, then a member of the Marquis of Donghun's harem, and finally chosen lady in Emperor Wu's harem. She was Ruan Lingying 阮令嬴 (477–543). The history does not report whether she had children with her first two husbands, but the fact that she had been with two other men—somewhat like Chen Miaodeng of the Liu Song—did not interfere with her remarrying and becoming the mother of an heir apparent. She was posthumously declared empress dowager. Emperor Yuan's wife, on the other hand, had affairs during her marriage to him, which led him to condemn her to death. She was Xu Zhaopei 徐昭佩, who married him when he was prince and bore him a son and daughter, but died before he became emperor. She was said to be ugly but fond of sex with handsome young men. She gave rise to an irreverent saying, "Woman Xu, past her prime," which came to refer to an older woman who still liked sex (*Xuniang* or *Xuniang banlao* 徐娘半老). What "older" meant reflected the view that a woman's sexual prime was brief, somewhere between her midteens and her early twenties. If a woman in later years still prettied herself and liked to have sex, she became the butt of jokes. Since Xu married in 517, she was probably born around 500 or slightly after. She died at around fifty, so she could have been having her affairs up to that time, though there are no dates for any of them. The tone of her biography is light, but her ending is not. The historian reports that her husband visited her rarely and that, whenever he did, she would put makeup on only half her face. This was her way of mocking him, since he was blind in one eye. He would become furious and leave. Her biography adds that she was "viciously jealous" and liked to drink.

If there was an unfavored concubine, Xu would join her for a drink. But as soon as she learned that one of the concubines was pregnant, she would take a knife to her. The emperor had a handsome attendant named Ji Jijiang, and she had an affair with him too. Jijiang once

sighed and said: “Huan Zhi’s dog may have been old, but it was still a good hunter. Xiao Liyang’s horse may have been old, but it still liked to gallop. Lady Xu may be old, but she is ever so passionate [徐娘雖老猶尚多情].” There was another good-looking man named He Hui, with whom the princess got together in the Puxieni Temple, where they exchanged poetry written on a pillow carved in white cow horn.

Exchanging poems written on a pillow makes it sound as if there were more of a story to tell, but the historian stops there. Ji Jijiang’s remark was the origin of the saying about a woman past her prime. Lady Xu’s end came in 549 when her husband blamed her for the death of one of his favorites and ordered her death. She drowned herself in a well, and he divorced her by returning her body to the Xu family.³⁰

An Emperor Who Despised the Smell of Women

After the Chen succeeded the Liang, a branch of the Liang house continued as a vassal state of the Western Wei. The first ruler of the new state, called the Western Liang, was Xiao Cha 詒 (519–562), a son of Emperor Wu’s first heir apparent and a nephew of Emperor Yuan, whom he put to death in 555. Xiao ruled as emperor from 555 to 562, but controlled only a small parcel of land. He loved literature, authored many works, and detested women. As the *History of the Northern Dynasties* reports: “Xiao Cha never drank and found solace in simplicity and frugality. He was famous for filial love of his mother. He disliked entertainment and romance and hated even the sight of women. If any were close by, he said that he could smell their stink. He threw away any clothing that came in contact with them during sexual visitations. After favoring a member of the harem, he would lay sick in bed for weeks at a time.”³¹ Was he an emperor who liked men? No details are given. He also despised the sight of people’s hair, such that those getting near him had to be mindful and cover their heads. In the historian’s eyes, he fit the mold of the last ruler of a dynasty doomed to fail.

THE NORTHERN QI, 550–577

The Northern Qi was one of the more unusual dynasties in terms of mad and immoral behavior in the imperial family, including rape, incest, and adultery. It had an emperor who became mad, a dowager whose son discovered her having an affair, and a nanny who engineered a maid's enthronement as empress. Its last ruler delayed a battle so that his favorite consort could join him to watch. Its first great leader, though never an emperor, was Gao Huan 高歡 (496–547), a general of both the Northern and Eastern Wei who had been a member of various rebel factions before joining Erzhu Rong 尔朱荣, the general who deposed and drowned Northern Wei dowager Ling, as told above. The Northern Wei split into the Western and Eastern Wei, with Gao Huan behind the eastern faction, which shortly after his death his son Gao Yang 洋 forced aside to become the first emperor of the Northern Qi.

As with all leaders of the Period of Disunity, Gao Huan had to walk a fine line between many factions, which in the north mainly had to do with the divide between people of either Chinese or nomadic origins, though many people combined both. Gao Huan's main wife, for example, was the formidable Lou Zhaojun 婁昭君, who was Xianbei, as Gao Huan probably was. Since Gao was present at Erzhu Rong's massacre of the Chinese officials and families associated with Dowager Ling, he needed to win back the Chinese faction. At the same time he had to create and maintain alliances with the nomadic clans, especially Erzhu Rong's, who brought Gao to power (Erzhu Rong belonged to a nomadic group other than the Xianbei). Gao Huan was a gallant man who was generous to his followers and liked to gather men of valor. Our main source for the history of the Northern Qi is the *History of the Northern Dynasties*. Another major source written during the Song dynasty is also useful, the *Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government* (*Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑒), a chronological history of China written by Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019–1086) and completed in 1084. It contains extra and alternate information, some from sources unavailable to the earlier writers.

Lou Zhaojun Marries the Man of Her Choice

Lou Zhaojun (501–562) was originally from a wealthy family. Her biography tells the story that one day she saw Gao Huan while he was doing

duty on the city wall. He was a minor military officer at the time. She decided then and there that he was the one for her. She sent a maid to tell him of her offer and gave him gifts to increase his wealth and standing so that he could qualify as someone good enough to propose to her. Her parents disapproved, but she had gone so far that they had to accept. She was wise, strict, and decisive; refined, compliant, and unostentatious, says the history, adding that she was generous and fair to other consorts and offspring. Such cooperation was critical since Gao Huan had many wives with whom he concluded politically strategic marriages. Lou gave birth to six sons and two daughters. Four of the sons served as emperors, and she was empress dowager for all of them. Although not much information remains about her compared to other famous empresses and dowagers, she aided Gao Huan in decision making and was a strong and respected figure. She fit the mold of the female nomadic leader who actively participated in dynastic politics.

Of the wives Gao Huan married for political reasons, one was the result of an alliance with an enemy nomadic group, the Ruanruan 蠕蠕. The marriage took place in 545 and was part of an attempt to sue for peace. Gao Huan originally wanted the princess to marry his son, but the Ruanruan leader insisted that Gao Huan marry her himself. According to the *History of the Northern Dynasties*, Gao hesitated, but Lou Zhaojun and others urged him to go ahead. When the princess arrived, Empress Lou vacated the main bedchambers for the sake of the princess. Feeling guilty, Gao Huan bowed and thanked his wife, who told him not to worry about her. When the princess was presented to Gao, the uncle who escorted her is said to have issued an order: “As soon as there is a grandson, you will return to the homeland.” The princess was stern and strong willed and “refused to speak Chinese.” Gao became ill in 546 after an unsuccessful campaign against the Western Wei and was unable to visit the princess’s quarters. Her uncle was angry, so Gao visited her while still ill. When he died in 547, his son followed the levirate laws of the Ruanruan and married the princess, who gave birth to a daughter. Since cross-generational marriage was against Chinese principles, the history refers to the son’s marriage using the ancient word “incest” (*zheng* 蒸) instead of “marriage.”

Another of Gao Huan’s political marriages was with Erzhu Ying’e 尔朱英娥, the daughter of General Erzhu Rong. Erzhu Ying’e had altogether three husbands: (1) the previous Northern Wei emperor

(Xiaoming), to whom she was a consort; (2) the Northern Wei ruler set up by her father (Xiaozhuang 孝莊, reigned 528–531), to whom she was empress; and now (3) Gao Huan, to whom she was great consort (*taifei* 太妃). Gao's marriage to her was by way of legitimizing himself as heir to Erzhu Rong's authority and thereby guaranteeing his continued access to the horses and wealth of the Erzhu clan. He was said to have treated her with more respect than he did Lou Zhaojun. Whenever he met the great consort, he put on a proper belt and hat and referred to himself deferentially as "your humble official" (*xiaguan* 下官). When he first escorted the Ruanruan princess to his harem in 545, Erzhu Ying'e met them at a place from which she proceeded on the same route but in a separate group. The two women never met. One day, to demonstrate her pride and skill, the princess shot an arrow at a flying bird and hit it. Erzhu Ying'e then drew her bow and hit another flying bird. Gao Huan was delighted: "Both my wives are worthy of crushing bandits," he said. Erzhu Ying'e later became a nun, but died at the hands of the first Northern Qi ruler, who in one of his drunken sprees was "improper" with her. When she rejected his advances, he killed her.³²

Two of Gao Huan's consorts had affairs with close members of his family. The first woman was the daughter of Erzhu Rong's nephew. She had an affair with Gao's brother, whom Gao then killed. In order to maintain good relations with the Erzhu clan, however, he treated the woman leniently and sent her away. She later remarried. The other consort, Zheng Dache 鄭大車, had been previously married to one of Gao Huan's Tabgatch puppet rulers. She was from an old northern Chinese family that had once lived under the Han but then served the Northern Wei (she was related to Zheng Yan, Dowager Ling's supposed lover). Gao married her as part of an attempt to win back the support of the Chinese families who were powerful in the Northern Wei before Erzhu Rong's invasion. She became great consort and was favored more than anyone else, says the history. While he was away on a military campaign in 535, however, his oldest son, Gao Cheng 澄 (521–549), "committed incest with her." When Gao Huan returned, a maid told him about it, and a second maid confirmed it. Gao had his son caned one hundred times, put him in prison, and refused to see Lou Zhaojun (presumably for not keeping Gao Cheng under control). Gao Cheng was heir apparent at the time, but Gao Huan now wanted to replace him with Erzhu Ying'e's son. He was finally persuaded not only to keep

Gao Cheng, but also to repudiate the reports about the incest. The man who persuaded him said, “A woman is as trivial as a blade of grass, and as for the words of a maid, they aren’t to be trusted.” One of the maids was forced to hang herself. Meanwhile, husband, wife, and son had a tearful reconciliation. Another history reports that Consort Zheng’s son (Gao Huan’s fourteenth) “slept with her and that there were filthy and untoward rumors because of it” (與之同寢, 有穢雜之聲). Was Consort Zheng in fact involved in two cases of incest, one with the son of another wife and one with her own son? Or did historians confuse one case with another? Whatever the answer, nothing is known of what happened to Consort Zheng afterwards.³³

Gao Yang, the Mad Emperor

The first emperor of the Northern Qi was Gao Yang 高洋 (530–560), posthumously known as Emperor Wenxuan 文宣, who was Gao Huan’s and Lou Zhaojun’s second son. Unattractive and unremarkable as a young man, he was not originally expected to be emperor. He suffered from numerous ailments and during his last years, from about 555 on, became mentally unbalanced and committed many acts of atrocity. Before that, he was said to be confident, intelligent, and cunning as a strategist and administrator. His fits of rage were the source of many stories, including the time when he drunkenly passed through the city and asked a woman, “What do you think of the emperor?” She answered, “He is out of his mind. He hardly acts like an emperor.” He had her killed on the spot. He liked to ride his horse through the city and throw money and other objects of value on the ground and gleefully watch as people scrambled to pick them up. In one of his most outlandish acts, he was about to burn himself alive after an argument with his mother. “The empress dowager [Lou Zhaojun] was sitting on a small bed in the northern palace. The emperor was drunk and lifted up the bed, causing the empress to fall onto the floor and severely injure herself. After he became sober he was so mortified and angry with himself that he had a pile of kindling gathered and lit and was about to throw himself into the fire. Alarmed and terrified, the dowager pulled him away.” Other details and a slightly fuller version emerge in the Song-dynasty historian Sima Guang’s account in his *Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government*, which reports that the dowager had taken a heavy

bamboo cane to beat the drunken emperor. He reacted by saying that he ought “to marry off his old mother to a Hu barbarian.” This enraged her and put her in a foul mood. “He tried to cheer her up by getting on the floor and crawling like a baby, then uplifted the bed with his body, which threw the dowager to the floor and caused her severe injury.” After she pulled him back from the fire, he ordered someone to whip him on the back until it became bloody, but the dowager pleaded with him not to. He wept and beseeched her until she finally agreed to let him be whipped fifty times on the feet with a light bamboo. He managed to stop drinking for a few weeks, but then started again.

His madness extended to relations with women, including the wife of his brother Gao Cheng (whose murder by a slave in 549 paved the way for Gao Yang’s rise to power). In 555 he said to her, “My brother once raped our wife, so now we must get back at him” (吾兄昔姦我婦, 我今須報). By “our wife” was he referring to Gao Cheng’s affair with his father’s consort? Whatever he meant, he raped the widow. Gao Yang’s main wife was Li Zu’e 李祖娥, who became empress when he assumed the throne in 550. She was beautiful and had good breeding, but she was Chinese, for which reason some of Gao’s advisors did not want her to be the “mother” of the people. Gao Yang kept her anyway. He beat and whipped his consorts, even killing some of them, but he was always polite and respectful to the empress, says the *History of the Northern Dynasties*. Still, Gao Yang prided himself on being Xianbei and disliked what he thought of as the soft and unmanly Chinese traits of his heir apparent, Gao Yin 殷 (545–561). “He always asserted that the heir apparent had the characteristics of his Han relatives. ‘He isn’t like me,’” he used to say (每言太子得漢家性質, 不似我).

After Gao Yang’s death from illness in 560, a quick succession of emperors followed, the third of whom, Gao Zhan 湛 (537–569, fourth son of Gao Huan and Lou Zhaojun) forced himself on the previous emperor’s wife, threatening to kill her son if she didn’t submit. The previous emperor was his brother, whose wife had been empress. She became pregnant and gave birth to a daughter, but killed her. The emperor was enraged and killed her son, then had her strip and whipped her, tied her up, and threw her in a ditch. She recovered and was sent to live in a Buddhist temple, where she became a nun and lived into the Sui dynasty.³⁴

The Young Last Ruler and His Powerful Nanny

Gao Wei 緯 (557–577) was the last Northern Qi emperor, ruling from the age of nine to just before his death at twenty in 577. The histories designate him as Last Ruler (*Houzhu* 後主), a traditional epithet used to refer to a dynasty's decadent last ruler. Calling him such meant that he did not deserve to be called emperor because his realm was in such disarray that the succeeding dynasty had the right to take over. The epithet was also applied to the last emperors of the Chen and Sui. Gao Wei assumed the throne in 565 after his father, Gao Zhan, was persuaded by his advisors to retire. Throughout Gao Wei's reign, a woman who had been his nanny, Lu Lingxuan 陸令萱, played a major role in both inner and outer palace politics. As Jennifer Holmgren demonstrates, since she has no biography of her own, information about her can only be gathered from scattered references in the histories. She entered Gao Huan's household as a slave in about 534 and had a son who became powerful along with her. Her rise occurred during Gao Zhan's reign; by Gao Wei's time she was a frequent player in palace politics. In general there were three interest groups at the time: imperial favorites (of whom she was one), the outer court and imperial bureaucracy, and the imperial family. Lu committed suicide in 577 when she learned that her son had defected to the enemy, the Northern Zhou. Both her son and the Last Ruler were executed in 578.³⁵

Besides Nanny Lu, other notable women included his mother and three empresses, plus the consort he fell in love with at the end of his reign. His mother was Empress Hu 胡, who during the reign of his father, Gao Zhan, became sexually involved with a Central Asian merchant. It might have been a sort of *ménage à trois*, since the history reports that Gao Zhan “dearly favored” the merchant, inviting him to live in the palace. Empress Hu was also said to have had indecent relations with eunuchs, though no details are given, and after Gao Zhan died, to have had an affair with a Buddhist monk. She invited him and other monks into the palace, where “she lived with him day and night.” When Last Ruler Gao discovered his mother's affair, he had the monk executed and his mother temporarily imprisoned. Relations between mother and son were strained after this, and each was suspicious of the other. If she served him food, he dared not eat it. Eventually, however, she survived the takeover by the Northern Zhou and, according to the

History of the Northern Dynasties, continued her wanton behavior, dying sometime at the end of the sixth century.³⁶

As for Gao Wei's empresses, his first was Empress Hülü 斛律, the daughter of an important general. She bore Gao Wei a daughter in 572 when Gao was fifteen, two years after he had already had a son. Empress Hülü was deposed when her father was slandered and executed for factionalism. His second empress was his maternal cousin, surnamed Hu 胡. She was introduced to Gao Wei by his mother in an attempt to regain his favor after the embarrassment of her affair with the monk. The dowager prettied the girl up; Gao Wei liked her; and the girl became his consort at the rank of illustrious visage. Nanny Lu preferred a favorite of her own as empress, but the dowager insisted on the Hu girl, who was enthroned in 572. In the following year, however, Nanny Lu managed to convince the dowager that Empress Hu said something insulting about the dowager, who had all Hu's hair cut off and deposed her. In spite of this, the emperor still sent her poems telling her how he missed her.

Gao Wei's third empress was Mu Sheli 穆舍利, originally one of Empress Hülü's maids. Gao Wei "favored" her while she was a maid and it was she who gave birth to Gao Wei's first child, a son, who was born in 570 when Gao Wei was thirteen. Nanny Lu decided to take advantage of the relationship by adopting the young mother, promoting her as imperial consort, then giving her son to Empress Hülü to raise. As a result, the boy was designated heir apparent. Meanwhile Gao Wei discovered his mother's affair with the monk in 571; Empress Hülü was deposed in 572; and Empress Hu was deposed in 573. It was then that Nanny Lu finally succeeded in having Mu Sheli declared empress.

"They Wanted to Live and Die Together"

Not long after, the emperor fell for an attendant of Empress Mu's named Feng Xiaolian 馮小憐. She played the pipa and was good at singing and dancing. The *History of the Northern Dynasties* described the Last Ruler's feelings for her using the word *huo* 惑, which historians and moralists used to refer to a man who was "deluded" or "bewitched" by a woman. "They shared the same mat when sitting," says the history, "and rode side by side when on horseback. They wanted to live and die together." An event that took place in 576, when the Northern Zhou

army menaced the Northern Qi, made them notorious. Gao Wei was on a hunt with Consort Feng and received urgent calls to return to the capital. But Feng wanted to linger, so Gao Wei stayed on. When he finally returned, his army was about to retake a city that the Northern Zhou had captured. He called for a delay so that Feng could join him and watch the battle, but the delay caused the siege to fail. In the end the Northern Zhou captured both Gao Wei and Feng and took them to Chang'an, where Gao asked the Zhou emperor to return her to him. The emperor said, "The empire is as worthless to me as an old shoe. Why should I begrudge you a mere old woman?" And he gave her back.

What happens to the women of a fallen ruler? For the most part they are not heard of again. After Zhou emperor Wu had Gao Wei killed in 578, Feng Xiaolian was given to a Northern Zhou prince, who prized her. One day she was playing the pipa when one of the strings broke, stirring her to write the following quatrain: "Though favored now, I still long for a previous love. How to understand a broken heart, it's no different from a broken string." As for other Northern Qi women, according to the *Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government*, some of the empresses and consorts of the Northern Qi were so poor after the fall of the dynasty that they resorted to "selling candles in order to make a living." Who they were is unknown, but Gao Wei had many other wives, including two whom he designated as Left and Right "E Ying" 娥英, thus combining the names of the two wives of the ancient ruler Shun, Ehuang and Nüying. Such naming bestowed an aura of hallowed antiquity, though in general the Northern Qi hardly conformed to high imperial standards. Another two of his consorts were daughters of a musician, one of whom defied the emperor and as punishment had her face mutilated. Two more consorts were musicians, of whom one had been a courtesan, the other a slave.³⁷

THE NORTHERN ZHOU AND THE CHEN, 557–589

The final two dynasties of the north and south were the Northern Zhou and the Chen, two of the shortest regimes in the Period of Disunity. In terms of empresses and consorts, the Northern Zhou mainly stands out because one of its emperors enthroned five empresses at once, something never seen before or since. A powerful Xianbei general in the

Western Wei army prepared the way for the dynasty's rise, but died beforehand. Two of his sons ruled briefly before his third son finally ruled for over a decade and conquered the Northern Qi in 577. His son, Yuwen Yun 宇文贇 (559–580), was the one with multiple empresses.³⁸

Five Empresses at Once

Before he became emperor, Yuwen Yun had often been punished by his father for his bad behavior. He assumed the throne in 578 but, in an unusual move, retired after less than a year and passed the throne to his young son. Becoming more dissolute than ever, Yuwen Yun had sex with his father's palace women and kept adding to his own harem, sometimes carousing with women for weeks at a time before emerging from the inner palace. Then he decided he would enthrone four empresses besides his original Empress Yang Lihua 楊麗華 (561–609). Of the four, three were concubines whom he elevated to the rank of empress in 579. He named a fourth in 580. Still in his twenties, the retired emperor now had five empresses at once. The first concubine he enthroned as empress was originally a servant in charge of clothing in the palace who was some ten years his senior. One day he summoned her to have sex; in 573 she gave birth to the boy whom Yuwen Yun chose as successor. The next two empresses entered the palace at the same time and were promoted together. The fourth was a cousin of his and already married. Her husband's father (also a cousin of the emperor) plotted against the emperor, was discovered, and was killed along with the woman's husband. Yuwen Yun forced himself on her, made her a consort, then elevated her to empress. He modified imperial protocol whenever he felt like it, even referring to himself as "Heaven" when addressing his ministers. He used to eat and drink out of the precious ceremonial vessels of the imperial ancestral temple, which was unheard of. He ignored criticism and had ministers and others of whom he was suspicious punished by caning. Many of the women he favored also suffered punishment. The titles of the empresses are worth recording because of the loftiness of the wording. They were ranked in order. Empress Yang was first, called heavenly primordial empress. The next was great heavenly empress. Then came great heavenly empresses of the left and right. After the addition of the fifth empress, the third became great heavenly empress of the middle, while the fifth took the

place of great heavenly empress of the left. According to a statement in the biography of the first Sui emperor, the four extra empresses slandered each other as they vied for favor. In other words, they failed to live up to the heavenly order of their titles. All four became Buddhist nuns after their husband's death and the fall of the Northern Zhou, which happened in 581 when Empress Yang's father deposed Yuwen Yun's son.³⁹

Yuwen Yun's main empress was Yang Lihua, who was the eldest daughter of the eventual first emperor of the Sui dynasty, Yang Jian 楊堅 (541–604). She was married in 573 at age twelve to Yuwen Yun, who at the time was the fourteen-year-old heir apparent. They had two sons and one daughter. In spite of the fact that Yuwen Yun enthroned four other empresses, Empress Yang was never jealous, says her biography, but was gentle and kind to all. But the emperor's moods swung unpredictably. When he once accused Empress Yang of a crime, she adamantly defended herself. He was furious and ordered her death. She won reprieve only after her mother's desperate appeal. Aware of her father's attempt to end the Northern Zhou, Yang Lihua—like Wang Mang's and Cao Cao's daughters before her—became angry and resentful, making her father feel guilty. She continued to defy him for years, spurning his request to remarry, insisting on herself selecting the husband for her daughter, and demanding that her father grant him high rank.

She Greeted the Conquerors with Dignity

The last empress of the Chen was similarly heroic at the dynasty's last moments, while the last emperor left a story of decadence and ignominy. He was Chen Shubao 陳叔寶 (553–604), who responded to enemy invasion by fleeing to the women's quarters and hiding in a well. Like Gao Wei of the Northern Qi, in later times he was referred to not as emperor but as Last Ruler. The gist of the history of the Chen is as follows: The dynasty's founder, Chen Baxian, reigned as Emperor Wu from 557 to 559 and died without naming an heir. Since his only surviving son was a hostage with the Northern Zhou, his widow was compelled by advisors to select the eldest son of Emperor Wu's elder brother. After him came his eldest son, known as the Deposed Emperor because he was deemed incompetent and deposed after one year. The

next ruler was the second son of the founder's elder brother, who helped bring about the downfall of the Northern Qi, but in the end emerged weaker than the eventual victor, the Northern Zhou. The latter took over northern China in 577, but was conquered by the Sui dynasty in 581. Last Ruler Chen was the fourth ruler's eldest son and ruled from 582 to 589.⁴⁰

Chen Shubao's empress was Shen Wuhua 沈婺華, a granddaughter of Emperor Wu and wife of Chen since 569 when he was sixteen. They had no sons, but she raised the first heir apparent, whose mother died in childbirth. Her biography reports that she was wise, prudent, well versed in history and canon, and talented at writing. But the Last Ruler was not fond of her, instead favoring Honored Consort Zhang Lihua 張麗華. To this, it was said, Empress Shen reacted with a complete lack of resentment. She preferred a simple life of reading, especially Buddhist scriptures. The Last Ruler was about to depose her in favor of Zhang Lihua, but the dynasty came to an end before he could do so. In 588 he managed to replace the heir apparent raised by the empress with the son of Honored Consort Zhang. During the dynasty's last moments, Empress Shen and the new heir apparent waited respectfully for the Sui representatives to arrive. Shen survived, entered the Buddhist orders as a nun in 618, and lived into the Tang dynasty.

She Looked Like an Immortal Floating in the Air

Chen Shubao provides us with the classic story of a last ruler who neglected government in favor of a life of luxury and pleasure in the palace. He had already been brought up in an atmosphere of polygamous profligacy. His father had forty-two sons; Chen Shubao had twenty-two. The reason for such a high number is obvious. Like other rulers both before and after—including Liu Song emperor Xiaowu, with twenty-eight sons, and Southern Qi emperor Wu, with twenty-three—he began having intercourse with women in his early teens and continued with young women all his life (he and the others had many daughters as well, but their numbers were not always counted as accurately). Chen Shubao's favorite consort, Zhang Lihua, entered the palace when Chen Shubao was heir apparent. She was from a poor military family, one of her uncles having woven grass mats for a living. Chen liked her, she became pregnant, and she had a son who became heir apparent. Histo-

rians criticized Chen Shubao for decadence and lavish spending. In a custom that continued into the Tang but was eventually forbidden, he used to entertain guests with the public show of his harem women. He had specially selected “female scholars” (*nüxueshi* 女學士) who participated with everyone else in writing poetry, the best of which was put to music. Chen built three luxurious pavilions, housing himself in one, Honored Consort Zhang in another, and two other favorites in the third. Empress Shen lived apart from them all. When biographers describe a woman like Zhang Lihua, they note her beauty and talent, but also emphasize her abuse of beauty and talent to mislead the ruler. Zhang had an aura that verged on the supernatural. When made up and seen from afar, it was said, she looked like “an immortal floating in the air” (*piao ruo shenxian* 飄若神仙). Her hair was long and glossy like a mirror. She had splendid poise and fine features. “Just a look or a glance brimmed with radiance that shone all around” (每瞻視眄，光彩溢目，照映左右). She was clever with words, had an excellent memory, and knew how to read minds, especially the ruler’s. She liked to present him with palace women, so that everyone in the rear palace vied in singing her praises. Finally, she was adept at the art of wizardry, used demon lore to fool and fascinate the ruler, and recruited female shamans to give her inspiration.

Since Chen Shubao was “lax in attending to court duties,” Zhang Lihua involved herself in state affairs. Whatever his ministers presented had first to pass through two of his eunuchs, after which “the Last Ruler sat Honored Consort Zhang on his lap as they worked matters out.” If the eunuchs overlooked something, she “made a note of it so that nothing was omitted.” Bribery and abuse of power, especially on behalf of the families of the palace women, won out over the rulings of court ministers. In the end, the Sui army launched an attack against the Chen, but Chen Shubao was not told about it until it was too late. As the Sui army neared the palace, an official urged him to sit properly in the main hall and “await them with dignity.” But Chen said that he had a plan of his own, which was to hide in a well in the women’s quarters. When the Sui soldiers arrived, they looked down the well and called out, but no one answered. They were about to throw stones down when they heard shouts from inside, so they pulled up the rope. They were surprised at how heavy it was, only to discover the Last Ruler and his two favorites clinging to the line. Not long after, Zhang Lihua was

beheaded and, according to the *Book of Chen*, her corpse was hung from a bridge. The murder of the female favorite rather than the man who loses power because of his infatuation with her would happen again in the Tang dynasty with Emperor Xuanzong and Consort Yang. Chen Shubao lived into the Sui dynasty, dying in 604. The Sui emperor treated him well. When he heard that Chen was often drunk, he tried to get him to drink less, but then thought better of it. “Let him do as he pleases. What else does he have to do to pass the time?”⁴¹

NOTES

1. Lynda Garland, *Byzantine Empresses: Women and Power in Byzantium, AD 527–1204* (London: Routledge, 1999), 136–57.
2. See Ellison B. Findly, *Nur Jahan: Empress of Mughal India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), chapter 5.
3. For the poem, see Wei Shou, *Weishu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 53.1176–77, as cited in Jennifer Holmgren, “Empress Dowager Ling of the Northern Wei and the T’o-pa Sinicization Question,” *Papers on Far Eastern History* 18 (1978): 123–70, 135–36, my translation borrowing slightly from hers. Other material can be found in the biographies of women in *Weishu*, 92, as cited by Holmgren, 136. See also Song Qirui, *Bei Wei nüzhū lun* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2006).
4. See Holmgren, “Women and Political Power in the Traditional T’o-pa Elite: A Preliminary Study of the Biographies of Empresses in the Wei-shu,” *Monumenta Serica* 35 (1983): 33–74, 49; and “The Harem in Northern Wei Politics—398–498 AD: A Study of T’o-pa Attitudes towards the Institution of Empress, Empress-Dowager, and Regency Governments in the Chinese Dynastic System during the Early Northern Wei,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 26, no. 1 (1983): 71–96, 73–74, and 77–78. For Li Yanshou’s writing about womanly virtue, see Richard Davis, “Chaste and Filial Women in Chinese Historical Writings of the Eleventh Century,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 121, no. 2 (2001): 204–18, 212–13.
5. See Li Yanshou, *Beishi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 13.492–93. The first woman was Empress Murong 慕容, wife of the first emperor, Tuoba Gui (Emperor Daowu 道武). The second woman was Consort Yao 姚 (died 420) of the second emperor, Tuoba Si 嗣 (392–423; Emperor Mingyuan 明元).
6. See *Beishi*, 13.493; and *Weishu*, 13.325.
7. See Holmgren, “Women and Political Power in the Traditional T’o-pa Elite,” 57–58; and “The Harem in Northern Wei Politics.”

8. Emperor Wencheng's personal name was Tuoba Jun 濬. See *Beishi*, 13.495, 498. Dowager Chang was the second wet nurse of the Northern Wei to be so named, the first being the wet nurse of the third Northern Wei ruler.

9. She was also known as Empress Dowager Wenming 文明. See *Beishi*, 13.495–97. On her favorites, see Song Qirui, *Bei Wei nüzhū lun*, 207–14; and Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian* (Taipei: Shijie shuju, 1974), 134.4187–88 (including her employment of eunuchs).

10. Feng Run's sister was Feng Qing 馮清. See *Beishi*, 13.498–502. Xiaowen's first empress, who preceded Feng Run, was put to death after giving birth to his first heir apparent and was named empress posthumously.

11. See *Beishi*, 13.502–3.

12. See *Beishi*, 13.503–5 (the prince, “defiling the harem,” and “spreading licentiousness”); and Wei Shou, *Weishu*, 13.337–340, especially 338–39 (use of *zhen* and event in storehouse). Han empress Lü used *zhen* in *Hanshu*, 3.96. Also see *Zizhi tongjian*, 148.4635 (granting father a title and protests against it); 149.4656 (forcing prince to “favor” her); and 150.4698 (Zheng Yan, including eunuch escort, and another intimate). The Prince of Qinghe was Toba Yi 拓跋懌. The Northern Wei general was Erzhu Rong 尔朱荣. For more on Dowager Ling's life and rule, see Holmgren, “Empress Dowager Ling,” especially 130–33, 151, and 166, on the prince and the storehouse.

13. For this and other sections below, besides the *Jin History* I have also consulted a two-part history of the southern dynasties by Hans Bielenstein, “The Six Dynasties,” *The Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 68 and 69 (1996 and 1997): 5–324 and 5–246.

14. See Shen Yue, *Song shu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 41.1269. Emperor Shizu 世祖 initiated the title honored consort.

15. See *Jinshu*, 32.981.

16. See Fang Xuanling, *Jinshu*, 8.191. Her husband was Emperor Kang 康 (322–344, reigned 343–344). She was dowager for emperors Mu 穆; Ai 哀; the Deposed Emperor, Jianwen; and Xiaowu, and regent for Mu, Ai, and Xiaowu (the one she held in her arms behind the divide).

17. The statesman was regent Xie An 謝安 (320–385). See *Jinshu*, 32.982–83.

18. See *Jinshu*, 9.242. Bielenstein says that Emperor Xiaowu was “possibly” murdered by concubine Zhang. He regards sensational accounts like this with skepticism; see Bielenstein, “The Six Dynasties,” vol. 1, *The Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 68 (1996): 95.

19. Emperor Wen's personal name was Liu Yilong 劉義隆. Liu Shao's half brother was Liu Jun 駿 (430–464). See *Songshu*, 41.1284–86.

20. The Later Deposed Emperor was son of Emperor Ming 明, who came between the Former and the Later (*Qianfeidi* 前廢帝 and *Houfeidi* 後廢帝).

21. See *Songshu*, 41.1287 (ugly rumors in Xiaowu's inner palace); 7.147–48 (Xiaowu's main wife and Princess of Shanyin, personal name Liu Chuyu 劉楚玉); 41.1293–94 (affair with great-aunt, Liu Yingmei 劉英媚, whose husband was He Mai 何邁); 72.1858 (woman he forced his attendants upon, Princess Dowager Jiang 江); and 7.146 (his death).

22. The Princess of Linchuan was Emperor Wen's sixth daughter; her husband, Wang Zao 王藻, was the brother of Emperor Xiaowu's empress. On jealousy, see *Songshu*, 41.1290–91. The discussion of princesses derives from Jennifer Holmgren, "Imperial Marriage in the Native Chinese and Non-Han State, Han to Ming," in *Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society*, edited by Rubie S. Watson and Patricia Buckley Ebrey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 58–96, 67–68.

23. See *Songshu*, 41.1295. Emperor Ming's personal name was Liu Yu 劉彧. The illustration of disrobing is in the late Ming *Huitu lienu zhuan* (Taipei: Zhengzhong shuju, 1971), 7.15a; see also Katherine Carlitz, "The Social Uses of Female Virtue in Late Ming Editions of Lienu Zhuan," *Late Imperial China* 12, no. 2 (1991): 117–52.

24. Xiaowu's mother was Lu Huinan 路惠男 (412–466), a consort of Emperor Wen. She took care of Emperor Ming when he was young, after his mother had died. On Lady Chen, see *Songshu*, 41.1296.

25. See Li Yanshou, *Nanshi* 南史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 11.331. The Prince of Yulin was Xiao Zhaoye 蕭昭業; the Prince of Hailing, Xiao Zhaowen 蕭昭文. Wang Baoming's husband was Xiao Zhangmao 蕭長懋 (458–493).

26. See *Nanshi*, 11.331–32.

27. His name was Xiao Baojuan 蕭寶卷. See *Nanshi*, 5.154–55.

28. The *Wenxuan* 文選. See *Nanshi*, 12.339–40.

29. The novel was *Liang Wudi xilai yanyi* 梁武帝西來演意 (preface 1673) by Tianhuacang zhuren 天花藏主人, an anonymous author of numerous seventeenth-century novels. See chapters 17 (broods), 20 (dream), and 29–30 (karmic debts).

30. See *Nanshi*, 12.340–42.

31. Xiao Cha was son of Xiao Tong, who was the son of Ding Lingguang. See *Beishi*, 93.3089. The Western Wei became the Northern Zhou, which brought an end to the Northern Qi.

32. See *Beishi*, 14.516–17 (Lou Zhaojun); 14.516, 518 (Ruanruan consort and the incest); 14.518 (scene of archery).

33. See *Beishi*, 14.519; and on Consort Zheng sleeping with her son, see Li Baiyao 李百藥 (565–648), *Beiqi shu* 北齊書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1972), 10.139. On Gao's marriages, see Jennifer Holmgren, "Family, Marriage and

Political Power in Sixth Century China: A Study of the Kao Family of Northern Ch'i, c. 520–550," *Journal of Asian History* 16, no. 1 (1982): 1–50.

34. For the episode with his mother, see *Beishi*, 7.260; and Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, 166.5147–48. See also Jennifer Holmgren, "Seeds of Madness: A Portrait of Kao Yang First Emperor of Northern Qi, 530–560 AD," *Papers on Far Eastern History* 24 (1981): 83–134, and 125–27 for other cases of bizarre behavior. In addition, see *Beishi*, 14.520 (Gao Cheng's wife); 14.521 (thrown in a ditch); 7.263 (feelings about his son).

35. For more on the nanny and court politics, see Holmgren, "Politics of the Inner Court under the Hou-chu (Last Lord) of Northern Ch'i (ca. 565–73)," in *State and Society in Early Medieval China*, edited by Albert E. Dien (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 269–330, especially 278–80 and 325.

36. On the merchant (He Shikai 和士開) and the monk (Tan Xian 曇獻), see *Beishi*, 14.522–23.

37. See *Beishi*, 14.525–26 (Feng Xiaolan); 14.526–27 (left and right wives and others); and *Zizhi tongjian*, 173.5382 (selling candles).

38. The Xianbei general was Yuwen Tai 宇文泰 (507–556), followed by the first emperor, Yuwen Jue 宇文覺 (542–557), then Yuwen Yu 宇文毓 (534–560), and Yuwen Yong 宇文邕 (543–578), who ruled from 561 to 578. Yuwen Yun's son was Yuwen Yan 宇文衍 (573–581).

39. The first concubine was Zhu Manyue 朱滿月 (547–586), the second and third, Chen Yueyi 陳月儀 and Yuan Leshang 元樂尚, and the fourth, Yuchi Fanchi 尉遲繁熾 (566–595). See *Beishi*, 10.379–81 (improper behavior); 11.400 (rivalry); and 14.529 (Yang Lihua).

40. The widow empress was Zhang Yao'er 章要兒 (506–570); Emperor Wu's elder brother was Chen Qian 陳蒨 (522–566; reigned 559–566), whose son was Chen Bozong 陳伯宗, followed by Chen Xu 陳頊 (reigned 569–582).

41. See *Nanshi*, 12.347–48 and the *Book of Chen* in Yao Silian 姚思廉, *Chenshu* 陳書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1972), 7.131 (Zhang Lihua); and *Nanshi*, 10.309–10 (drinking).

5

THE SUI AND EARLY TANG DYNASTIES TO EMPRESS WU, 581–705

THE SUI DYNASTY, 581–618

After several centuries of division between the north and south, a Northern Zhou general unified China in 589 under the Sui 隋 dynasty and established a strong centralized government that would last under both the Sui and the succeeding dynasty, the Tang 唐. Both the Sui and Tang emerged from the northern dynasties, the Sui following directly upon the Northern Zhou. The Sui had only two emperors, Yang Jian 楊堅 (541–604), the source of one of the most telling statements about imperial polygamy in Chinese history, and his son, Yang Guang 楊廣 (569–618), one of China's most infamous megalomaniac rulers. They were followed by the Tang, which had the only female emperor in Chinese history, Wu Zetian 武則天 (625–705). How she established herself and almost regularized rule by women is the climax of the first half of the history of female rulership in dynastic China. Her rule begs many questions about women's participation in politics, including the terms a woman used to call herself, whether and how she appeared in public, the masculine and feminine poses she struck, and her sexuality in terms of intimacy with favorites. Let us first look at the Sui, which in spite of its notorious second ruler began with a companionate couple, his parents, who at first agreed to have children only by the empress. The main source is still the *History of the Northern Dynasties*, with a

few references to the *History of the Sui* (*Suishu* 隋書), the two of which for our purposes largely overlap.

They Will Have Children by No Other Women

Dugu Jialuo 獨孤伽羅 (544–602) was the first Sui empress, wife of Yang Jian, who was posthumously called Emperor Wen 文. She was the daughter of a high military official of the Northern Zhou who married her to Yang Jian when she was fourteen. She fits the profile of a good founding empress, that is, she was of outstanding character and from a prominent family. Her elder sister was the second Zhou emperor's posthumous empress, while her eldest daughter, Yang Lihua, as told above, was Zhou emperor Yuwen Yun's empress. A remarkable statement occurs early in her biography: "The emperor and empress were a companionate couple who swore that they would have children by no other woman" (帝與后相得, 誓無異生之子). Swearing to have children by no other woman was unprecedented in Chinese history. In another testament to their harmony, her biography follows by saying that when the emperor held court, she used to proceed there with him in a carriage and wait for him nearby. When he concluded, they returned to their living quarters and, says the historian, "they were happy to see each other." She liked to read and was kind and sympathetic, especially to people in distress such as criminals about to be executed. But, it was said, she was extremely jealous. She left vacant many of the positions designated for consorts, including the top three; closely guarded the emperor's access to women from the rear palace; and when he impregnated one of his concubines, the empress had her killed.¹

"Here I Am an Emperor, Yet I Cannot Do as I Please"

The empress had the pregnant consort murdered while the emperor was holding court. What happened next produced a quintessential statement of polygamous frustration.

The emperor flew into a rage, got on his horse, and left the palace alone, exiting from the garden and taking a winding route until he came to a mountain valley thirty *li* away. Gao Ying, Yang Su, and

others rode in pursuit, and when they reached him, grabbed his horse and bitterly remonstrated with him.

The emperor heaved a deep sigh: “Here I am an emperor, yet I cannot do as I please” [吾貴為天子, 不得自由].

Gao Ying replied: “How can Your Majesty forsake the empire because of a mere woman?”

The emperor calmed down somewhat, grazed his horse for quite a while, and finally went back to the palace that night. The empress waited for him inside the gate and, when he arrived, she wept and bowed in apology. Gao Ying, Yang Su, and others helped them make up, then the emperor had wine brought out and enjoyed himself to the hilt. This was a major setback for the empress.

Because the advisor Gao Ying had been a retainer of the empress’s father, Empress Dugu at first treated him with respect. But after hearing that he referred to her as a “mere woman,” she began to bear him a grudge. She became even more displeased when, with his wife now dead, one of his concubines gave birth to a son. The empress plotted against him on several fronts. Since the emperor listened to her every word, her biography says, she persuaded him to reprimand all princes and officials whose concubines became pregnant. As a result, the emperor dismissed Gao Ying and deposed the heir apparent, Yang Yong 勇, for having too many concubine favorites. A new heir apparent was installed, their second son, Yang Guang, who pretended to abide by his mother’s rules against favoring concubines.

The empress died in 602 at age fifty-nine. Her biography reports that, after her death, the emperor became “infatuated” (*huo* 惑) with his two favorite consorts, fell ill as a result, and died. While on his deathbed he told his attendants: “If the Empress were still alive, I would not have come to this.” If we were just to read these words, then we might conclude that the fate of the entire Sui empire was summed up in this one brief sentence. A jealous empress, in other words, was a good thing, since she could prevent the emperor from going astray in the harem. In another statement before he died, however, he blamed the empress for switching the crown princes, as told in the story of Lady Guest Chen.

Lady Guest Chen was Chen Shubao’s half sister and had entered the lateral courts of the Sui after the fall of the Chen. Because of Empress Dugu’s jealousy, Chen was the only consort the emperor was allowed to

see. She supported Yang Guang, who succeeded in having his elder brother deposed as heir apparent so that he could take the position himself. When the empress died, Chen became honorable lady, was favored above everyone else, and became the most powerful woman of the inner palace. When the emperor was ill and nearing death, Honorable Lady Chen and heir apparent Yang Guang attended him at his bedside. Yang Guang tried to force himself on her, but she fended him off. Noticing that she was upset, the emperor asked her what was wrong and was furious to learn what happened. “How can a beast like this be handed the reins of government? Empress Dugu has done me wrong!” He was referring to the fact that the empress had been the main advocate of deposing their first son in favor of the second, Yang Guang. The emperor ordered his officials to prepare an edict reversing the designation of heir apparent, but Yang Guang found out and blocked them. Suddenly the news came that the emperor had expired. Honorable Lady Chen and other women of the rear palace “trembled” in fear of a revolt, and when Yang Guang sent her a sealed box, she assumed that it contained the poison that he would order her to drink to commit suicide. Instead, it contained a precious love token. The other women were relieved, but Chen was angry and refused to offer her thanks. When the others pressed her, she finally bowed to the messenger. That night “the heir apparent committed incest with her.”²

A Megalomaniac Emperor

One of Yang Guang’s strategies for becoming heir apparent was to pretend that he shunned having favorite concubines. This was in order to make himself look better than his brother, Yang Yong, the original heir apparent. Yang Guang won his mother’s approval by giving away any sons born of concubines, thus “demonstrating that he had no personal favorites.” As emperor, Yang Guang was responsible for grand-scale construction projects, including parts of what would become the Grand Canal, major military campaigns, and innovative restructuring of imperial administration. But in history he was mainly known as a megalomaniac emperor. He bested his brother by far in the luxury and size of his harem, about which much was written and fantasized in later times. Unlike other such emperors, he was never posthumously deposed, but in a decree of 618 the first Tang emperor gave him the unsavory post-

humorous title of the Profligate Emperor, Yangdi 煬帝, in which the character Yang, different from the Yang of his surname, connoted profligacy and abuse of power. The title has stuck ever since.

Sui Yangdi fascinated writers of poetry, drama, and fiction. One story even had him conversing with the ghost of Last Ruler Chen, who addressed him as a subordinate. One of the most famous works was the Ming-dynasty novel *The Libertine Life of Emperor Yang of the Sui*, which like other such stories drew from both history and fiction, including nonofficial accounts whose contents had been known for centuries, but only outside of the dynastic histories. The most famous parts of the story are about the emperor's enormous construction projects and his lust for virgins. In real life, he fell in love with the southern city of Yangzhou, located far from the capital in Chang'an, and decided to move there. In the novel, an ingenious advisor invents a giant carriage for transporting palace women to Yangzhou, called the car for the emperor's women. In it the emperor can do whatever he likes without anyone outside seeing or hearing. No such thing exists in the dynastic histories. Later in the novel the emperor realizes that the best way for him to transfer his palace women to Yangzhou is by water, thus his grand project of building a series of canals between the north and Yangzhou. The canals were real; and many of them still exist today. For transport, he had hundreds of "dragon boats" built, with brocade sails for windy days. The dragon boats actually existed, but the novel adds the detail that, if there was no wind, the emperor had the boats dragged by thousands of teenage girls aided by goats. Was the author perhaps inspired by the story of Emperor Wu of the Western Jin, who rode his goat cart through his harem of ten thousand women?³

Once established in Yangzhou, the novel continues, the emperor builds a palace called the Labyrinth, in which he dallies for days on end with the three thousand virgins drafted into his harem. The story of the Labyrinth cannot be found in the dynastic histories, but arose by the Song dynasty and fascinated later writers. In the novel, Yangdi has two inventions specially made for him, the first called the turn-easy chair, which allows his attendants to push him around upstairs and down, for he tires of walking to and fro in the Labyrinth. The vehicle is equipped with a lever on each side allowing it to roll in any direction. Then there is the cart of wanton desire, with devices for locking the hands and feet of the virgins so that the emperor can have his way with them. In one

scene a virgin flirts with him precociously but desperately resists him when he wants to have sex. He ignores her pleas but, as the narrator describes, is mindful of the virgin's pain and tries not to be too rough. Hours later she relaxes and coyly tries to win him over, but he still has his way. In the end she throws herself in his lap and they cuddle tenderly for a while.

Devices like the cart of wanton desire appeared in other Ming and Qing stories as tools of the profligate man's whims. Fascination with virgins was a typical motif, as was the man's concern for her pain. The careers of such men usually ended with their death and destruction. No stories ever concluded with him proudly defending his way of life, as Giacomo Casanova (1725–1798) did in his *Histoire de ma vie*, the famous autobiography about his many decades of sexual folly and adventure throughout Europe. Casanova was not a ruler nor did he have a harem and, moreover, he had the opportunity to speak for himself. The Chinese profligate was someone written about by others who used him as a didactic example, though authors hardly shied from injecting obscene and explicit portrayal.⁴

THE EARLY TANG DYNASTY, 618–705

As the Sui dynasty weakened under Emperor Yang, rebellions hastened its fall. One of the rebel leaders was Li Yuan 李淵 (566–635), who had been a governor and general in the Sui. His mother was the sister of Yang Jian's mother. He was helped by two of his children by the same wife, his son Li Shimin 李世民 (599–649) and his daughter the Princess of Pingyang 平陽 (598–623), who gathered thousands of troops and herself participated in the rebellion. Li Yuan ended the Sui and established the Tang, ruling from 618 to 626. But in a dispute in 626, his son Li Shimin killed two of his own brothers, including the heir apparent, frightened Li Yuan into abdicating, and took over as emperor from 626 to 649. It was under his son, Gaozong 高宗 (628–683), who ruled from 649 to 683, that the only female emperor in Chinese history began to come to power. Since her original name is lost to history, she is usually known by her posthumous name, Wu Zetian 武則天 (625–705). First co-ruling with her husband, after his death she ruled her own dynasty, called the Zhou 周, from 690 to 705. She was followed by several other

powerful women, including a daughter who wanted to rule in her brother's stead and a granddaughter who wanted to succeed to the throne. It was an extraordinary time in Chinese history.

The Tang emerged from the northern dynasties, in which, as we know, nomadic groups were dominant and women enjoyed wider latitude than Han women in politics and war. Was the influence of northern customs a factor in the appearance of this series of powerful imperial women? Or were there precedents already in place and were these women merely furthering them? Was Wu Zetian the last of a kind? Wu Zetian did indeed mark an extreme that future reigns made sure never became a rule. Let us look at the early Tang in terms of her rise to and fall from power, including the ways in which she created precedents and legitimized herself and how she was portrayed both then and later. Let us also focus on a feature she shared with other female rulers, her fondness for male favorites, which inspired later works of fiction including one of the most famous works of pornography in Chinese history, *The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction*. Then we will once again reflect upon the question of rule by women in China.

Using the Word Emperor to Refer to Herself

Confucianists in general shunned the thought of female rulers. Empress and dowager were the highest ranks women could attain, and an empress was always the wife of the supreme ruler, the male emperor. But Wu Zetian called herself emperor, *huangdi* 皇帝, not empress, *huanghou* 皇后. She referred to herself using the first-person pronoun, *zhen*, usually used only by men. The male officials of her dynasty treated and addressed her as emperor, and when the Tang dynasty was restored, the new emperor, her son, still honored her as having been emperor, as did the next Tang emperor, another of her sons. The old resistance to female rulers cemented itself once the Tang fell, however, as can be seen in the way the first official dynastic history of the Tang treated her. This history is called the *Old Tang History* (*Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書) and was finished in 945. As with other emperors, it gave Wu Zetian her own annal and referred to her as *shang* 上, a common alternate word for emperor (literally, “supreme one” or the “one on high”). Yet the title of the annal referred to her as empress. The later revision of the *Old Tang History*, the *New Tang History* (*Xin Tangshu* 新唐書),

likewise gave her an annal. It was produced in 1060 by the famous poet and statesman Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–1072). But in addition to the annal, he also gave her a biography, in which he reported that she “called herself” emperor (*zicheng* 自稱). In this way he distanced himself from the notion that she was emperor, implying that she only thought she was. Then there was the great history of China completed in 1084 by Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019–1086), the *Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government*. It stated that Wu Zetian was never an emperor but instead an empress dowager (*taihou*). From then on, Wu Zetian was simply considered a usurping empress. The standard history from the thirteenth century on, Zhu Xi’s 朱熹 (1130–1200) *Outline of the Comprehensive Mirror* (*Tongjian gangmu* 通鑑綱目), considered her son Zhongzong 中宗 to be the legitimate ruler during the period in which she reigned, even though she deposed him and ruled in his stead until he took the throne back from her in 705.⁵

“Let the Two Hags Get Drunk to Their Bones!”

Both Li Yuan’s and Li Shimin’s empresses were Xianbei. Li Shimin’s empress Zhangsun 長孫 (601–636) was Gaozong’s mother and the striking opposite of a woman like Wu Zetian. Even when the emperor tried to consult her on political matters, she steadfastly refused to respond, quoting the old line from the *Book of Documents* that “hens did not announce the dawn” and that as a woman she would never interfere in politics.⁶ Wu Zetian was originally one of Li Shimin’s lower-ranking consorts, the daughter of a man who helped Li Yuan during his rebellion and a woman who had been a member of the Sui royal family. She entered the harem at age fourteen. After Li Shimin died, she and other sonless consorts were placed in a nunnery, where they would normally have remained widows the rest of their lives. But in a scheme against a rival wife, Gaozong’s empress Wang 王 had him take Wu Zetian out of seclusion and incestuously marry her, thus promoting Wu against the rival wife but inadvertently giving Wu the opportunity to scheme on her own behalf. As the story went, Empress Wang had no sons and was not favored. Her rival was the emperor’s new favorite, Chaste Consort Xiao Liangdi 蕭良娣, who had a son. It was to divert the emperor’s attention from her that Empress Wang recommended taking Wu Zetian as consort. Gaozong already knew Wu from the time when he was attending

his father and, according to some, he was already attracted to her. Gaozong agreed to invite her into his harem and awarded her the rank of illustrious visage. Some or even all the details about her entry into Gaozong's harem are questionable, but there is no doubt that she was the consort of both father and son. Among northern nomads, as we have seen, levirate marriage was normal, whereby a deceased man's wife or wives might marry the man's younger brother or even son. Yet this was hardly a case of levirate. According to Han Chinese standards, a son marrying a father's consort was a heinous case of incest. This marriage was an instance in which expedience and passion simply overruled taboo. Empress Wang's plan backfired when Wu Zetian took advantage of the situation to slander both her and Consort Xiao. One account has it that Wu had just had a baby daughter, whom Empress Wang visited and held in her arms. After the empress left, Wu smothered the baby. When the emperor showed up, Wu pretended happily to go and fetch the girl, only to discover her dead body. When she asked her servants what happened, they said that Empress Wang was the last person there. The emperor immediately assumed that the empress had killed the baby daughter.⁷

No such incident is recorded in the *Old Tang History*, which was in general more sympathetic to Empress Wu and which instead reported that Empress Wang and her mother tried to use witchcraft against Wu. In the *New Tang History* Wu falsely accused them of doing so. It is also possible that the empress's fall resulted from the fact that a relative of hers who was prime minister fell into disfavor with Gaozong and thus endangered her position. Whatever the truth may be, and whatever combination of factors there may have been, the emperor finally deposed both Empress Wang and Chaste Consort Xiao, reduced them to the rank of commoners, and had them imprisoned. He then made Wu Zetian empress, all of this occurring in 655. The emperor still felt sorry for Wang and Xiao and tried to help them, but Empress Wu found out and in Empress Lü's style had the two caned, their hands and feet cut off, and their bodies thrown into wine vats to die. "Let the two hags get drunk to their bones!" she said (令此二嫗骨醉). When they were first imprisoned, Empress Wang had been submissive, it was said, but Consort Xiao cursed Wu, saying, "In the next life Wu will turn into a mouse, I a cat, and I will rip her throat out!" For this reason Empress Wu

supposedly prohibited cats in the palace and often had nightmares about the two women.⁸

Creating Herself as Ruler

Empress Wu ruled side by side with her husband Gaozong for many years until his death in 683. Historians have accused the emperor of allowing her to dominate him, but it was also the case that, from the late 650s on, he was in poor health and often unable to attend to duties. As a result, the empress ruled in his stead and learned how to do so well. When he had what was perhaps the first of a series of strokes in 660, she assumed virtually unquestioned authority, which she retained from then on except when he almost deposed her in 664. She got him to reverse himself, after which they ruled together as the “Two Sages” (*ersheng* 二聖). Whenever he held court, she would sit behind him shielded by a curtain—little did she know that governing from behind a curtained divide would become the rule for female regents in the Song and Qing.⁹ In 674 they adopted the parallel titles of heavenly emperor and heavenly empress (*tianhuang* 天皇 and *tianhou* 天后), creating the impression that they were coequals. She had four sons and two daughters. Her eldest son served as first heir apparent but died, some say at her order, followed by her second son, whom she disposed of as well. She destroyed many others of the Tang imperial house both before and after the death of Gaozong, when her third son, Li Xian 李顯 (also known as Li Zhe 哲, 656–710), assumed the throne as Emperor Zhongzong. But she soon replaced him with his younger brother, Li Dan 李旦 (662–716), who ruled as Emperor Ruizong 睿宗. She so dominated him that he never truly ruled and finally ceded the throne to her in 690, when she established her own dynasty. Both sons remained loyal to her even after her dismissal and death.

Since rulers had always been men, the question of whether or not a woman deserved to rule was automatically an issue for her. She and her supporters responded to that challenge by engaging in symbolic acts. They made use of language, ritual, religion, and art to legitimize her role and enhance her aura. During her coreign with Emperor Gaozong, for example, she asked a minister to persuade the emperor to perform a set of sacrifices at the holy Mount Tai that had only been performed six times previously, the last time in the Han. The purpose of the rites was

to announce to heaven and earth the success of the dynasty. Women had not participated in the rites, but Empress Wu succeeded in leading a part that was dedicated to the earth goddess. This took place in 666. Two crucial steps in her move to take the throne involved in one case the use of an omen, in another a sacred text, both fabricated by her supporters to point her in the direction of usurpation. Using omens to support imperial intentions was of course an old tradition. Supposedly without her knowledge, in 688 a nephew of hers had words carved in a white stone saying, “a sage mother shall be upon us and her imperial reign will flourish forever” (聖母臨人, 永昌帝業). The stone was referred to as the “precious diagram” (*baotu* 寶圖) and was presented to the empress, who was told that it had been found in the Luo River, which since the legendary past had produced omens of similar sort. Then there was a Buddhist text called the *Great Cloud Sutra* (*Dayun jing* 大雲經), which prophesied the incarnation in female form of the Buddhist deity Maitreya, who would rule the world and bring bounty and joy to all human beings. A newly written commentary to the sutra asserted that she was the reincarnation of that deity. It was presented to the empress in 690. Two months later, petitions appeared asking her to found the Zhou dynasty, one signed with sixty thousand names. At first she refused, but then acquiesced (recalling Wang Mang in his usurpation six hundred years before).¹⁰

Wu Zetian, *Cakravartin*

After becoming emperor, a major concern was gaining and maintaining support for her rule. She continued to engage in frequent acts of a symbolic nature. She gave herself and her courtly entourage a sumptuous appearance, often emerging in public at the head of splendid ceremonies. She repeatedly changed her reign titles. One set of years was called “Heavenly Granted,” for example, another “Perfect Satisfaction.” She created a new Chinese character for her name, Zhao 曌, which consisted of the sun and moon over the sky, as if to say that she were the sun and moon shining over everyone under heaven (it and others she created were abolished after she died). She addressed the traditional bias toward male privilege by placing emphasis on loyalty to the state over loyalty of son to father. She made the mourning period for a deceased mother the same as for a deceased father, three years. She



Figure 5.1. Empress Wu Zetian. (From an eighteenth-century album of portraits of eighty-six emperors of China, Qing dynasty, eighteenth century. The British Library, London, UK. Permission of Lessing Photo Archive, copyright Erich Lessing.)

once reversed the usual custom of sending a Chinese princess to marry a foreign king or prince and instead sent a Chinese prince to a foreign princess. The foreign ruler who requested the marriage alliance felt insulted and continued to wage war against the empress, even saying that he would restore the Li clan to power. She took steps to promote her own family instead of that of the Li house of the Tang. She enthroned her mother as empress dowager. Besides performing sacrifices to the Li clan, she sacrificed to her own Wu ancestors. She greatly

increased the power and influence of the Wus and almost made a nephew of the Wu clan heir apparent.

At the core of her symbolic acts was her attempt to create an image of herself as cosmic ruler, in particular, female cosmic ruler. She created an image of herself as mother of the realm, which she and others accomplished by linking her with the primordial notion of the Dao, the birth-giver of the world, or to the ancient goddess Nügua. She also gave herself a specifically Buddhist imperial aura. The newly created commentary to the *Great Cloud Sutra* had already told that she was the incarnation of the bodhisattva Maitreya. As emperor, she identified herself as a *cakravartin*, a Sanskrit term for a universal, enlightened ruler (in Chinese, *zhuanlun wang* 轉輪王, meaning the ruler whose wheels roll everywhere without obstruction). Other Chinese rulers had used the term before her, but none in so grand a way. She was a lavish and devoted patron of Buddhist art and architecture and employed experts who engaged in monumental projects, including great murals of episodes in Buddha's life, magnificent buildings, and statues. Before becoming emperor, in 688 she already had a group of buildings constructed that included a Confucian temple called the Hall of Light (*mingtang* 明堂), to the north of which she built a five-story tower, called the Hall of Heaven (*tiantang* 天堂), with a statue of the Buddha several hundred meters high in it. Nearby she installed a mechanical device made of bronze that marked heavenly movements. In about 695 she had another bronze monument constructed at the southern gate of the imperial city, a column thirty-five meters tall and four meters in diameter, called the Heavenly Axis (*tianshu* 天樞). Executed by craftsmen from Persia, India, and Korea, it was like a pillar at the center of the world and served as a symbol of her imperial centrality. One did not create such things unless one had monumental messages to deliver. The various projects stood as emblems of her role as a kind of cosmic ruler ushering in a new Buddhist era. The further implication was that, if there could be rulers who were sons of heaven, there could also be rulers who were daughters of heaven.¹¹

Unfortunately, too little information remains about the political and administrative aspects of her rule, especially in comparison with other similar lengths of time in the Tang. Historians were so repulsed by her rule that they left little to tell and, of that, much was negative. Nevertheless, suffice to say, Wu Zetian was a strong and adept ruler who

attended to all aspects of imperial duties throughout her rule, including when necessary the use of military force. Prior to assuming the throne she had already recognized the economic and demographic shift that had taken place between the Chang'an region and the region in which the southern dynasties had ruled. She responded by launching new administrative posts and units and expanded the bureaucracy by recruiting a larger group of candidates for offices. Her method of doing so was to expand the use of civil service examinations for selection of candidates, a change that took hold for the rest of imperial history. Once established as emperor, she insisted that no great change would occur. The transition of adopting Loyang as capital instead of Chang'an went smoothly; she even moved thousands of households along with her. She won the loyalty of the best officials available to her, said the historian Sima Guang, who in general disapproved of her. As a controversial ruler, she inevitably relied upon a group of inner-court advisors loyal to her, including her daughter the Princess of Taiping 太平 and her female private secretary, Shangguan Wan'er 上官婉兒 (664–710), to be discussed below. To guard against resistance, she went to great lengths to eliminate opposition, killing many members of the Li clan and others whom her secret police implicated. She reversed the trend of granting power to the chief ministers, whom she frequently appointed and dismissed. She dealt with several military challenges, including retaking garrisons captured years before by the Tibetans and quelling, with difficulty, a Khitan rebellion in the northeast in 697. By that time there were serious problems caused by such things as the increasingly large numbers of displaced people and the inability to meet the costs of both defense and the expanding bureaucracy. After a series of crises she was finally convinced to address the issue of succession and in 698 decided upon the Li family instead of the Wus. Her popularity declined in the final years of the Zhou, especially because of her favoritism for the Zhang brothers, to be discussed shortly. Members of the bureaucracy finally saw no alternative but the use of force, and thus the end of her rule in 705.¹²

The Elderly Empress and Her Male Favorites

The side of Empress Wu that later became the most grossly overblown was her fondness for male favorites. Prior to Wu Zetian, as we have

seen, powerful women likewise took extramarital lovers or had male favorites, even as advisors. In her case, she took her favorites after her husband died and after she was sixty years old. If compared to male rulers, she was not necessarily unusual. Favoritism posed dangers no matter whether a ruler was male or female. On the other hand, as long as favoritism did not interfere in politics, it was not of great consequence. She was unlike a male ruler in that, during her reign as emperor, she was too old to produce offspring who might have changed the line of succession. A man of the same age could still have had sons and might be tempted to have one of the later sons replace his earlier heir apparent. Although she already had two sons ready to succeed her, Wu Zetian stalled in naming an heir apparent. Male rulers sometimes stalled as well. Whether the ruler was male or female, stalling created tension among both courtiers and candidates for succession. A more serious departure would have occurred had Empress Wu appointed a Wu man as successor, which she almost did, thus completely changing the line of succession. This possibility was alarming to many but not all at court. Other departures from the precedents of succession did not come up, in particular, naming a woman as successor, which would have been unheard of, though after Wu Zetian's death her granddaughter asked to be named heir apparent. Nor did Empress Wu ever propose naming one of her male favorites as successor, as might have happened centuries before when Han emperor Ai proposed doing so with Dong Xian. What Wu Zetian most had in common with male rulers was her desire to take matters of sexual and sentimental intimacy into her own hands and not be constrained by others. If she was attracted to a man, she wanted him in her midst, however scandalous that behavior would be had she not so much power. Like other empresses and dowagers, she seemed to say that now she was in charge, the normal rules of a woman's sexual conduct should not matter. It was also the case that she lived in an age in which her conduct—whether calling herself emperor or having lovers—was relatively less scandalous and more possible than it would be in times after her, a topic to which I will return below.

The first of her affairs began in 685 with a man named Feng Xiaobao 馮小寶 (died 694), who made his living selling women's cosmetics. He was a muscular man of imposing stature who in one report managed to "gain the favor" of a servant woman of a Tang princess, who in turn spoke highly of him to Empress Wu. When the words "gain the favor"

refer to an emperor and a woman, they mean that a sexual relationship has occurred. In this report, the relationship was between Feng and the servant woman. The empress liked him so much that she had him shave his head and be ordained as a Buddhist monk so that he would have easy access to the palace. She renamed him Xue Huaiyi 薛懷義, giving him the surname of one of her sons-in-law, who was forced to adopt him as father. She granted Xue many privileges, which he used to lord over people both inside and outside the palace. The empress protected him from those who were outraged by his behavior, even once when he had his attendants severely beat a high official. His favor lasted about ten years, but the empress finally tired of his excesses, including setting fire to the Hall of Heaven and Hall of Light in anger at her having taken a new lover (Xue had been put in charge of supervising their construction in 688). In 695 she had him murdered. According to the *Old Tang History*, the empress had her daughter, the Princess of Taiping, pick several dozen stout women to observe him in secret. When they discovered him engaging in a devious plot, the Princess's wet nurse had some strong men tie him up and strangle him, then sent his corpse back to his monastery. The slightly different report in the *New Tang History* says that Empress Wu had the female servants tie him up and the men beat him to death before sending him back to the monastery.¹³

The historians are reserved in their reference to the sexual relationship between the empress and Xue. The *Old Tang History* does not explicitly refer to it, though later it reports that her new lover, an imperial physician, "gained her favor." The *Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government* merely says that Xue "gained the favor" of the empress, while the *New Tang History* uses the words "was intimate with him" (*yu si* 與私), which unmistakably refer to a sexual affair. Writers in later centuries, especially the Ming and Qing, liked to believe that she, a woman over sixty, was still lusty and driven to have affairs with younger men. But the only spice the Song historians added to their report was that "even though the empress was elderly, she was skillful in applying make-up, such that even those close to her were unaware of how much she had aged" (太后春秋雖高, 善自塗澤, 雖左右不悟其衰). Another fascinating point about the empress and Xue Huaiyi is the fact that the *Old Tang History* placed his biography in the chapter on "in-law relations," which Chinese dynastic histories usually reserved for the emperor's wives and concubines. The imperial physician is also mentioned

here. Although we cannot assign too much importance to this categorization, it nevertheless hints at the resemblance the historians saw between Xue Huaiyi and female consorts married into the imperial family; at least it hints at the fact that how to categorize him was an issue. By not placing him in the chapter on imperial in-laws, on the other hand, the *New Tang History* denied him the slightest hint of normalization.¹⁴

The empress's next affair was with two half brothers and was more sensational. It began in the late 690s when the empress was seventy-two and lasted until she was eighty. If Xue Huaiyi was known for his brawn, the two young men in their twenties, Zhang Yizhi 張易之 and Zhang Changzong 昌宗, were known for their delicate beauty. Skilled in music and song, they served the empress in the inner palace, where they "wore powder on their faces and rouge on their lips" (*fu fen shi zhu* 傅粉施朱), dressed in extravagant clothing, and delighted Emperor Wu with performance and wit. It was common since the northern and southern dynasties for handsome young men to wear powder and rouge. As with Xue Huaiyi, the *Old Tang History* never hints that the Zhangs' relationship with the empress was sexual, but the *New Tang History* states that they "gained her favor." Although later they involved themselves in politics and became audaciously corrupt, at first they mainly provided the empress with amusement and diversion. At parties, for example, they "furnished entertainment by making fun of ministers." Eventually, according to the historians, all kinds of flatterers and slanderers began to converge on the court, and nasty rumors began to spread. The *New Tang History* states that the brothers were flagrantly lewd and shameless, while all the sources say that the empress invited pretty boys to court to entertain her. An imperial official finally submitted a complaint, saying that the rumors were getting too ugly and referring to the young men by the old term, "inner favorites" (*neichong* 內寵). She told him he was honest to tell her so. Meanwhile, even during the period of the Zhang brothers, the empress dealt with serious matters such as the Khitan rebellion in the northeast.¹⁵

The Zhang brothers' end finally came when they became involved in the issue of imperial succession. They feared what would happen to them after the empress's death. For a long time Empress Wu had not made it clear who would rule after she died, though she named her son Ruizong as imperial heir (*huangsi* 皇嗣), avoiding the usual title of heir apparent (*taizi* 太子). Members of the Wu clan, led by the empress's

nephews Wu Chengsi 武承嗣 and Wu Sansi 武三思, wanted a member of their family to succeed, while officials of the imperial court promoted her son Zhongzong. Empress Wu began leaning toward Zhongzong, whom she finally declared heir apparent in 698. But he took the surname Wu, which still indicated that the empress did not intend to restore the Tang. Meanwhile, the Zhang brothers allied themselves with Wu Sansi. The empress's health began to fail, after which she allowed no court attendants to see her except the Zhang brothers. Early in 705, a faction of high ministers got the reluctant Zhongzong to join them and their forces as they entered the palace, where they decapitated the Zhangs and ended the Zhou. The empress surrendered and lived for another ten months, dying at the end of 705.

Though not the same kind of favorite, a young woman who played a major role in both palace and court politics during Empress Wu's regime was her private secretary, Shangguan Wan'er. Her father and grandfather had been executed for their opposition to Empress Wu, after which she and her mother entered the palace as slaves while Shangguan was still a baby. But even though a slave, she was such a talented writer that the empress employed her. After about 698 Shangguan Wan'er became her confidant, helped draft decrees, and participated in policy discussions. At one point she committed a crime for which she should have been beheaded. Because the empress valued her talent, she reduced the punishment by having her face tattooed instead. Shangguan Wan'er was also famous as a poet and judge of poetry and was influential in the promotion of literary talent, an enterprise that the empress especially prized. But it was after Empress Wu died that Shangguan Wan'er's influence truly grew. When Emperor Zhongzong assumed the throne in 705, she became his concubine at the rank of illustrious countenance and served as a ghostwriter for him and his powerful wife, Empress Wei 韋. She continued to be involved in sexual and political intrigues until she was killed by Li Longji 李隆基 (685–762), who eventually took over as emperor and who, in recognition of her talent, ordered the posthumous compilation of her works.¹⁶

Almost Three More Wu Zetians

Echoes of Wu Zetian followed her death in the form of three other royal women. The first was Empress Wei, wife of Emperor Zhongzong.

After he was deposed in 684, he was exiled and lived in fear of assassination. During the hard times he reportedly relied on the courage of his wife and once swore that if ever his fortunes changed for the better, he would be forever beholden to her. She retained that dominance when he was restored to the throne. Shangguan Wan'er even "urged her to continue in the mold of Wu Zetian," says the *Old Tang History* (上官常勸后行則天故事). Then a strange and unexpected alliance formed between Wu Zetian's nephew, Wu Sansi, and Empress Wei. First Wu Sansi had an affair with Shangguan Wan'er, who introduced him to the imperial couple. One report had it that Wu Sansi would play a game with the empress on the imperial bed, while the emperor happily kept score. Because of this, ugly rumors spread outside the palace. Then Wu Sansi "gained the Empress's favor" and through that relationship plotted the marriage of his son to the favorite daughter of the emperor and empress, the Princess of Anle 安樂.¹⁷

The next even stranger outcome of these new alliances was the scheme to have the Princess of Anle declared heir apparent. Empress Wei had no surviving sons (her one son had been executed by Wu Zetian for criticizing the Zhang brothers), while the emperor only had sons born of concubines, the third of whom, Li Chongjun 李重俊, was chosen as heir apparent. According to Li's biography, however, Wu Sansi and his son persuaded the Princess of Anle to harass Li Chongjun by reminding him that he was of lower birth than she. She was the empress's daughter, whereas he was born of a concubine. She even called him a "slave." Wu Sansi and his son further persuaded the princess to request that Li Chongjun be deposed and that she be declared "crown princess" (*huang tainü* 皇太女), a term that had never existed before. She loved the idea and proposed it to the emperor, who, though he did not accept it, did not scold her for it either. The heir apparent finally gathered allies and killed both Wu Sansi and his son. Because Shangguan Wan'er had "fornicated" with Wu Sansi, Li Chongjun tried to kill her too, but failed and was killed during an escape. Soon after, the Princess of Anle married another man of the Wu family in a sumptuous wedding and, along with Empress Wei, enjoyed several more years of power and privilege until the emperor died suddenly in 710, some say at the hands of his wife or daughter. Empress Wei then enthroned a fifteen-year-old son of Emperor Zhongzong, planning to keep the power of the throne to herself.¹⁸

The third powerful woman emerged two weeks later, when a coup took place in which Empress Wei, the Princess of Anle, and Shangguan Wan'er all lost their lives. Although Li Longji headed the attack, the prime mover was Wu Zetian's daughter, the Princess of Taiping, who replaced the fifteen-year-old emperor with her brother, Emperor Ruizong. Li Longji was Ruizong's third son by a concubine. The Princess of Taiping was always full of schemes, says the historian. Long before, Empress Wu used to say that her daughter was "like me" (*lei wo* 類我).¹⁹ With Ruizong on the throne, the princess planned to rule in his stead, just as her mother had when he was previously on the throne. She bowed to precedent by declaring an heir apparent, Li Longji, but soon turned against him. Then a comet appeared in the sky in the summer of 712. Since such things could be taken as omens of impending change, Emperor Ruizong abdicated to Li Longji. The Princess of Taiping attempted a coup, failed, and in 713 was ordered by the new emperor to commit suicide. With her death came the end of dominance by women in the Tang.

A Pornographic Book about Wu Zetian

Before discussing the historical import of Wu Zetian and her female successors, let us look at how she became vilified in later times and inspired one of the most famous works of pornography in Chinese history. As with Flying Swallow and Sui emperor Yang, fiction in general exaggerated Wu's attraction to young men and portrayed her as an insatiable woman. Her accomplishments as a ruler became secondary. The pornographic work was *The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction*, by an anonymous author who some say wrote it in the 1530s. In Europe pornography was often used as a weapon of social criticism and satire and the same occurred in this case, which likewise wove a moral message into the explicit description of sex. Parts of the story are nothing but an outright glorification of sexual ecstasy. At the same time the author is thoroughly motivated to prove the villainy of Wu Zetian's rule and the necessity of potent and upright men to return the empire to its proper path. The most potent man is a newly invented character with the same surname as Xue Huaiyi, that is, Xue Aocao 薛敖曹, a handsome and brilliant young courtier skilled in calligraphy, painting, and music and possessing an enormous penis that gets so stiff that a peck of

grain can be suspended from it. The story's tone of exaggeration and slapstick is already evident in this detail. Xue Aocao is a virgin until he meets Wu Zetian, for whom sex with him is at first painful but who soon finds him the most satisfying partner she has ever met.

The story sticks closely to historical reports and frequently quotes from them, but creates its own plot in terms of the sexual relations between Wu Zetian and her lovers. Though an elderly woman, she still looks youthful in hair, teeth, and skin, and gushes with sexual desire. The key feature of her affair with Xue Aocao is his ability to please her at the same time that he resolves to serve her loyally and never let himself be corrupted by her favoritism. Loyal service includes causing her pain in sex, even when she tells him to stop, where pain is a metaphor for the truths that a loyal minister utters but that the ruler does not want to hear. He makes her dependent upon him and amenable to his persuasions by teasing her sexually. He reaches her innermost depths and brings them both to ecstasy, but sometimes pulls himself out when she is in the midst of arousal or goads her with shallow tantalizing thrusts. The ultimate truth Xue Aocao conveys is that she must select an heir apparent and that the heir must be her son, Emperor Zhongzong. At first she refuses, but gives in when he resorts to injuring himself by taking a knife to cut his penis. In the finale, they bid each other goodbye with a ritual in which they burn incense on each other's genitals, thus symbolizing the beginning and ending of their affair in pain. Then she has them reenact every sexual position they have ever performed, ten times each, after which she sends him off with extravagant gifts. Her son returns to the throne and later tries to find Aocao to thank him, but he has disappeared. When people sight him several decades later, he has turned into an immortal who has left the earthly world forever.²⁰

This and other novels that portray Wu Zetian and women like her assume that a woman greedy for power is also greedy for sex. Bad male rulers like Sui emperor Yang are similar in this respect, but there is a difference. No female character comparable to Xue Aocao ever serves a male ruler. In other words, no female sexual companion of superior sexual strength loyally serves a profligate male ruler and compels him to mend his ways. The female sexual companion of a profligate male ruler monopolizes him for her own benefit or gets rejected as he moves on to other women. The virtuous woman who serves him loyally or remon-

strates with him does not at the same time serve him with grandiose sexual pleasure.

A Female Emperor in Byzantium

It happened that, about a century after Wu Zetian in China, there was a woman ruler in Byzantium who also referred to herself as emperor, Irene. She was born in about 750–755 and became empress when her husband assumed the throne in 775. When he died in 780, she became regent and co-ruled with her nine-year-old son, who was declared emperor. Then she claimed that role over him, issuing coins showing her with the scepter of office. When he grew up, he deposed her and held the throne from 790 to 797, but in 797 she took the throne back, blinded him (a common way of eliminating rivals to the throne in Byzantium), and became sole ruler until 802. Coins issued during that time named her as empress, while legal documents referred to her as emperor, using the Greek word *basileus*. Like Wu Zetian she liked to appear publicly in grand ceremonies. Toward the end of her reign, she considered marriage to the Frankish king Charlemagne, but was overthrown before she could carry out the plan. She died in exile in 803.

Numerous other powerful women appeared after Irene, including one who likewise called herself emperor, Theodora, in her case using the word *autokrator*. She ruled from 1050 to 1056. Byzantium had both widowed empresses who remarried and co-ruled with their emperor-husbands and widowed empresses who did not remarry but ruled as emperors without calling themselves such. Theodora's sister, described in the last chapter, was Zoe Porphyrogenneta, who preceded Theodora and was empress from 1028 until her death in 1050. She did not pursue power for herself but had a series of three husbands, all of whom became emperor through marrying her. She had lovers while married to the first husband, whom she had one of her lovers drown and replace as emperor. Her third husband, whom she married while in her sixties, had a mistress who moved into the palace as a quasi-empress. It is said that Zoe succeeded in spite of her irregular ways because she and her sister Theodora had no brothers and were considered the legitimate heirs to their father's throne. Wu Zetian enjoyed no such legitimacy. Only princesses like Wu Zetian's daughter, the Princess of Taiping, or granddaughter, the Princess of Anle, enjoyed similar privilege and pow-

er. For a widowed empress in China to remarry was unthinkable. Wu Zetian and others like her in China succeeded because of their personal strength and skill and the support they received from family and officialdom.²¹

NOTES

1. See *Beishi*, 14.532, or the *Sui History*, in Wei Zheng 魏徵 et al., *Suishu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1973), 36.1108; and on her jealousy, *Beishi*, 13.489.

2. See *Beishi*, 14.533–34. He did the same with another of his father's consorts.

3. For the imaginary meeting with Chen, see Yan Shigu 顏師古, "Daye shiyi ji" 大業拾遺記 (616 CE), cited in Liu Yongqiang, *Zhongguo gudai xiaoshuoshi xulun* (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2007), 108–9. The novel is by the anonymous Qidong yeren 齊東野人, *Sui Yangdi yanshi* 隋煬帝艷史 (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou guji chubanshe, 1988). On the car, *yunü che* 御女車, see chapter 13; the canals, chapter 17; and the boats, chapter 25. On the historical dragon boats, see *Suishu*, 3.63–64.

4. For the inventions in the Labyrinth (*zhuanguan che* 轉關車 and *renyi che* 任意車), see *Sui Yangdi yanshi*, chapters 30 and 31. A work called *The Labyrinth* (*Milou ji* 迷樓記), probably written during the Song dynasty, relates the fate of a forlorn consort who won the emperor's attention only when she committed suicide.

5. See Hou Jin 後晉, Liu Xu 劉昫 et al., *Jiu Tangshu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 6.123–24 (use of *shang*); 6.129 (use of *zhen*); and Ouyang Xiu and Song Qi 宋祁, *Xin Tangshu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 4.81 and 76.3481. See also R. W. L. Guisso's "The Reigns of Empress Wu, Chung-tsung, and Jui-tung (684–712)," in *Sui and T'ang China, 589–906*, vol. 3, part I of *Cambridge History of China*, edited by Denis Twitchett and John Fairbank (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 244–332. The *New Tang History* suggests that, since Sima Qian and Ban Gu both gave Han empress Lü an annal, giving Wu Zetian one did not necessarily mean that she was a legitimate ruler (4.113).

6. On Empress Zhangsun, see *Jiu Tangshu*, 51.2165.

7. See *Zizhi tongjian* 199.6284 (Gaozong already knew Lady Wu) and 6286–87.

8. See *Jiu Tangshu*, 51.2170; *Xin Tangshu* 76.3473–75. On the fall to disfavor of her relative, see Huang Yongnian, *Tang shi ershi jiang* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2007).

9. See *Zizhi tongjian*, 201.6343. See *Jiu Tangshu*, 5.100 (天后垂簾於御座後; use of curtain while ruling with Gaozong); and *Xin Tangshu*, 76.3477 (常御紫宸殿, 施慘紫帳臨朝; while ruling with son as puppet emperor).

10. See *Zizhi tongjian*, 206.6530 (marriage alliance) and 204.6448 (the white stone).

11. On Wu as mother of the realm, see Stephen Bokenkamp, “A Medieval Feminist Critique of the Chinese World Order: The Case of Wu Zhao (r. 690–705),” *Religion* 28 (1998): 383–92. Regarding Buddhist and other architectural projects, see Yen Chuan-ying, “The Tower of Seven Jewels and Empress Wu,” *National Palace Museum Bulletin* 22, no. 1 (1987): 1–18; and Amy McNair, *Donors of Longmen: Faith, Politics, and Patronage in Medieval Chinese Buddhist Sculpture* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), chapter 7.

12. The information about the administrative aspects of her rule is mainly from Guisso, “The Reigns of Empress Wu,” 290–321, including the lack of information about her period of dominance, 245. See *Zizhi tongjian*, 205.6478 (effective use of officials).

13. See *Jiu Tangshu*, 183.4741 (gaining favor); *Zizhi tongjian*, 205.6499 (fire); *Jiu Tangshu*, 183.4741, 4743; and *Xin Tangshu*, 76.3483 (his death).

14. See *Jiu Tangshu*, 183.4741–43 (Xue Huaiyi biography); *Zizhi tongjian*, 203.6436; *Xin Tangshu*, 76.3480, 3482; and *Zizhi tongjian*, 205.6487 (makeup).

15. See *Jiu Tangshu*, 78.2706 (powder and rouge); *Xin Tangshu*, 76.3484 (gaining favor); *Jiu Tangshu*, 78.2706 (making fun of ministers); *Xin Tangshu*, 104.4014 (lewdness); and *Zizhi tongjian*, 206.6538, 6546–47.

16. See *Jiu Tangshu*, 51.2175; *Zizhi tongjian*, 208.6586–87.

17. See *Jiu Tangshu*, 51.2172.

18. See *Jiu Tangshu*, 51.2172, 86.2837–38.

19. See *Xin Tangshu* 83.3650.

20. For a study and translation of the story, see Charles Stone, *The Fountainhead of Chinese Erotica: The Lord of Perfect Satisfaction (Ruyijun zhuan 如意君傳)* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003).

21. On Byzantine empresses, see Linda Garland, *Byzantine Empresses*, especially 136–57; and Judith Herrin, *Women in Purple*, 51–129.

CONCLUSION TO PART II

The Question of Female Rulership

From the examples of Wu Zetian, Empress Wei, and the Princess of Taiping, it might have looked as though China was about to regularize rule by women. In retrospect, nothing could be further from the truth. With few exceptions, China remained committed to the notion that women should never be rulers. It is true that fifty years after the death of Wu Zetian, another woman became the center of dynastic crisis when Emperor Xuanzong became deeply attached to Honored Consort Yang. That affair was seen as the ultimate cause of the rebellion that occurred in 755 and nearly destroyed the Tang dynasty. But Consort Yang did not exert political authority in the manner of Wu Zetian. She was primarily a companion of pleasure and leisure. After Wu Zetian, Empress Wei, and the Princess of Taiping, only one other woman in the Tang came close to having as much influence on state politics, Suzong's Empress Wang. For the rest of the Tang, few women were even installed as empresses. Emperors for the most part simply refused or failed to enthrone empresses and instead kept consorts at ranks just below that of empress. No explicit decree or manifesto was ever issued to that effect, but it became a kind of *de facto* policy. Wu Zetian thus became the last woman in all of Chinese history to challenge the fact that only men could be emperors. That fact makes it even more remarkable that she and her immediate followers accomplished as much as they did.

Compared to people like Empress Lü or Jia Nanfeng, Wu Zetian gave people in later times an even greater reason to oppose female rulership. Imperial women sometimes even pointedly denied that they were like her. They particularly avoided one aspect of her character, having male favorites—although sometimes they were still accused of doing so. The shadowy forms of polygamy in women like Jia Nanfeng and Wu Zetian hardly appeared again. Should we suppose that if women in Wu Zetian's mold had continued to emerge, they would have insisted on their own forms of sexual and marital privilege? Would they have, for example, insisted on multiple husbands, whether at the same time or one after the other? Would they have regularized having harems of handsome young men? Would they have done so all along or only in older years when they were no longer fertile? In general, how would they have handled the matters of marriage, fertility, and imperial succession?

Although these are very hypothetical questions, some can be answered if considered in the framework of women rulers at other times in China and in other cultures. What types of situations occurred elsewhere? The eighteenth-century Catherine the Great of Russia, as mentioned before, proved that a female ruler could govern effectively and have a series of male favorites throughout her years of fertility and beyond. On the other hand, simply because men were polygamous and promiscuous does not mean women rulers also had to be. Catherine the Great was extremely unusual. At another extreme was someone like the virgin Queen Elizabeth of sixteenth-century England, who had no children at all and never married. She in turn contrasted with Queen Victoria of the nineteenth century, who though far less powerful than Elizabeth or Wu Zetian reigned while monogamously married to Prince Albert, with whom she had nine children. Byzantine empresses, as we have seen, had the freedom to remarry or not. When they did so, they raised their husbands to emperors and co-ruled with them. Some did so without suffering a loss of power; some encountered husbands who tried to dilute their authority. Some continued to have children with their new husbands (such as Eudokia Makrembolitissa, 1021–1096). It is true, however, that church authorities generally frowned on multiple marriages, especially beyond two, even for men. In Ottoman and Mughal Empires, powerful women were generally senior women, that is, past the years of childbearing. If widowed, they were not likely to re-

marry, though they could do so. Examples of powerful women in the Ottoman Empire include the female regents of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the Mughal Empire, examples include Hamideh Banu Begum (1527–1604), the mother of Akbar the Great (1542–1605); and Empress Nur Jahan (1577–1645), the wife of Emperor Jahangir (1569–1627). In none of these cases did a woman pass the throne to another woman. Such a situation was extremely rare, though it happened for a while in twelfth-century Jerusalem and the fourteenth-century Maldives.¹

The examples of these women suggest some of the possibilities that could have occurred in China, such as empresses marrying a series of husbands and permissiveness in regard to male favorites. Powerful women requiring themselves to be loyal to one man seems unlikely, as Chinese princesses proved in their marriage practices. Would the Chinese have permitted or even regularized succession to the throne by women? Would such women have been allowed to marry more than one man? Would they allow only one surname to be used for the dynasty or would that no longer matter? Would they have been careful about which man fathered their children? Women like Wu Zetian already began to create new terms and precedents, and the women immediately after her appeared likely to continue. However, the trend of expanding space for female rulership, if we can call it that, instead came to an end. In China a woman in charge still remained primarily a widowed regent who served temporarily until the young male emperor was ready to rule on his own. Polygamy stayed supreme, jealousy never disappeared, and succession to the throne remained the system's weakest link, which little was able to remedy.

NOTE

1. With the principles of succession still unsettled, five women in a row ruled the kingdom of Jerusalem in under sixty years. See Sarah Lambert, "Queen or Consort: Rulership and Politics in the Latin East, 1118–1228," in *Queens and Queenship*, ed. Anne J. Duggan, 153–69 (Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, 1997) and for the Maldives, Fatima Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 109. Another briefer case occurred in Silla Korea, where the father of Queen Seonde-

ok (r. 632–647) had no sons and selected her as successor; a female cousin succeeded her, Jindeok (r. 647–654).

III

The High Tang to the Liao, 712–1125

6

THE TANG FROM XUANZONG TO ITS FALL, 712–907

THE LOVE AFFAIR OF AN AGING EMPEROR AND HIS YOUNG CONSORT

The brief instability after Wu Zetian's reign was followed by several decades of stability and prosperity under the rule of Li Longji, more commonly known by his posthumous title, Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗. Then came one of the Tang dynasty's greatest fiascos, a rebellion that occurred in 755 when the aging Xuanzong was in the midst of an affair with a young concubine, Honored Consort Yang, Yang Guifei 楊貴妃. The two lovers had been living happily together for at least ten years when An Lushan 安祿山, a half-Turkic, half-Sogdian general and friend of theirs, turned against them and mounted a rebellion which threatened the dynasty. The emperor and his consort fled the capital, Chang'an, but on the way the emperor's soldiers insisted that Consort Yang be killed before they moved a step further. The soldiers reflected a widespread feeling that the disaster was due to both the emperor's infatuation with her and the favor he extended to her cousin, Yang Guozhong 楊國忠, who was chief minister and an enemy of An Lushan. Consort Yang was killed along the route to Sichuan, after which the emperor abdicated the throne to his son, Emperor Suzong 肅宗.

Compared to Wu Zetian and other powerful women from the Han to the end of the northern and southern dynasties, Yang Guifei had little if any political ambition. During his reign, Emperor Xuanzong was

served by a series of strong ministers and never experienced women trying to “meddle” with governmental affairs. In his later years, however, he became less devoted to duties, which he had pursued energetically for many decades. He was by no means negligent, but he became careless in regard to the people he trusted and overconfident in the stability of his regime. The Tang never recovered its original strength and unity. A key feature of the period after Wu Zetian and Consort Yang was that most Tang emperors never enthroned empresses except posthumously. As said previously, no directive expressly stated that the position of empress should be left vacant. Precedents existed in that, for example, a number of Northern Wei emperors either named no empress or did not do so until late in their reigns. Whatever the reason, polygamy without a main wife served as a subtle method by which the power of women was reduced and dispersed. A concurrent development was the rise of eunuchs, who remained strong until the end of the dynasty. After its fall in 907, the Tang was followed by several decades of fragmentation referred to as the Five Dynasties in the north, where non-Han regimes governed, and the Ten Kingdoms in the south, where Han regimes ruled. Then came reunification with the Song dynasty in 960 and a return to peace and stability, though the area north of China was always ruled by non-Han peoples, first the Liao dynasty (907–1125), ruled by the Khitan, followed by the Jin dynasty (1115–1234), ruled by the Jurchen, the latter of whom finally conquered and occupied the northern half of Song China in 1127. In general, there was no end to women playing major roles in imperial politics, but later women did so in ways that carefully avoided the appearance of a figure like Wu Zetian. She came to signify an extreme that should never be repeated and a strong reinforcement of the principle that women should never rule.

Part III begins after Wu Zetian and goes to the end of the Tang and the chaotic period of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms. Instead of continuing to the Song, which marked a major break that needs to be addressed in another volume, we will end with the Liao dynasty in 1125, which took power in the north during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms and belonged to the non-Han Khitan. The important questions for now have to do with (1) the repercussions of Wu’s rule to the end of the Tang and its aftermath and (2) the experience of the inner palaces of the non-Han dynasties that followed the Tang in the north,

some of which were concurrent with the Song dynasty to the south. Concerning the first question, what conscious or unconscious steps were taken to prevent another person like Wu Zetian from appearing? How did her example affect the behavior of later imperial women in the Tang? As to the second question, after the fall of the Tang, how did the non-Han dynasties of the Five Dynasties and the Liao blend their own cultures with the Chinese imperial system? What Chinese traditions did they adopt and what traditions of their own did they retain that diverged from Chinese precedent, especially in terms of the domestic politics of the palace and the roles of empresses, consorts, and eunuchs? Another focus of part III is the stories of both elegance and decadence that are left by the inner palaces of the Ten Kingdoms, which featured the most accomplished poet emperor in Chinese history, but also profligacy matching the worst of the Period of Disunity in the past and the Jin and Ming dynasties still to come.

Falling in Love with His Son's Wife

Emperor Xuanzong, who reigned from 712 to 756, was in his late fifties when he first became attracted to Yang Yuhuan 楊玉環 (ca. 719–756), who was married to his son, the heir apparent. Xuanzong took her for himself and gave his son another wife in exchange. The love story of Xuanzong and Consort Yang is one of the most famous in Chinese history. Poets, dramatists, and novelists have been moved by the story of an aging emperor who let his love for a female favorite cloud his capacity to rule. It was said that he fell into such a depth of sadness after her murder in 756 that he never recovered. Xuanzong's father was Emperor Ruizong, who abdicated to him in 712, as previously told. Xuanzong's mother was one of Ruizong's consorts, a woman of a prominent clan who along with Ruizong's empress was killed by Empress Wu. Wu kept Xuanzong from participating in politics during the first part of her reign, but called him back to the capital in 698, after which he gathered influence and support and, following her death, led the coup that ended Empress Wei's reign in 710. As we saw above, he also eliminated Wu Zetian's daughter, the powerful Princess of Taiping, whose death he ordered in 713.

Xuanzong was known as a capable ruler who governed during a period of splendor and wealth. He inherited many capable officials

previously picked by Empress Wu. Under him the Tang carried out a major codification of law, revised the tax system to increase revenue, and reorganized the military to create a professional force to protect China's frontiers, especially in the north and west. Xuanzong was a musician, poet, and calligrapher and shared these interests with his personal favorites, including Consort Yang. As a polygamist and father, he had fifty-nine children, thirty boys and twenty-nine girls (though not all lived to maturity), but no children by Honored Consort Yang. Was she infertile or did he become so in his later years? His sons also had many children: his fourth had fifty-five, his sixth fifty-eight, and his twentieth thirty-six. These populations created great financial burdens for the government. All sons had to be given noble titles, households, and fiefs, although in some cases the fiefs were made as small as possible. Xuanzong kept watch on them by having them dwell nearby in specially built quarters.

The sources for the love affair include the dynastic histories: (1) the *Old Tang History*, finished in 945; (2) the *New Tang History*, by the famous statesman and poet Ouyang Xiu, completed in 1060; and (3) the chronological history of China to the Song, the *Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government*, by the statesman and scholar Sima Guang, completed in the Song dynasty in 1084. Sima Guang's history includes a supplement that he added called the "Examination of Discrepancies" (*Kaoyi* 考異), which cites numerous sources, including semifictional ones and others with information that varies from his main text. The *Old Tang History* relies on the *True Records* (*Shilu* 實錄), the diaries of each reign compiled by court historians after an emperor died, which tended to omit unflattering details (they were no longer kept after 847). The authors of the *New Tang History* and the *Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government*, who lived after the Tang, felt less need to hide the unflattering details and, moreover, had access to sources that the earlier historians did not use or did not know about, or that have since disappeared. But the later historians were also under the influence of two centuries of lore that had accumulated about the sensational love affair between Xuanzong and Consort Yang, which they included in their accounts and which is interesting to us but often needs to be treated with caution. I also cite poetry and narrative fiction that embellished on the affair, plus "unofficial" accounts written by individuals claiming to provide information that standard histories failed to provide or did not

dare to. The unofficial accounts have titles such as *Little Known Affairs of the Kaiyuan and Tianbao Periods*, by a Five Dynasties author, or *Unofficial Account of Yang Taizhen* (another name for Yang Yuhuan), by a Song-dynasty author. These sources were important for later authors, including the Qing-dynasty dramatist Hong Sheng (1645–1704), who wrote the famous opera *The Palace of Eternal Life* about the love affair and its afterlife. Much later there was even a French author, Georges Soulié de Morant (1868–1955), a member of the French diplomatic corps in China, who wrote “Le Passion de Yang Koei-fei” in 1922.¹

Empress Wang, Hoping to Become a “Peer of Wu Zetian”

Xuanzong had two empresses and several harem favorites before he met Consort Yang, including one who had seven children and whose death caused him deep grief. He deposed his first empress in 724 and named no other for the rest of his reign; the second empress was only so named after she died and Xuanzong had abdicated. The first empress, named Wang 王, married Xuanzong when he was a prince, was childless, and because of this lived in fear that she would be deposed. In hopes of her getting pregnant, her brother sought the help of a Daoist priest, who performed some magic. “He made a wooden charm for her on a piece of wood split by thunder and lightning, on which he carved the characters for heaven and earth and the taboo name of the emperor. She was to wear this at her waist. He blessed her, saying that if she wore the charm she would bear a son and that she would be the peer of Empress Zetian.” For him to say that she would be “the peer of Empress Zetian” indicates that Wu’s influence still echoed a decade after her death and that to be her peer was still considered by some as something positive. The matter was discovered, Empress Wang was deposed and soon died, and her brother was ordered to commit suicide.²

The second empress was surnamed Yang and was from the same clan as Consort Yang, but a few decades older. She entered the harem between 710 and 712 and gave birth to Li Heng 亨, the future Emperor Suzong, who was born during the time when Princess Taiping was contriving against Xuanzong. Worried that the princess would plot against the pregnant consort, Xuanzong (not yet emperor) prepared an

abortion medicine for her, but while doing so, according to the histories, dreamt of a spirit that upturned the vessel in which he was making the concoction. He decided not to give her the drug after all. When the child was born, Xuanzong gave him to Empress Wang to raise, and she cared for him as if he were her own, says the history. Empress Yang died sometime before the mid-720s and was named empress posthumously when her son assumed the throne in 756.

The details have been lost regarding the transition from Posthumous Empress Yang to Xuanzong's next significant consort, Sagacious Consort Wu (Wu Huifei 武惠妃, died 738). She was the daughter of one of Wu Zetian's nephews, for which reason ministers opposed the emperor when he wished to make her empress in 726. He abandoned his plan and never tried to name an empress again. But he had Consort Wu treated with the same protocol as an empress, thus circumventing his ministers in that way. Consort Wu probably entered Xuanzong's harem while he was still a prince in 711 or 712. She had four sons and three daughters, more children than any of his other wives. Her first three children died in childbirth, which so upset the emperor that when she had the fourth child, his eighteenth son, he had him raised by one of his elder brothers, fearing bad luck if he were to leave the boy with his mother. The *New Tang History* adds information about other early favorites, including one who was a singer and the mother of his first heir apparent (she was surnamed Zhao 趙; his name was Li Ying 瑛). She died around 726. Consort Wu plotted against the heir apparent and two other princes by rumoring that they were involved in a conspiracy, which was reported to the emperor, who had the heir and his two brothers demoted and killed in 737. Consort Wu died the next year in 738. The *Old Tang History* reports that Xuanzong "mourned and grieved for her for a long time; and among the thousands of women in the Rear Palace, he found no one else who pleased him."³

A Partner for His Older Years

Little Known Affairs of the Kaiyuan and Tianbao Periods reports that before he elevated Consort Yang, the emperor had no favorites and so held contests in order to choose the women he would sleep with. "Toward the end of the Kaiyuan period [713–741], after spring arrived the emperor was in the habit of visiting the inner palace every day. He had

the ladies compete with each other by placing flowers in their hair, then he released butterflies that he had collected, favoring whichever woman the butterflies landed upon. He ceased playing the game once Consort Yang won his exclusive favor.” Another game that he likewise discontinued was one in which women tossed coins to gamble on who would sleep with the emperor. Both games recall Western Jin Emperor Wu, who let his goats choose the woman for him. Neither of the two Tang histories reports the games.⁴

Consort Yang was born and raised in Sichuan, the home of her husband Li Mao 瑁, whose mother was Xuanzong’s beloved Consort Wu. Consort Yang and Li Mao married in 736. It is unclear when Xuanzong first saw her, but when he did, he decided that he wanted her for himself, in spite of the obvious awkwardness of the situation. He could not simply take her, but had to devise an indirect means to bring her into his harem. He had her leave her husband and be registered as a Daoist nun in 741, at which point she was given a religious name, Yang Taizhen 楊太真. He waited a few years, then in summer 745 made her an official member of his harem, giving her the title of honored consort. She was called *niangzi* 娘子 in the palace, a familiar word for “wife,” and was treated as an empress, though never named one. Her relatives—especially her three sisters, father and mother, and a paternal uncle—were lavished with titles and rewards, while her cousin, Yang Guozhong, became chief minister, the highest position in court below the emperor.

One year later she offended the emperor in some unspecified way and was expelled from the palace. The emperor was so upset that by noon of that day he had still not eaten, says the *Old Tang History*. Seeing the emperor in such a mood, his favorite eunuch, Gao Lishi 高力士 (684–762), requested that food be sent to her. The emperor agreed, but continued to be out of spirits, exploding into anger at the slightest cause. At that, the eunuch humbly requested that Consort Yang be summoned back to the palace. She returned and was more favored than ever. An example of the indulgence she enjoyed is found in the *New Tang History*, which says that she liked fresh lychees, native to distant southeast China. The emperor had them delivered to her by special horseback couriers. But she was expelled a second time in 750. This time she sent a message through a eunuch intermediary, beseeching the emperor to take her back:

“Your humble concubine has insulted the sage’s countenance and deserves a thousand deaths. From clothing to everything else of mine, they have all been granted me by imperial kindness. There is nothing left to submit to you but my hair and flesh, which were given me by my parents.” She took a knife and cut a lock of her hair, which she submitted to the emperor. When he saw it he was alarmed and moved and immediately ordered Gao Lishi to summon her back.⁵

The emperor was in his sixties when he took Consort Yang into his harem. She was a partner for his older years. They enjoyed music together, they traveled to the emperor’s various palaces and resorts, and they played games. *Little Known Affairs of the Kaiyuan and Tianbao Periods* reports that An Lushan gave the emperor an aphrodisiac, called “love helper” (*zhuqing hua* 助情花), which consisted of one hundred pills “the size of a rice grain and red in color. Taken before bed, one pill would stimulate sensation and produce lasting energy.” The same source reports that the emperor and his consort liked to play a special game when they got drunk. She headed a team of one hundred or so prostitutes, while he headed a team of the same number of young eunuchs. They ranged the teams into “love formations” (*fengliu zhen* 風流陣) and had them do battle. The penalty for the losers was to drink wine from giant goblets made of rhinoceros horn. Some people saw the game as a bad omen, eventual proof of which was the An Lushan rebellion in 755.⁶

Another of their activities likewise appears outside the official histories. It took place in the tenth lunar month of every year, when the emperor, Consort Yang, and other favorites retreated to the hot springs outside of Chang’an, where an extravagant palace had been built, called the Resort of Splendor and Purity (*Huaqing gong* 華清宮). Each group formed its own brigade and traveled in a grand and glittering procession. A park outside of contemporary Xi’an still commemorates the location of the resort and hot springs, which played a role in two famous Tang literary works about the affair, one the poem by Bai Juyi (772–846) called the “Song of Everlasting Sorrow,” the other the story by the early-ninth-century author Chen Hong, “The Account of the Song of Everlasting Sorrow,” which was a narrative accompaniment to the poem. Both pieces are highly fictionalized and in both the hot springs are where the emperor first falls in love with Consort Yang. According to Chen Hong, the emperor granted women the privilege of

taking baths in the springs. That was how he became smitten with Yang; all other women seemed worthless to him. When she emerged from the bath, as Chen wrote, she seemed so frail that she could not even support the weight of her clothes. Consort Yang was supposedly a bit plump, but Chen's description of her frailty conformed to a traditional stereotype of the beautiful woman, who was so fine and delicate that even the lightest clothing was too heavy for her. The poet Du Fu (712–770) wrote ominously of the same hot springs in his poem, "A Song of My Cares While Traveling from the Capital to Fengxian." He described the times just before the rebellion, in particular the luxury enjoyed by the emperor and his guests while poor people suffered. As Owen translates: "All granted baths there have long hat ribbons, / no short tunics join in their feasts," he wrote ("long hat ribbons" referred to the elite, "short tunics" to the commoners). The poem's most famous line is: "Crimson gates reek with meat and wine, / while on the streets, bones of the frozen dead," in which crimson gates referred to the houses of the wealthy (朱門酒肉臭, 路有凍死骨).⁷

"Holding a Clod of Dirt in Her Mouth"

An Lushan was a special favorite of the emperor and Consort Yang. He had free access to the palace, where he ate and drank with them and in general enjoyed privileges that would normally have been considered improper for such a person. She adopted him as a foster son and showered him with gifts and rewards. According to one source, for one of his birthdays they gave him lavish gifts, then a few days later invited him to the inner palace where she had him put on a pair of giant diapers made of elegant brocade. A corpulent man, he was pulled around in a cart drawn by palace ladies. When the emperor heard the shouts of glee, he asked what was going on. Yang's attendants explained that the consort was performing the ritual of the baby's third-day bath. The emperor joined the fun and rewarded them with money and gifts. "From this time on, An Lushan had free access to the Lateral Courts, ate with Consort Yang, and sometimes stayed all night in the palace. This gave rise to many ugly rumors, but the emperor was never suspicious."⁸

The rebellion had a catastrophic effect. The *Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government* writes, "In his late years, the emperor took peace for granted and reckoned that the empire no longer required his con-

cern and attention. He stayed deep within the palace where he immersed himself in music and women, leaving all matters of government to his chief minister, Li Linfu 李林甫.” Xuanzong was surprised by An Lushan’s betrayal because, although he had been forewarned, the emperor had continued to trust him. In shock, he decided to abdicate to his son, but the chief minister, Yang Guozhong, sent Consort Yang to plead with the emperor not to do so. She appeared before him “holding a clod of dirt in her mouth” and succeeded in persuading him to stay on throne. In ancient times holding a clod of dirt in one’s mouth signified abject apology, indicating that one admitted one’s guilt and expected the death penalty, but nevertheless hoped for forgiveness. Xuanzong and the consort fled the capital in secret, but on the way the emperor’s soldiers mutinied and demanded Consort Yang’s death. He tried to prevent them, but his advisors explained that it was fruitless to resist their demand. The emperor told her of the decision and, according to the *Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government*, had Gao Lishi lead her to a Buddhist temple where she was strangled. Bai Juyi described the scene in his poem, as Owen translates:

and the fragile arch of her lovely brows
there perished before the horses. . . .
Our lord and ruler covered his face,
Unable to protect her.

Later on his way back to the capital the emperor requested that she be reburied. Given the feelings of the generals and soldiers, his advisors deemed this inappropriate, but the emperor had her secretly dug up. Although her body had decomposed, an incense bag of hers was found that the eunuchs presented to the emperor. He “looked at it with great sorrow, had a likeness of her drawn, and placed it in a side hall, which he looked at every day.”⁹

Tang Eunuchs, Their Origins, and Their Families

After Xuanzong, there were no more women who occupied center stage like Wu Zetian, Empress Wei, or Consort Yang and there were hardly any notable love affairs. But another group that normally should not have gained power, but nevertheless did, was eunuchs. A brief description of them is necessary in order for the story of emperors and their

wives after Xuanzong to make more sense. How were eunuchs like women and how did they become powerful? They resembled women in that they were an influential force that stood apart from men of both the imperial family and the civil and military bureaucracies. They were also like women in that, when powerful, they were viewed as the sign of a weak emperor, although that was not always necessarily the case. In the early Tang, eunuchs were minor. Having learned from the experience of previous rulers, the first Tang emperor, Li Yuan, ordered that eunuchs only do menial tasks in the palace and never be more than commoners in status. Later rulers realized the usefulness of eunuchs and allowed them to increase in number and influence. Eunuchs received high ranks and noble titles and served responsibly and effectively from Emperor Xuanzong to the end of the dynasty. They were especially effective in helping emperors control unruly forces in the provinces. A eunuch commander's unit even played a decisive role in defeating the Tibetan armies that invaded Chang'an in 763. In general, compared to the imperial bureaucracy, they provided emperors with a greater sense of immediacy and direct personal control, not to mention loyalty. The bureaucracy was slower, more distant, and prone to factionalism.

Where did eunuchs come from and who were some of the prominent ones? At first Tang eunuchs came from places like Vietnam or non-Han aboriginal peoples of southern China, from which they were sent to the capital in regular quotas. Later they also came from respectable families in central China, especially military ones. Some families saw contributing their sons as eunuchs as a way of gaining influence and status. By the eighth and ninth centuries, many eunuchs had fathers, brothers, and other family members who were prominent in the civil and military bureaucracies. Some military men even married their daughters to important eunuchs, while eunuchs adopted military men as sons.

Gao Lishi, about whom we heard above, was the most powerful eunuch in Emperor Xuanzong's time, prominent from the 710s to his death in 762. His family had served the Tang for three generations, but his father was falsely accused of a crime, the family was enslaved, and as a boy Gao was castrated and sent to the capital as tribute. Both Wu Zetian and Xuanzong liked him. By Xuanzong's time he was already highly educated and was expert at the bow and arrow. He became one of the emperor's closest confidants. Another powerful eunuch was Yang

Sixu 楊思勗 (654–740). He began in a similar way to Gao Lishi, was adopted by a court eunuch named Yang, whose surname he took (he was probably from a non-Han group in the south), then rose in the palace through many acts of service such as helping Xuanzong assassinate Empress Wei in 710. He became general in chief of the imperial bodyguards and was one of many eunuch-commanders in charge of major field armies. He served in campaigns in which he defeated rebellious non-Han peoples in the south, reportedly having thousands beheaded. He was so highly favored that when he died he was given a sumptuous burial in a lavish tomb, all with the blessing of the emperor. A third important eunuch was Li Fuguo 李輔國 (704–762), whom Emperor Suzong appointed chief administrator of the armies during the An Lushan rebellion. After the court's return to Chang'an he rose further, gaining exclusive authority over communication between the court and the emperor between 758 and 762. He was an ally of Suzong's Empress Zhang, but eventually turned against her when she tried to replace the original heir apparent at Suzong's death. Li Fuguo had her killed in 762, but the next emperor had Li killed later the same year.

Gao Lishi, Yang Sixu, and Li Fuguo were examples of a select few eunuchs who gained a high position in the civil and military bureaucracies, that is, the outer court. Beginning with Emperor Dezong 德宗 (reigned 779–805) another kind of eunuch emerged when the emperor initiated special commissions for them in his inner court. Among other things, Dezong used them to control uncooperative generals in the provinces. In his and Emperor Xianzong's reigns, these eunuchs rose in regular fashion according to experience and seniority. As in Xuanzong's time, a select few were capable, competent, and appreciated for being so. By the ninth century, the two most powerful positions were superintendent of the Shence Army (the "Divine Whip Army," or *Shence jun* 神策軍) and commissioner of privy affairs. In the Shence Army eunuchs served as imperial representatives to the regional armies and helped the emperor supervise his generals. The duties of the commissioner of privy affairs were to create efficient communication between the emperor and the eunuchs, on the one hand, and the bureaucracy on the other. Spying, intelligence gathering, and influence peddling were among the eunuch specialties, but they also played effective roles in decision making, including selection of provincial governors and questions of imperial succession. They remained powerful until a military

governor who ended the dynasty conducted a mass extermination of eunuchs in 903.¹⁰

EMPERORS WITHOUT EMPRESSES: SUZONG TO THE END OF THE TANG, 756–907

In the post–Wu Zetian period, the most significant theme in the lives of imperial women was the fact that, from Suzong to the end of the dynasty, of thirteen emperors only three named empresses during their time on the throne: Suzong, Dezong (whose empress was enthroned on the day she died), and Zhaozong, the second-to-last emperor, who reigned when the dynasty was already in ruins. Emperors engaged in a polygamy of consorts without empresses. Let us record in sequence, one by one, how the absence of empresses worked, adding occasional mentions of compelling situations of palace life, including a dowager who repudiated Wu Zetian, the recruitment of scholarly palace women, a consort who looked like the emperor, and a princess who lost her temper in front of her father, the emperor.¹¹

Empress Zhang: “The Heir Apparent Is Too Compassionate”

Suzong’s main wife while he was still a prince was surnamed Zhang 張 (died 762), whose grandmother was a younger sister of Xuanzong’s mother, making Suzong and his wife distant cousins. She was the slight exception to the lack of women like Wu Zetian in the latter half of the dynasty. During the emperor’s secret flight from Chang’an, Suzong was at first hesitant to take charge of the battle against An Lushan, but Empress Zhang and an influential eunuch persuaded him to do so. During the flight, Zhang gave birth, but three days later was already helping sew soldiers’ clothing, something that imperial women traditionally did in times of war. Suzong told her she should take care of herself, but she replied that there was no time for that. She was enthroned as empress in 758 and, according to the histories, received exclusive favor from the emperor. She and the eunuch Li Fuguo were powerful allies who often took part in government, to the emperor’s displeasure, but he was unable to stop them. It was said that he lived in fear of her because she had once plotted the death of one of his broth-

ers. During Suzong's final illness in 762, Empress Zhang conspired with eunuchs and others to replace the heir apparent, Suzong's eldest son and the future Emperor Daizong, whose mother was one of Suzong's deceased consorts. The empress wanted to enthrone another consort's son, but Li Fuguo foiled the plot and had Daizong enthroned. After assuming the throne, Daizong had her deposed, reduced to commoner status, and killed. Later the same year, the new emperor had Li Fuguo assassinated.¹²

Citing the *True Records*, the *Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government* provides more details and a different ending. When Suzong was ill, Empress Zhang summoned the heir apparent, the future Daizong, and told him that Li Fuguo and another chief eunuch were plotting rebellion and should be arrested and executed.

The heir apparent wept and said: "His Majesty is at the brink of death, and the two eunuchs are imperial servants of long standing. To put them to death suddenly and without trial would upset and alarm the emperor, and I am afraid he could not survive it."

She told him to go back to his quarters for the time being while she thought things over. After he left, the empress summoned the Prince of Yue, Li Xi [李係], to whom she said, "The heir apparent is too compassionate. He lacks the nerve to execute the traitorous officials. Can you do it?" The Prince replied that, yes, he could.

The Prince then armed two hundred or so strong eunuchs, while the empress told the heir apparent to visit the emperor. They planned to kill the heir apparent on his way. But Li Fuguo learned of the plot and informed the heir apparent, who at first was in a state of disbelief. He insisted that, with the emperor near death, how could he, his own son, "fear death and fail to go to see him?" Li Fuguo persuaded him of the seriousness of the situation and had him led to a safe location. The counterplotters then captured the Prince of Yue and his allies and imprisoned both them and the empress. The emperor died the next day, after which Li Fuguo had the empress and the Prince of Yue executed. He led the heir apparent to the chief ministers, to whom he officially announced the emperor's death.¹³

A Lost Empress and Her Imposters

Of the next three emperors, one lost his empress in the rebellion, the second named an empress on the last day of her life, and the third died before he could name one. After Suzong came Daizong 代宗 (reigned 762–779), under whom the last of the An Lushan rebels were defeated, but no notable turnaround occurred in terms of the problems that plagued the dynasty, especially the weak relations between central authority and the provinces. Daizong had two empresses, neither of whom became empress while alive. Posthumous empress Shen 沈 married Daizong while he was still a prince. She was one of a group of girls periodically drafted from virtuous families and gave birth to the future Emperor Dezong in 742. During the An Lushan rebellion, she disappeared and was never found again. In a type of episode that appeared now and then in Chinese history, several imposters claimed to be her. The first was a Buddhist nun in 765, who was discovered to have been Dezong's wet nurse. She was whipped to death. When Dezong assumed the throne in 779, he posthumously declared his mother empress and wept uncontrollably during the ceremony to enthrone her. He sent out search parties to find her and received several claims that she had been located, but all were imposters. In one case, the imposter was sent away without punishment because the emperor was afraid that no one else would come forward. As he said, "I'd rather have a hundred imposters, as long as there is hope that one of them might be her." Daizong's second empress was also enthroned posthumously. She was Empress Dugu 獨孤, who had been chosen as consort for her beauty and received Emperor Daizong's exclusive favor. She had a daughter whom they dearly loved, but the girl died in 774. The emperor felt such grief that he refused to attend court for several days, forcing his ministers to plead with him to return. Dugu died the next year and was declared empress posthumously. The emperor was so grieved at her death that he could not bear to have her casket taken from the palace, where it rested for three years before she was finally buried.¹⁴

Dezong (reigned 779–805) had one empress, named Wang 王, who gave birth to his successor in 761 while Dezong was still a prince. She became ill in 786 and was declared empress on the last day of her life. Installing a wife as empress when she was about to die had its own particular meaning. It was a way of honoring her and her family at an

especially emotional time. Doing so also had the effect of keeping her from having enough time to gain the kind of influence that came with being empress and that might lead to interference in government. Emperors may or may not have had such considerations in mind, but other emperors besides Dezong did the same with their wives, especially in the Qing dynasty.

Next came Emperor Shunzong 順宗, who assumed the throne in 805, but was already incapacitated because of a stroke and ruled for less than a year. Previously, a group of officials unhappy with the factionalism of Dezong's reign won Shunzong's support while he was still a prince. But after his stroke in 804, he lost the use of his voice. Isolated in his apartments, he was attended by a chief eunuch and a favorite concubine named Niu 牛. When his health worsened, a group of officials and others gathered in 805 to seek his abdication and removed the clique that he had supported. The biography of his principal wife Wang 王 in the *Old Tang History* gives a slightly different account. She was the mother of the next ruler, Emperor Xianzong. During Shunzong's illness, she cared for him daily, never leaving his side. There is no mention of Consort Niu. Wang was about to be enthroned as empress, but was prevented because of the emperor's illness. After his abdication, she was declared "retired empress" (called *taishang huanghou* 太上皇后) and after his death became empress dowager. The *New Tang History* praises her, saying: "She embodied the air of ancient consorts." She died in 816.¹⁵

"I, Another Empress Wu?"

After Shunzong came Emperor Xianzong 憲宗 (778–820), who reigned from 805 to 820. He was known as a capable ruler who, with the help of his eunuchs, asserted control over the provinces and had a series of strong chief ministers. He was interested in Daoist alchemy and near the end of his life suffered extreme bouts of anger and emotional instability, perhaps caused by the elixir drugs he took, which contained mercury. He died suddenly in 820, some say at the hands of a eunuch, others say because of alchemical poisoning. A eunuch faction headed by Wang Shoucheng 王守澄 took power and promoted as successor Xianzong's son, Emperor Muzong. Like others before him, Xianzong never named an empress during his lifetime. In 813, officials requested three

times that he enthrone Honored Consort Guo 郭, the mother of the future Emperor Muzong, but Xianzong rejected the request. He said that the dates of their births were astrologically opposed and, furthermore, he had many favorites in the rear palace and was worried that she would not tolerate his affairs with other women. Consort Guo was from an illustrious family, her mother being one of Emperor Daizong's daughters. She was named dowager after he died and went on to live through the reigns of the next five emperors, thus the following stories about her.¹⁶

When her son assumed the throne in 820, she was made empress dowager. She lived through the reigns of Muzong, Jingzong, Wenzong, Wuzong, and Xuanzong, by which time she had become Great Empress Dowager Guo. The aftereffects of Wu Zetian's usurpation show themselves in the account of Guo's outrage when she was asked to take the reins of government at the death of her son Muzong. According to the *New Tang History*, when he died in 824 and his fifteen-year-old son Jingzong took the throne, some eunuchs tried to persuade Dowager Guo to take power. She replied angrily, "Are you saying that I should become another Empress Wu? [吾效武氏耶?] In spite of the youth of the heir apparent, he is still capable of selecting worthy and virtuous advisors. Who would I be to interfere?" The *Comprehensive Mirror* has her adding, "Since ancient times, when has a woman ever ruled the world and established order like Yao and Shun?" (自古豈有女子為天下主而能致唐、虞之理乎). Much later, during Wuzong's reign (840–846), she lectured the young emperor when he once asked her to define the traits of an illustrious ruler. Wuzong was fond of hunting and wrestling and used to invite young wrestlers into the palace. The dowager told him that a good emperor should choose virtuous and loyal advisers, listen to criticism, however pointed, and follow the advice of his remonstrators. The dowager's words, plus the criticism of his excesses by court officials, reportedly convinced Wuzong to curtail his love of hunting and wrestling.¹⁷

Dowager Guo became unhappy during the reign of her stepson Emperor Xuanzong, who ruled from 846 to 859. His mother had been a servant of the dowager's named Zheng 鄭, whom Emperor Xianzong "favored" and who gave birth to the future Emperor Xuanzong, Xianzong's thirteenth son. Enmity arose between the dowager and Zheng. Because of his lowly birth, while still a prince, Xuanzong lived in a

palace designated for minor imperial relatives and princes. He was resentful of this and became convinced that Muzong (his half brother) and Dowager Guo were responsible for his father's sudden death. When Xuanzong became emperor, he enthroned his mother Zheng as empress dowager. Great Empress Dowager Guo felt slighted and became depressed. She went with some servants to the top of a palace tower and was about to throw herself off, but her attendants prevented her. Then follows cryptic information: "The emperor was displeased at this news, and that night the dowager died suddenly." No details are given about what happened, though the *Comprehensive Mirror* states that she died because of an already existing illness. The year was 848. Controversy continued even after her death in a dispute about whether or not she should be buried in her husband Xianzong's tomb. Emperor Xuanzong wanted her buried apart, but the official of the Court of Imperial Sacrifices argued in her favor. The official was exiled until the reign of a later emperor, when he returned to court and succeeded in having the dowager's spirit tablet placed in Xianzong's temple.¹⁸

Unmarried Female Scholars in the Palace

Amidst the biographies of imperial wives, the writers of the *Old Tang History* and *New Tang History* inserted the biography of the five Song 宋 sisters, who were noted for their exceptional intelligence and skill in letters. They had all sworn never to marry, but wanted instead to earn fame for their family through their talents in learning. Their parents agreed with their wishes because, it was said, they did not want to risk marrying them to unworthy men. The eldest, Song Ruoxin 宋若莘, wrote a ten-chapter work on wifely duties, called the *Women's Analects* (*Nü lunyu* 女論語), for which the second sister, Song Ruozhao 宋若昭, composed annotations (the currently existing work with that title, however, does not list them as authors). In 788 they were presented to Emperor Dezong, who invited them to the palace, tested them, and had them live there, giving them the title of scholar academicians. They never became consorts. They participated in poetry-writing events held by the emperor and his courtiers and were treated more respectfully than concubines and other palace women and servants. The eldest died around 820 and was replaced by the second oldest, who under Emperor Muzong was appointed as one of two matron intendants of the general

palace service, one of six agencies for palace women. She lived through three more reigns and served as a teacher to princes, princesses, and other palace women. After she died, the fourth sister took her place under Emperor Wenzong, but became involved in a bribery scandal and was ordered to commit suicide. By then the two other sisters had already died.¹⁹

The palace was also inhabited by noted consorts not found in the dynastic histories. In his harem Dezong had one of the three most famous female poets in the Tang, Li Ye 李冶. According to a poem she wrote, she was already middle-aged by the time the emperor, a lover of poetry, invited her to his lateral courts. But she came to an unfortunate end. When a general rebelled and took over the capital, she submitted a poem flattering him. After recovering the capital, Dezong ordered her clubbed to death in 784. Similarly, Emperor Xianzong had a favorite named Du Qiu 杜秋, who had previously been the concubine of a rebel general and entered the imperial harem after the general's defeat in 807. After Xianzong died in 820, Muzong appointed her the adoptive mother of his sixth son. In the end, however, the son became involved in a struggle for the throne, lost, and was demoted, after which Du Qiu was exiled to her original home. By that time she had lived in the palace for three decades through four emperors. We know about her only through minute references in the dynastic histories and from a famous 833 poem by the Tang poet Du Mu. She is an example of a consort who entered the lateral courts not through regular recruitment but as a victory prize, somewhat like the wives founding emperors took from conquered enemies. Nothing is known of the details of her relationship with Emperor Xianzong. The focus of Du Mu's poem is on the sad fate of a woman buffeted from man to man, rising to a glorious position but then exiled from the palace to her homeland where she no longer had family or friends.²⁰

Killed by His Eunuchs during a Drunken Spree

After Emperor Xianzong died, his son Emperor Muzong 穆宗 (reigned 820–824) assumed the throne when he was twenty-four, thanks to the help of the powerful eunuch Wang Shoucheng, as mentioned above. Muzong fathered the next three emperors, Jingzong, Wenzong, and Wuzong. None of the four named a living empress. Critics thought

Muzong lax in exerting authority over the provinces; ministers criticized him for “over-indulgence in feasts and entertainment” and “spending day and night in gross intimacy with actors and prostitutes” (晨夕與倡優狎暱). The ministers complained that they often did not know where he was and would not be able to find him in case of emergency. The emperor held a remarkable conversation with an official named Ding, in which the emperor saw nothing wrong with feasting and entertainment:

“I have heard that it is common for people to engage in feasts and entertainment. After all, it is a time of peace and harmony, and we can surely rest our minds at ease.”

Ding replied, “This is not a good sign. I am afraid that things will gradually worsen and eventually there will be cause for concern.”

“Why?” the emperor asked.

“Since the Tianbao era, officials have been outdoing each other in displays of hedonism. They drink day and night and play like apes, with no regard for decency. They act shamelessly in front of others. If this continues, they will abandon their official duties and cause Your Majesty considerable concern. I wish that you would order them to exercise restraint. It would benefit the entire world.”

Three empresses are listed for Muzong, all posthumous, and each the mother of an emperor. In 823 Muzong became an invalid because of a fall from a horse while playing polo. Like his father, he was fascinated with Daoist elixirs and probably poisoned himself with them. He died the next year and was succeeded by the fifteen-year-old Jingzong.²¹

Like his father before him and his brother after him, Emperor Jingzong 敬宗 (born 809, reigned 824–827) was criticized for his love of gaming and horse polo and for being intimate with inferiors. One of his favorite pastimes was hunting fox at night. He was capricious with his retainers and eunuchs, whom he punished for trivial infractions, causing many to fear and resent him. The *Comprehensive Mirror* reports his murder. “One night at the end of the year 827 he returned from a hunting expedition with several eunuchs and sportsmen retainers, twenty-eight altogether, all of whom had been drinking. The emperor was drunk and entered his apartments to relieve himself. Then the candles were suddenly put out.” The eunuch Liu Keming 劉克明, a retainer, and others murdered him, after which Liu tried to enthrone

one of Jingzong's brothers. In a counterplot, the eunuch Wang Shoucheng summoned the Shence Army, killed Liu Keming and the others in his group, and enthroned another of the imperial brothers, who became Emperor Wenzong, the fourth emperor in seven years. Jingzong never named an empress. Only one consort is listed for him, Honored Consort Guo 郭, who entered his palace during Muzong's reign when Jingzong was still a prince. She bore him a son and, for that reason, plus her great beauty, was exceptionally favored.²²

Emperor Wenzong 文宗 (reigned 827–840), the younger half brother of Jingzong, was a more serious ruler, but nevertheless failed to overcome powerful underlings, especially eunuchs, and was beset by factionalism among his court officials. He tried to eliminate the power of eunuchs, but in a famous affair in 835 known as the Sweet Dew Incident, the eunuchs utterly defeated him, after which they tightened their control. Wang Shoucheng was killed, while a new eunuch chief emerged, Qiu Shiliang 仇士良 (781–843).²³ Wenzong lost hope and the balance of power, which had always been fragile, was gone for good. He never named an empress. There are no biographies of imperial wives at all for his reign in either the *Old Tang History* or *New Tang History*, probably because none gave birth to a future emperor. But other parts of the histories indicate that two rival favorites were involved in the intrigue to select a successor. The account of their rivalry takes up nothing like the space devoted to similar affairs in the Tang or other dynasties and must be pieced together from several places. The basic annal of Wuzong in the *Old Tang History*, for example, records that Consort Yang 楊 became Wenzong's favorite after he lost interest in the mother of the original heir apparent, the eldest son. Elsewhere the histories report that the emperor was unhappy with the heir apparent and wanted to depose him, but his officials insisted that the son could still reform himself. The emperor relented, but the son persisted in his ways and "died suddenly" in 838, which is a coded way of suggesting that he was put to death.²⁴ With her rival out of the way, Consort Yang promoted one candidate as heir apparent, while the emperor and his ministers chose another. But the emperor died before formalizing the decision, at which point eunuchs again stepped in as Qiu Shiliang and his allies had the emperor's choice killed and forged a decree enthroning Wenzong's younger half brother, Li Yan 炎, who became Wuzong.

In this case, the eunuchs chose a capable candidate who was not merely someone they could manipulate.²⁵

A Consort Who Looked Like the Emperor and Followed Him in Death

Wuzong 武宗 (reigned 840–846) was a sharper and more capable ruler than his half brother, Wenzong, but, like other Tang emperors before him, was fascinated by Daoist alchemy. The same drugs of immortality that killed his grandfather, Emperor Xianzong, killed Wuzong in 846 at age thirty-three, with his favorite consort at his bedside. He had wanted to name her empress, but was opposed by his officials. She was Talented Lady Wang 王, who was thirteen when she entered the palace as a gift from Wuzong's father, Emperor Muzong, selected because of her skills in song and dance. In the words of the *New Tang History*,

She was tall and slender and looked remarkably like the emperor. She used to accompany him during hunts in the palace park, riding a horse and wearing a long robe, with magnificent and luxurious regalia that almost completely matched the great ruler's. As they galloped to and fro, it was difficult to tell them apart. The emperor wanted to enthrone her as empress, but the chief minister Li Deyu persuaded him not to, saying, "The Talented Lady has no sons, nor is she from an old and illustrious family. There would be much talk against it." The emperor relented.

If emperors after Xuanzong and Suzong tended not to have living empresses, here is a case of a ruler who might have appointed one. The official who dissuaded him relied on sound reasoning. It would have been ill-advised, though not unprecedented, to appoint a favorite as empress. She was not a respectable choice, especially in the aftermath of Xuanzong's Consort Yang.

Talented Lady Wang worried about the emperor's "fascination" (*huo* 惑) with the teachings of the masters of the supernatural (*fangshi* 方士). She told her attendants, "His Majesty fires cinnabar every day and tells me that he is doing it to seek immortality. But his skin is drying out and I am deeply worried." Suddenly he became deathly ill. With her by his side, he spoke his last words, telling her that he felt utterly exhausted. She swore to follow him in death, then he spoke no more and passed

away. Talented Lady Wang gave all her precious belongings to people in the palace and hung herself. The *Comprehensive Mirror* adds that, while on his deathbed, he asked her what would become of her afterwards. She said that she would follow him to the afterworld. He gave her a kerchief, which she used to hang herself after he died. Palace women who had been jealous of her before were deeply moved. The next emperor lauded her sacrifice and elevated her to the rank of virtuous consort.²⁶

An Emperor's Angry Daughter Breaks Her Spoon and Chopsticks in Front of Him

Xuanzong 宣宗 (reigned 846–859) was thirty-seven years old when he assumed the throne, the thirteenth son of Emperor Xianzong and half brother to Muzong. Again like those before him since Dezong, he never installed an empress and never named an heir apparent. When he died at age forty-nine from alchemical poisoning, eunuchs enthroned his firstborn but least-favored son. Xuanzong had two daughters whom he sternly lectured about wayward women. While still a prince, he married a woman from an undistinguished family, who died during his reign. They had two children: the son who became his successor, who named his mother empress posthumously; and a daughter, whom Xuanzong married to a man from an influential clan. Before the marriage, he warned the daughter not to look down on her husband's family and never to interfere in state affairs, for "we must always guard against the calamities caused by the Princesses of Anle and Taiping." He added that marriage between husband and wife was the "root of all moral learning" and that princesses and their daughters who have sons but lose their husbands should never remarry. Widow remarriage became a central theme under the Neo-Confucianism of the Song dynasty, but this is a hint of it already in the Tang. Princesses and other women who married more than once were still common in this period. In another expression of his disapproval of unsubmissive women, Xuanzong once cancelled the betrothal of his daughter, the Princess of Yongfu 永福. When his chief ministers asked why, he said that he had been eating with her recently when she became angry and "broke her spoon and chopsticks in front of me. With a temper like this, how can she be wed to a man of the official class?" (對朕輒折匕筯; 性情如是, 豈可為士大

夫妻). He chose another of his daughters to marry the man originally selected for her.²⁷

When the next ruler, Emperor Yizong 懿宗 (reigned 859–873), assumed the throne, the dynasty was in a state of irreversible decline. Three wives are listed for him in the *New Tang History*, none of whom became empress during his reign. Only one of them is listed in the *Old Tang History*, Empress Wang 王, the mother of the next ruler, Emperor Xizong. She died during Yizong's reign and was made posthumous empress when her son assumed the throne. A second Empress Wang gave birth to Emperor Zhaozong, who made her posthumous empress during his reign. The third woman was Chaste Consort Guo 郭, with whom Emperor Yizong had a favorite daughter. When the daughter died in 869, the emperor executed over twenty of her doctors and imprisoned over three hundred of their family members. An official criticized him for this, but he refused to release the prisoners and gave his daughter an extravagant funeral. Later rumors said that Chaste Consort Guo had illicit relations with the deceased daughter's husband. The *Comprehensive Mirror* states that the affair was with someone else and that the emperor had the official who reported the affair to him beaten to death. Other reports that Sima Guang considered less reliable asserted that she had illicit relations with a number of men, including the deceased daughter's husband.²⁸

The Last Tang Empress

The Tang ended in a way that recalls many previous dynasties: a general who once fought for the dynasty took over and established his own dynasty. He was Zhu Wen 朱溫 (852–912), first emperor of the Later Liang. The last three emperors of the Tang after Yizong died were (1) Emperor Xizong 僖宗 (reigned 873–888), who assumed the throne in 873 at twelve years old, the fifth of Yizong's eight sons. He loved archery, riding, swordsmanship, football, and cock fights. By the 870s, China was ridden with banditry and weakly united. A bandit rebel named Huang Chao 黃巢 (died 884) took Chang'an in 880, forcing the emperor to retreat to Chengdu in Sichuan, where a powerful eunuch reduced the emperor to a puppet. Xizong died in 888 at age twenty-seven. His younger brother took the throne as (2) Emperor Zhaozong 昭宗, about whose empress we will read next. In 904, Zhaozong was followed by (3)

his twelve-year-old son, Aidi 哀帝, who was nominal ruler until 907, when the military governor Zhu Wen forced his abdication and established the Later Liang. Before doing so, Zhu Wen ordered a mass execution of eunuchs both at court and in the provinces, where eunuchs had long been assisting provincial governors as army supervisors. In one sweep, Zhu thus ended more than a century of eunuch domination.

The *Old Tang History* and the *New Tang History* mention no empresses or consorts for Xizong and only one for Zhaozong, Empress He 何, who is the last woman in the biographies of empresses and consorts. She was enthroned as empress shortly after Zhaozong assumed the throne, by then having had two sons. Banditry had been rampant since the 870s, while weeds grew in the palace, her biographers say, but she remained loyal to the emperor to the end. Living in fear, all they could do was weep.²⁹ During the last years of Zhaozong's reign, Zhu Wen forced them to move to Loyang and in 904 had the emperor assassinated. The chief ministers forged a decree in the empress's name establishing her son as ruler and naming her empress dowager. When Zhu Wen finally forced the last emperor to abdicate, someone accused the dowager of plotting to restore the Tang. Zhu Wen ordered her death.

As we have seen, almost no emperors after Suzong enthroned empresses. If we look at the emperors one by one, we can see a pattern, but it is difficult to see consistent or conscious intent. Before Suzong, Xuanzong wanted to name Consort Wu as empress, but his officials discouraged him, though he treated her and Consort Yang like empresses anyway. Suzong had a powerful empress, but after his death a powerful eunuch had her executed. After Suzong, Daizong named no empress. The woman he married while still a prince disappeared during the An Lushan rebellion, which happened before he became emperor. He had a favorite consort, but named her empress only after she died. Dezong named one of his consorts empress on the last day of her life in 786 and enthroned no one else after that, dying in 805. Shunzong was about to enthrone his main wife as empress, but died before he could do so. Xianzong refused to enthrone a consort recommended by his officials; she came from a powerful family. Muzong, Jingzong, and Wenzong named no empresses. Wuzong wanted to name a favorite as empress but was discouraged by his officials. Xuanzong, Yizong, and Xizong named no empresses. Zhaozong, the next-to-last emperor, finally enthroned an empress, but by then the dynasty was already finished.

The last emperor was too young to be married. Of the twelve men since Suzong, three almost had empresses: Shunzong died first, Xianzong refused to follow through, and Wuzong was dissuaded. Of those who named no empresses, some were hardly serious rulers (Muzong and Jingzong), others were perhaps distracted because of political instability (Wenzong, Yizong, and Xizong) or because they were fascinated with Daoist elixirs (Muzong, Wuzong, and Xuanzong). A deeper study would reveal more, but suffice to say that both before and after the Tang, enthroning empresses was a normal and serious thing to do, yet it fell out of practice for more than a century with no clear policy either for it or against it.

NOTES

1. A convenient modern account of the affair is Howard Levy's *Harem Favorites of an Illustrious Celestial* (Taichung: Chung' ai Printing Company, 1958), with translations of numerous Tang sources. The *Unofficial Account of Yang Taizhen* is *Yang Taizhen waizhuan* 楊太真外傳; Hong Sheng 洪昇 wrote "The Palace of Eternal Life," *Changsheng dian* 長生殿.

2. See *Jiu Tangshu*, 51.2177.

3. See *Jiu Tangshu*, 51.2177–78 (Wu's son and grief); and *Xin Tangshu* 76.3491 (heir apparent).

4. Wang Renyu 王仁裕 (880–956), *Kaiyuan tianbao yishi* 開元天寶遺事 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1985), 68 (translated passage), 92.

5. See *Xin Tangshu*, 76.3494 (lychees); and *Jiu Tangshu*, 51.2179–80 (expulsion).

6. See *Kaiyuan tianbao yishi*, 75, 106.

7. For the translation of Chen Hong 陳鴻, see Stephen Owen, *An Anthology of Chinese Literature* (New York: Norton and Company, 1996), 448; and for Du Fu's 杜甫 poem, Owen, trans., *ibid.*, 418–19. Bai Juyi's 白居易 "Song of Everlasting Sorrow" is *Changhen ge* 長恨歌; "The Account of the Song of Everlasting Sorrow," *Changhen ge zhuan* 長恨歌傳.

8. See *Zizhi tongjian*, 216.6903.

9. See *Zizhi tongjian*, 216.6914 and 6974; *Jiutang shu*, 51.2180 (clod); Owen, trans., *An Anthology of Chinese Literature*, 444 (Bai Juyi); and *Jiu Tangshu*, 51.2181 (the likeness).

10. The information about eunuchs has benefited from unpublished material by both Lu Yang (especially regarding eunuchs as effective members of the inner court) and David Graff (eunuchs in the Tang military). See also Amy

McNair, “Beliefs about Sculpture: The Marble Guardsmen of the Court Eunuch Yang Sixu,” *T’ang Studies* 25 (2007): 157–81 (Yang Sixu’s burial).

11. Here is the list of emperors from Suzong (reigned 756–762) on, including the number of their children: Suzong, 13 sons, 7 daughters; Daizong, 20 sons, 18 daughters; Dezong, 32 sons, 11 daughters; Shunzong, 11 daughters; Xianzong, 20 sons, 18 daughters; Muzong, 5 sons, 8 daughters; Jingzong, 5 sons, 3 daughters; Wenzong, 2 sons, 4 daughters; Wuzong, 5 sons, 7 daughters; Xuanzong, 11 sons, 11 daughters; Yizong, 8 sons, 8 daughters; Xizong, 2 sons, 2 daughters; Zhaozong, 10 sons, 11 daughters. The numbers are taken from the table of contents of the *Old Tang History* for the sons and the *New Tang History* for the daughters.

12. See *Jiu Tangshu*, 52.2185–86 (living in fear); and *Xin Tangshu*, 77.3499 (deposing the empress).

13. See *Zizhi tongjian*, 222.7123–24; and *Jiu Tangshu*, 116.3383. Suzong had a second empress, the mother of his successor, but she died in 740 as a consort and was raised to empress posthumously.

14. See *Zizhi tongjian*, 223.7176 (whipped to death); *Zizhi tongjian*, 226.7296 (imposter released); *Xin Tangshi*, 77.3501 (Dezong’s statement); and *Jiu Tangshu*, 52.2190 (Empress Dugu).

15. See *Zizhi tongjian*, 236.7607 (Consort Niu); and *Jiu Tangshu*, 52.2195; *Xin Tangshu*, 77.3503 (Dowager Wang).

16. See *Zizhi tongjian*, 241.7777 (drugs); and *Jiu Tangshu*, 52.2196; *Xin Tangshu*, 77.3504 (Guo).

17. See *Xin Tangshu*, 77.3504; and *Zizhi tongjian*, 243.7830–31. The *Old Tang History* does not record her refusal to take power.

18. See *Xin Tangshu*, 77.3505; and *Zizhi tongjian*, 248.8034. The later emperor was Yizong (reigned 859–873).

19. For more on the Song sisters, see Idema and Grant, *Red Brush*, 54–61. See *Jiu Tangshu*, 52.2198–99 (swearing never to marry); and *Xin Tangshu*, 77.3508 (unworthy men).

20. See *Jiu Tangshu*, 174.4520; and *Xin Tangshu*, 180.5334, both of which refer to her as Du Zhongyang, 杜仲陽. Neither mentions that she was Xianzong’s consort. Du Mu’s 杜牧 piece is “Poem on Lady Du Qiu” (*Du Qiu Niangshi* 杜秋娘詩).

21. See *Zizhi tongjian*, 241.7783–84 (ministers); *Jiu Tangshu*, 52.2200–2203 (Xiao); and *Xin Tangshu*, 77.3507–8 (Wei). The first of Muzong’s empresses was Empress Wang 王, mother of Jingzong, who made her empress dowager in 824 when he assumed the throne. The second was Empress Xiao 蕭, a servant in Muzong’s palace when he was still a prince, mother of Wenzong (born 809), who made her empress dowager when he assumed the throne in 827. The third

was Empress Wei 韋, mother of Wuzong, who posthumously declared her empress dowager.

22. See *Zizhi tongjian*, 243.7851–52 (Jingzong’s murder); and *Xin Tangshu* 77.3509 (Jingzong’s consort).

23. On the incident (*Ganlu zhi bian* 甘露之變), see *Zizhi tongjian*, 244.7871. The emperor’s plotters killed Wang Shoucheng and then tried to assassinate his rival, Qiu Shiliang. In the Sweet Dew Incident, the plotters pretended that an auspicious sweet dew had fallen and lured Qiu and others to go look. Qiu discovered the plot, fled, and summoned the Shence Army and had the conspirators and their families executed, killing more than a thousand people in all.

24. See *Jiu Tangshu*, 18.583–84; *Zizhi tongjian*, 246.7935; *Jiu Tangshu*, 175.4540–43 (heir’s biography), and *Xin Tangshu*, 82.3633–34 (“died suddenly”).

25. Consort Yang promoted another of Muzong’s sons, Li Rong 溶, the Prince of An. The *Old Tang History* says that he “took Virtuous Consort Yang as mother” (*Jiu Tangshu*, 175.4538). This could mean that he adopted her as mother. Perhaps relying on this source, Michael Dalby refers to the prince as her son in “Court Politics in Late T’ang Times,” in *Cambridge History of China*, edited by Twitchett and Fairbank, vol. 3, part 1, 659. However, given that she was a favorite of Wenzong, then if she were the Prince of An’s mother, she would have been a consort to both father Muzong and son Wenzong. Such things happened in Chinese history, but in this case the histories make no mention of it. The *New Tang History* states that Muzong had five sons and that the identity of the mothers of the last two, including the mother of the Prince of An, was unknown. The *New Tang History* would have little reason to obscure any scandal if there was one. In its brief entry on the Prince of An, it says that Consort Yang promoted him as heir apparent for the sake of her security after Wenzong’s death (82.3631–32). See also *Zizhi tongjian*, 245.7910–12 (succession).

26. See *Xin Tangshu*, 77.3509–10; and *Zizhi tongjian*, 248.8025.

27. See *Xin Tangshu*, 83.3672–73 (first daughter, the Princess of Wanshou 萬壽); and *Zizhi tongjian*, 249.8075 (the Princess of Yongfu).

28. See *Xin Tangshu*, 77.3511; and *Zizhi tongjian*, 252.8159, 8163 (the daughter was the Princess of Tongchang 同昌).

29. See *Jiu Tangshu*, 52.2204.

THE FIVE DYNASTIES, TEN KINGDOMS, AND THE LIAO, 907–1125

THE FIVE DYNASTIES, 907–979

After the Tang came the period known as the Five Dynasties and the Ten Kingdoms, of which none lasted even a century. Although similar in brevity and brutality to the Period of Disunity, the Five Dynasties left fewer stories of imperial domestic interest. The Ten Kingdoms made up for that. They produced an emperor who was a better poet than ruler, Li Yu of the Southern Tang, whose empresses and concubines shared his musical and poetic pursuits. The Ten Kingdoms had one of China's most decadent regimes, the Southern Han, whose rulers were described as savage and licentious. The Five Dynasties occupied northern China, including areas outside the Great Wall, while the Ten Kingdoms stretched down to the area of modern Canton. Historians considered the Five Dynasties to be the true successors to the Tang and therefore called them dynasties, referring to the other regimes as kingdoms. But the rulers of the Ten Kingdoms reigned as emperors and kings nevertheless, while a number of their regimes were more stable and longer lasting than any of the Five Dynasties.¹

The rulers of three of the Five Dynasties came from a branch of Turks known as the Shatuo 沙陀. There are two main sources for the five regimes, first, the *Old History of the Five Dynasties* (*Jiu Wudai shi* 舊五代史), by Xue Juzheng 薛居正 (912–981), written in 973–974 at the order of the first ruler of the Song. At the time it was composed,

some of the southern regimes and part of the north had not yet been absorbed into the Song. The second main source is therefore more complete, the *New History of the Five Dynasties* (*Xin Wudai shi* 新五代史), written by the famous literatus and official Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–1072). It is a more compact version of the period and more moralistic in tone. Modeling itself on Sima Qian's *Records of the Historian*, the *New History of the Five Dynasties* is more literary than many other histories, which are drier and less fluid. In contrast to Sima Qian, Ouyang Xiu's dislike of meddling women is more pronounced.²

Ouyang Xiu Disapproves of the Barbarians and Their Women

Ouyang Xiu disapproved of many aspects of the Five Dynasties. He referred to the irregular relationships that the founder of the Later Liang (907–923) had with women. Zhu Wen 朱溫 (852–912) was a man of “firm resolve and violent temper” who held his main wife Zhang 張 “in awe.” Having known her since youth, he sought her advice in military strategy and state affairs. He was prone to fits of murderous rage, but she often interceded and saved the person he was about to have killed. After her death in 904, he never remarried and even asked his sons to offer him their wives, one of whom he liked in particular. He once had an affair with a prostitute who had been the concubine of a rebel leader at the end of the Tang. Zhu gave her to one of his most trusted advisors, but still slept with her. With another prostitute he had a bastard son, who assassinated Zhu after finding out that another brother had been selected as successor. Ouyang Xiu claimed that the fall of the Later Liang was due to “indulgence in mere women” (一二女子之娛).³

The historian furthermore disapproved of the Shatuo Turks, who ruled the Later Tang, the Later Jin, and the Later Han. They were barbarians from barren wastelands, he said, did not use surnames, and had no written language to keep track of their lines of descent. They acted rashly and allowed disastrous rifts to occur between fathers and sons, they did not practice the proper rites of respect for ancestors, and they adopted sons who were from different lines of descent (in contrast to the Han, who adopted from the same line of descent). He was referring in particular to the fact that the Later Tang (923–936) was ruled by men of three different surnames. The first two rulers were father and

son, but the third and fifth were adopted. The fifth ruler, moreover, rebelled and usurped the throne, becoming the last Later Tang ruler, later referred to as the Deposed Emperor.⁴ Another sign of barbarian inferiority in Ouyang Xiu's eyes was the lack of modesty and good temper among imperial women. The Deposed Emperor's wife was "overbearing and had a vicious temper, such that the Deposed Emperor always feared her." Similar words were used for the empress of the first ruler of the next dynasty, the Later Jin (936–946). The second Later Jin ruler violated ancestral taboo by marrying during the period in which the deceased first emperor still lay in state. The emperor and his new wife walked drunkenly in front of the casket and addressed the corpse, saying, "The Empress Dowager's orders are that we may not conduct grand ceremonies in front of the august Deceased Emperor." The emperor and those in attendance burst into laughter. His empress committed a further transgression by employing an uncastrated man for an office in the palace.⁵

An Empress Repudiates Her Father

One of the Later Tang empresses was the source of a comical story. Although the founder of the Later Tang already had a main wife, in 924 he promoted a secondary wife to the position of empress. Surnamed Liu 劉, she had been captured as a child during a plundering raid and was presented to him while he was still a prince. She was probably Chinese. He originally had another favorite who accompanied him on campaigns, but when Liu had a son, she rose in favor and began to accompany him on campaigns instead. Her father was a humble peddler of medicines and prophecies who, when he learned that she had become an imperial consort, appeared one day at the palace expecting to see her. But she was embarrassed to have him as father and refused to recognize him. He was turned out and flogged at the palace gates. Her biography explains that at the time she was competing with other women for imperial favor and for this reason insisted that her true father had died long before. The emperor was fond of antics and once disguised himself as Empress Liu's father, knowing that she hated any mention of her humble background. He equipped himself with the things that a peddler like her father would carry and had their son go along with him to her chambers. Servants announced that Mountain

Man Liu, the nickname for her father, had come visiting. She was furious when she discovered the trick and chased her son away with a cane, causing great amusement in the palace. After assuming the throne, the emperor became lax and allowed “eunuchs and actors” to interfere with government. Meanwhile, the empress gave lavishly to Buddhist clerics, hoarded precious goods, and in general used her position to acquire great gain. The emperor died during a rebellion, at which point the empress absconded from the palace with her treasures, intending to become a nun and, according to accusations, having an illicit affair on the way. The next emperor, an adopted son of the first, ordered her to commit suicide.⁶

A Dowager Helps the Usurper of Her Own Son’s Dynasty

In the years prior to the founding of the Song dynasty, Ouyang Xiu and other historians saw a valiant and exemplary predecessor in Guo Wei 郭威 (904–954), the Chinese founder of the last of the Five Dynasties, the Later Zhou (951–960). Empress Dowager Li 李, the wife of the founder of the preceding dynasty, the Later Han (947–951), was a well-respected woman who supported Guo Wei, even though it was the dynasty of her own husband and son that he replaced. Her husband was Liu Zhiyuan 劉知遠 (895–948), a Shatuo Turk who launched the Later Han dynasty, the shortest of the Five Dynasties. She was the daughter of a farmer. While still a young soldier, Liu Zhiyuan abducted her while he was grazing horses near her home. Like other noted empresses, she once criticized him for trying to raise money from the people to pay his troops. She preferred to use the funds of the inner palace than antagonize the people. He followed her advice, she emptied the inner treasury, and all who heard of this were “impressed and elated.” She became empress dowager at the death of her husband in 948, when her teenage son assumed the throne. When she criticized him for poor judgment, he angrily replied, “It is not the privilege of those in the women’s quarters to concern themselves with matters of state.” Guo Wei had been a favorite of Liu Zhiyuan and, as he moved toward forming his own dynasty, carefully consulted with Dowager Li, who admired him. Her son’s advisors distrusted Guo because of his popularity among officers and troops; murdered his wife, children, and other dependents; and tried to assassinate him. But Dowager Li continued to support him,

even as her own younger brother was involved in the plot to assassinate him. After her son's death early in 951, Guo Wei sought the dowager's advice about a successor. She named him regent, then when his soldiers demanded that he assume the throne finally asked Guo Wei to do so. He became ruler of the Later Zhou and she received his continued protection until she died in 960.⁷

THE TEN KINGDOMS, 907–978

In contrast to the Five Dynasties, the Ten Kingdoms were relatively more stable and prosperous. They were regional domains, none of which ever controlled anything approaching the original territory of the Tang or the Song. Some lasted longer than any of the Five Dynasties, in one case as long as seventy-one years (the Kingdom of Wu-Yue 吳越, 907–978). In general, a sea change took place during this period, in which the political center of China moved from the northwest around Chang'an east to Kaifeng, the eventual capital of the Song dynasty, while the economic center moved south, where the area of the lower Yangzi River became the most prosperous. Besides the *Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government*, two sources are useful for the Ten Kingdoms, the first being Ouyang Xiu's *New History of the Five Dynasties*, which calls the southern kingdoms "hereditary houses" (*shijia* 世家) to distinguish them from dynastic houses. The second source is from centuries later, the *Springs and Autumns of the Ten Kingdoms* (*Shiguo chunqiu* 十國春秋), by Wu Renchen 吳任臣 (1628?–1689?), a Qing-dynasty scholar and historian who wrote the work as a project of personal interest.⁸ In contrast to the histories of the Five Dynasties, his accounts of empresses and consorts contain more details of daily life in the inner palace. They are also full of fictional elements that Wu copied from unofficial histories and fictional biographies. The moralizing of Ouyang Xiu is less evident, while the descriptions of dissolute behavior get freer rein. For the Southern Han and the Min, for example, Wu reports bawdy rulers and their palace orgies, plus a heavily fictionalized account of two women who were consorts of both fathers and sons. On the other hand, the Southern Tang was famous for its Emperor Li Yu, who liked poetry better than ruling. His and other rulers' harems had women renowned for poetry, music, and other high talents.

She Will Not Take after Empress Wu

Li Bian 李昉 (888–943), the first ruler of the Southern Tang, was the adopted son of the first ruler of the Kingdom of Wu (907–937). References to Wu Zetian in the biographies of two of his wives show how fresh the memory of her reign still was. Li Bian forced the abdication of the last ruler of the Kingdom of Wu in 937 and created the Southern Tang in 939. He claimed to be a descendant of the Li family of the Tang and therefore called his dynasty the Tang, but later historians refer to it as the Southern Tang. His son, the next emperor, extended the Southern Tang domain into the Chu Kingdom to the west and the Min Kingdom to the southeast, but lost all territory north of the Yangzi River in 958 when he was forced to accept tributary status to the Later Zhou, the last of the Five Dynasties. Surrendering the title of emperor, Li Bian's son downgraded himself to king and, before his death in 961, handed power to his sixth son, Li Yu 李煜 (937–978), known as Last Ruler Li. He was the poet emperor. By the early 970s it was clear that the dynasty would not survive. The Song army occupied the capital Jinling in 975 and took Li Yu as hostage to the Song capital Kaifeng in 976, thus ending the Southern Tang.

Li Bian's main wife was Song Fujin 宋福金, who became his concubine while his first wife was still alive, gave birth to Li's successor, and became empress when Li assumed the throne. She was a sober and able administrator of the inner palace about whom the emperor once said, "The Empress already knows my thoughts before I express them." Toward the end of his life, Li Bian began taking longevity drugs, which caused him violent bouts of anger. The empress protected him from those who remonstrated against him for this. After he died, an official tried to persuade her to issue a posthumous order that would have had her take over the government. She refused, saying, "That would be to take after Empress Wu, something I could never possibly do" (此武后故事, 吾豈為之). After her son assumed the throne, she became empress dowager and insisted on keeping out of politics.⁹

Another consort also once referred to Wu Zetian, but only after she had suffered demotion and exile, as if to say that she had become the victim of someone like Wu. Zhong Shiguang 种時光, whom Empress Song liked and promoted, was from a good family when she entered the palace at sixteen. "She was bright, clever, and expert in writing and

calculation. She made herself up beautifully but wore no jewelry, yet bore an air of easy elegance, as if she were an immortal.” She was the emperor’s second favorite after Empress Song. Few other women gained access to the emperor. Li Bian had a stern presence and, as her biography repeats, he was prone to violent anger, which terrified his attendants. But “Lady Zhong held the food in her left hand, the spoon in her right, and fed him as calmly as if nothing was happening; the Emperor’s anger vanished immediately.” She lost favor, however, when she promoted her son over Empress Song’s, the heir apparent. The emperor ordered her to enter a nunnery. When Li Bian died, she wept and said, “It is the human hog and the drunken bones all over again!” (人彘, 骨醉, 復見於此矣). The new emperor exonerated both her and her son. Her use of expressions from the reigns of Empress Lü of the Han and Empress Wu of the Tang shows how key words from previous times became part of the imperial vocabulary for centuries afterwards. Still, Zhong Shiguang was far from meeting the dire fate of the victims of empresses Lü and Wu.¹⁰

Li Yu, a Better Poet Than a Ruler

Li Yu 李煜 (937–978) is another of Chinese history’s Last Rulers, like others renowned because of their association with an entourage of beautiful consorts in a time of impending doom. He is one of China’s better-recognized poets. By the time he came to power, the Southern Tang was weak and powerless. Since he had older brothers and uncles who had been originally more likely to succeed as emperor, he had not at first expected to rule, nor had he been trained to. From the beginning of his reign, which lasted from 961 to 975, his main goal was to humbly serve the Song, which came to power in 960, yet retain control of his own domain and delay surrender as long as possible. He enjoyed the company of his wives and palace women, with whom he spent hours drinking, eating, and writing and intoning poetry. In 974, the Song emperor finally sent him a request to surrender, but Li Yu declined on the pretext of illness. He had no choice the next year, when the Song armies besieged his capital and took him as hostage for the rest of his life. He lived under house arrest with his second queen, while his other palace women either joined the Song harem or became entertainers.

The biographies of his empresses and consorts are fuller than those in both the Five Dynasties and other regimes of the Ten Kingdoms and portray him as a man of sentiment and high culture. During his final departure from his capital, for example, he wrote a poem with the lines:

The worst was the flurry of departure from the ancestral shrine,
as the court musicians played songs of farewell,
as I wept before my palace women.

最是倉皇辭廟日
教坊猶奏別離歌
垂淚對宮娥

In another poem he wrote of his face washed in tears. In a third, he referred longingly to the “carved railings and marble pavements” of his former palace, which he was sure were still there, and ended with one of the most memorable lines in Chinese poetry, as Owen translates: “Tell me then of sorrow—how much can there be? / It is exactly like: / a whole river of springtime waters / flowing off to the east” (問君能有幾多愁，恰似一江春水向東流).¹¹

Records of Li Yu and his multiple wives draw a picture of a sensitive man who never indulged in sexual abandon and who maintained an atmosphere of cultured refinement. His first queen was Zhou Ehuang 周娥皇, whose name was the same as one of ancient emperor Shun’s wives. They married in 954 when he was seventeen and she eighteen. She was well read, talented in singing and dancing, and a skilled pipa player. She became queen when he assumed the throne in 961, but she lived for only three more years, dying in 964. An anecdote about a snowy night they spent drinking and eating together captures the tone of Li Yu’s palace life. When she raised her glass and proposed that he dance, he agreed to do so if she wrote a new song for him, which she did then and there. Later she managed to obtain remnants of a famous piece of music from the time of Emperor Xuanzong and Consort Yang. She performed it with her pipa, but according to some played the piece wrongly, which was thought to be inauspicious. By then, the historian added, Li Yu preferred music to governing, which he had utterly “cast aside.” He had long since stopped heeding his officials’ warnings.

But Queen Zhou died at twenty-eight, both from illness and, it seems, jealous rage. She was already ill when one of their three sons died suddenly at age four. According to the boy’s biography, he could

read the *Classic of Filial Piety* at age two and astonished people with his precocious solemnity in audiences with officials. The empress loved him dearly. One day he was playing in front of a Buddhist statue when a cat knocked over a large glass lantern. The crash so frightened the boy that he became sick and died. Grief worsened the queen's illness. Li Yu took care of her for days on end, even tasting her medicine before giving it to her, and fell into deep sorrow when she died. He buried her with her favorite pipa and composed an elegy that he had carved in stone. He gave her the posthumous title "queen of luminous sagacity" (*zhaohui guohou* 昭惠國后). According to some, there was another layer to Li Yu's grief, having to do with the fact that, before the queen's death, he already had his eye on her younger sister. As the queen lay sick in bed one day she chanced to see her younger sister. When the surprised Queen Zhou asked her how long she had been in the palace, the sister was too naive to realize that the queen might be suspicious and answered that she had been there for several days. The queen became so enraged that she never looked Li Yu in the face again. "Thus, it is said, the Last Ruler's excess of grief was his way of hiding the traces of this unfortunate matter."

Li Yu had indeed invited Queen Zhou's younger sister into the palace and, after the queen's death, married her. But since his mother died just after the first Queen Zhou, he had to delay the marriage until 968 because of the traditional taboo against marriage during the three-year mourning period for one's parent. Li Yu loved the successor queen even more than her older sister, it was said. He had a pavilion built in a flower garden, curtained in red and ornately decorated. Only the two of them could fit inside, where they enjoyed drinking together. After the fall of the dynasty, she accompanied him to Kaifeng, where they were sometimes invited to gatherings at the Song palace. They went together and stayed for several days at a time, but after returning home, she would weep and rebuke Li Yu so loudly that other people could hear. She died soon after he did.¹²

The Talented Consorts of the Rulers of the Ten Kingdoms

Li Yu and other rulers of the Ten Kingdoms were renowned for their talented consorts, some of whom literati extolled for their poetry, personalities, odd anecdotes, and in some cases heroism. One of Li Yu's

most beautiful consorts was Lady Huang 黃, who was put in charge of books and calligraphy in the imperial library. Because of the attentions Li Yu paid to his queen, Lady Huang rarely received imperial visitations and was never promoted. One account reports that she served the queen so well that, though other palace women came to harm, she never did. But there are no details about what kind of harm the other women came to.¹³ A more famous consort was the source of later speculation about the origin of the custom of foot binding. She was Yaoniang 窅娘, a skilled dancer for whom Li Yu designed a special stage in the shape of a golden lotus. He had Yaoniang wrap her feet in silk to make them seem small and slender. When she danced inside the lotus, “she swirled and whirled and looked as if she were floating through the clouds.” Other women began wrapping their feet in imitation. The earliest account of this story is from a thirteenth-century scholar who cited an earlier but now no longer extant source. Without more proof, including archaeological evidence from the bones of bound-footed women, it is impossible to verify exactly when the custom of foot binding began. The most educated guess is sometime during the Song dynasty, perhaps as early as the tenth century. Yaoniang’s fashion might have signaled a beginning.¹⁴

Other rulers of the Ten Kingdoms had similarly talented consorts, including the debauched Emperor Wang Yan 王衍 (died 926) of the Former Shu Kingdom (907–925). He was careless about government, delegated affairs to eunuchs, and devoted himself to pleasure and travel. But he had two consorts who became known for their poetry, plus a third who, when she was about to be executed along with the emperor and others, was instead let go. She insisted on being executed, however, saying that it would be disloyal not to die for one’s homeland. Another ruler’s consort gave rise to a story of the supernatural. Emperor Meng Chang 孟昶 (919–965) of the Later Shu (935–965) liked to spend time with his consorts on outings, climbing towers, and writing poetry. He and a favorite once traveled to a Daoist site where they stayed for over a month, refusing to return to the capital even after an official appealed to them. One day a storm struck and the consort was hit by lightning. Her corpse was buried under a white poplar, from which a few years later a Daoist master heard the sound of a woman reciting poetry. It was the consort lamenting that she had been forgotten and asking for a ritual to help her soul pass to the next life. The

Daoist carried out her request, for which she thanked him in a dream. Another of Meng Chang's favorites was an admired poet, Lady Huarui (Huarui furen 花蕊夫人). After the dynasty fell, the Song emperor asked her to write him a poem about why her kingdom failed. Given that the Song forces were fewer than the Shu's, he particularly liked the line that she wrote about her kingdom's surrender: "One-hundred forty thousand soldiers together put down their arms, / and not one of them could be called a true man." It was said that Lady Huarui remained loyal to the Shu for the rest of her life and kept an image of its last emperor, to which she gave offerings.¹⁵

Liu Chang's Persian Favorite

Some of the most dissolute behavior in the history of imperial life occurred in the Southern Han and the Kingdom of Min—though the Southern Dynasties of the Period of Disunity was another such period, while the most extreme behavior is yet to come in the Jin-dynasty reign of Emperor Hailing. The most common types of dissolute behavior included acts of public nudity, mass sex, stealing other men's wives, and other violations of sexual taboos. When historians used lurid detail to write of these acts, they did so in the name of denigrating the image of a bad ruler in a regime destined to fail. In the case of Wu Renchen's *Springs and Autumns of the Ten Kingdoms*, he was writing many centuries after the events and was not conducting himself in the capacity of an officially appointed historian. He was more prone than usual to be free with such description. Some of his accounts might as well be taken as pieces of fiction.

The Southern Han (917–971) began when Liu Yan 劉龔 (889–942), the brother of a Tang military governor, declared himself emperor of his own dynasty. Neither he nor his successors were model rulers. Liu Yan used to enjoy watching criminals tortured to death. He was succeeded by his third son, who ruled for one year before being assassinated. As Liu Yan still lay in state, the son summoned entertainers while drinking and amusing himself with naked men and women. He was replaced by another of Liu Yan's sons, who killed more than a dozen of his brothers, whom he feared as rivals. Once he drunkenly placed a melon on the neck of an actress and, to test his sword, chopped the melon but accidentally chopped off the woman's head. When sober the



Figure 7.1. The legendary Lady Huarui, poet and songwriter. (*Huitu lienü zhuan*. Zhibuzu zhai edition [1779]. Taipei: Zhengzhong shuju, 1971, 9.44b. Permission of Zhengzhong shuju.)

next day he summoned her, only to be told that he had killed her. He merely sighed and said no more. He ruled until 958.

The next in line was the third ruler's eldest son, Liu Chang 鋹 (942–980), another example of a dissolute emperor with unusual ideas about rulership. He trusted only eunuchs, it was said, because unlike officials they had no families to distract them from their service to the emperor. Supposedly “officials who wished to present themselves for service had to have themselves castrated first.” The history does not say if anyone actually did so. Liu Chang let others run the government while he played in the harem. One of the most powerful people during his reign was a palace woman to whom he delegated authority. She was joined by a eunuch and a female sorceress, who claimed to represent the Jade Emperor (the highest deity in Chinese folk mythology). The sorceress set up a tent in the palace from which she issued predictions and reviewed major government decisions. Liu Chang's favorite consort was a Persian woman, with whom he practiced orgiastic games. “Liu Chang indulged himself recklessly with her and had Masters of the Esoteric supply him with aphrodisiacs to aid in his licentious games. He also recruited young hooligans and matched them with palace maids. He had everyone strip naked and join in pairs, then had the Persian consort carried around so that she could enjoy herself watching them. The practice was given the name ‘Naked in Twos’ [*dati shuang* 大體雙], and it was because of it that the kingdom fell.” Only the *Springs and Autumns of the Ten Kingdoms* reports this episode. Liu Chang ignored warnings about the powerful Song armies in the north, which finally forced his submission in 971, after which he was pardoned and lived in Kaifeng with an honorary rank.¹⁶

Golden Phoenix, Partner to Father and Son

The Kingdom of Min (909–945), with its capital in modern-day Fuzhou, lasted thirty-six years, after which it was absorbed by the Southern Tang. Since it was less prosperous than other regimes, especially the Southern Tang and Wu-Yue, the main job of its early rulers was to introduce measures to improve governance and commerce. The development of maritime trade was one of its most successful achievements. At first subservient to the Later Liang and then the Later Tang, the Min became an empire in 933 under Wang Yanjun 王延鈞 (also called Wang Lin 鱗), who ruled from 927 to 935. It was torn by strife and suffered from chaotic marital relations in the palace. Before Wang Yanjun de-

clared himself emperor, his elder brother ruled the Min and had a main wife who, though a devout Buddhist, was said to be “vulgar, lewd, and extremely jealous” (貌陋而淫, 性極妬). During the mourning period for his father, the ruler defied ritual decorum and took many concubines. His wife plotted against them by trapping and torturing them, killing thirty-four women in one year (Ouyang Xiu says eighty-four). The fifth ruler’s empress “loved to drink and was stubborn and obstinate,” causing the ruler both to favor and fear her, says the history. He had a favorite consort who also liked to drink and, when they drank together, he would let her decide the fate of people accused of crimes, whether death or reprieve.¹⁷

Another Min woman inspired a pornographic tale written in the late Ming. She was the empress and favorite of Wang Yanjun, named Chen Jinfeng 陳金鳳, “Golden Phoenix.” The *Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government* and the *New History of the Five Dynasties* have little to say about her, though both agree that she was a servant of Wang Yanjun’s father before becoming Wang’s consort and then empress. The *Comprehensive Mirror* adds that she was “vulgar and lascivious.” The *Springs and Autumns of the Ten Kingdoms* expands on those laconic words and turns Golden Phoenix into a woman who was not merely the father’s servant but also his sexual companion before becoming the son’s and two other men’s. Although pretending to write history, the author relies heavily on the late Ming tale called “The Unofficial History of Golden Phoenix” and presents in a nutshell the plot of a pornographic story of the Ming and Qing.¹⁸

Let us first tell the story as it is found in *Springs and Autumns of the Ten Kingdoms*, then note some of the main features of a common pornographic plot. The key dynamic of the plot is that one act of illicit sex leads to another, until all the people involved die or meet some other dire end. The first dissolute act takes place before Golden Phoenix is born, when her father has an affair with a Tang official named Chen. Because of his free entry into Chen’s bedchambers, her father has an affair with one of Chen’s concubines, who becomes pregnant. Just before giving birth, her mother dreams of a phoenix flying into her womb, thus the child’s name, Golden Phoenix. The girl’s life is buffeted when the army of Wang Yanjun’s father, Wang Shenzhi 王審知 (862–925), forces her to flee to another home, where she lives until Wang Shenzhi conducts a recruitment of women for his rear palace.

The year is 909. Seventeen, beautiful, and skilled in singing and dancing, Golden Phoenix is selected and becomes a talented lady. Of the three histories, only *Springs and Autumns of the Ten Kingdoms* (relying on “The Unofficial History”) tells about her father, her birth, and her selection as talented lady.

The next twist comes when, after his father’s death, Wang Yanjun takes Golden Phoenix as consort, then enthrones her as empress. This is said to have occurred in 933. In other words, according to *Springs and Autumns of the Ten Kingdoms*, Wang the son has incestuous relations with a woman twenty-four years after she became the consort of Wang the father. She would have been forty-one at the time. None of the sources remarks on her late age for becoming empress. Wang Yanjun constructs a special palace for her, where they drink far into the night amidst the light of hundreds of lavishly made candles. Dozens of palace women serve them food and drink from precious goblets and platters. One of the emperor’s favorite activities is to have everyone drink and chase each other around naked. Quoting from “The Unofficial History of Golden Phoenix,” the historian reports that the emperor has a large bed built with an extra-long pillow on which “he gathers and lays with Golden Phoenix and palace maids, everyone naked.” He likes to have sex with Golden Phoenix behind specially built quartz screens, on the other side of which he orders palace maids to watch them through the openings. Another activity is to have palace women ride in boats in a lake where they sing lyrics composed by the empress, while the emperor watches from his dragon ship. The story winds down when the emperor falls ill and the empress has an affair with a handsome confidant of his. Through the confidant she meets and has an affair with an official who had previously been intimate with the confidant. Golden Phoenix, the emperor, the confidant, and the official all lose their lives during a coup. All sources refer to the empress’s affairs with the two men.¹⁹

The story of Golden Phoenix shares a number of features with pornographic tales from the Ming and Qing dynasties. First, many stories similarly begin with affairs in which intimacy between a husband and his male lover leads to intimacy between the lover and the husband’s wife or concubine. The same occurs at the beginning of the *Sensational History of Flying Swallow* about the Han-dynasty empress Zhao Feiyan (likewise written during the late Ming). A husband with multiple wives naked in bed while others watch was another common feature of Chi-

nese pornography. Did the author of *Springs and Autumns of the Ten Kingdoms* find it irresistible to compile his history using the same motifs as the fiction of his time? Yet another feature of Golden Phoenix's biography is her lack of children. Was she in reality infertile and thus conveniently suited to be a "wanton" woman, never sidelined by motherhood? Zhao Feiyan was likewise infertile. The sensational stories about her told of her relentless sexual drive, but her inability to get pregnant, the implicit message being that wantonness contradicts the ability to beget. Some Ming and Qing authors even drew an explicit connection between wanton shrewishness on the one hand and infertility on the other. An odd feature of the story is Golden Phoenix's age when she becomes empress. In a society where a women's sexual attraction and marriageability were considered to end in her early twenties, if not earlier, one might expect the writers at least to note her age and perhaps say something to the effect that at forty she was still alluring. In all of the accounts, however, this feature is ignored.²⁰

The story of Chen Jinfeng has an afterlife that makes it seem as if the seed of wantonness passes from generation to generation. All accounts report that Wang Yanjun had a palace woman named Li Chunyan 李春鸞, with whom his eldest son and successor, Wang Jipeng 繼鵬 (reigned 935–939) "had incestuous relations." When Wang Yanjun was ill, Wang Jipeng had Golden Phoenix ask to have Li Chunyan for himself. His father reluctantly agreed. As the "Unofficial History" writes, Wang Jipeng and Li Chunyan were constantly together. When he became emperor, he installed her as empress and built her a mansion that surpassed the one his father built. In the end, emperor and empress lost their lives in a mutiny in 939 and, as the "Unofficial History" continues, were buried by the side of Lotus Flower Mountain, from which there grew a tree that put forth flowers in the shape of mandarin ducks with intertwined necks (mandarin ducks being symbols of marital harmony). Although the theme of harmonious love may seem out of place in such a story, it makes sense given the memory of Tang emperor Xuanzong and Consort Yang. Observers saw both sides at once: the grand-scale irresponsibility of rulers obsessed with favorites coupled with the sublime passion of "mandarin duck" love. The "Unofficial History of Golden Phoenix" continues its tone of melodrama when it reports that Golden Phoenix and Wang Yanjun had already been buried at Lotus Flower Mountain. When years later soldiers plundered the tombs, the bodies

of both Golden Phoenix and Li Chunyan were still fresh. Blood flowed from the corpses and turned the mountain red, thus the end of the story of the two women who were favorites of both fathers and sons.²¹

THE LIAO DYNASTY, 907–1125

Concurrent with the Five Dynasties and the Ten Kingdoms was the Liao 遼, a large northern empire that was ruled by the Khitan (in Chinese Qidan 契丹), another nomadic people who formed a hybrid dynasty combining their own and Chinese methods of rulership. The Liao also became concurrent with the Song dynasty, which in the mid-tenth century began taking over the territories of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms. There were several powerful imperial women in the Liao, two dowagers in particular. Women played a more active role in the military than ever before in Chinese history. They reflected the ways of the Khitan and other Central Asians who allowed women, especially members of the elite, to participate in both civil and military affairs. Even Han women living in the Liao adopted some of the nomadic customs.

The Khitan homeland was the grasslands of the eastern slopes of the Greater Khingan Mountain Range dividing Mongolia from Manchuria. They were herders of cattle and horses and spoke an Altaic language related to Turkic, Mongolian, and later Manchurian languages. The first Liao ruler was known as Abaoji 阿保機 (872–926), who became khan in 907, which is the conventional beginning of the dynasty even though the name Liao was not adopted until 947. The original Khitan custom was to elect chieftains or khans every three years at a meeting of tribal leaders. A man presented himself to the triennial council for selection based on his perceived personal qualities. Abaoji broke with the tradition by declaring himself permanent leader and created a new system with two administrations. The northern one was a nomadic military state ruled as a khanate, while the south was sedentary, equipped with a civil government and ruled according to the model of a Chinese empire. The two administrations were eventually called the Northern and Southern Chancelleries (*beifu* 北府 and *nanfu* 南府). Abaoji built a permanent capital according to a Chinese urban model, but like other Liao emperors he always remained nomadic. Throughout the year Liao

rulers moved periodically along a circuit that followed seasonal hunting grounds and when necessary participated in military campaigns.

The sources on the Liao are in Chinese, not the language of the Khitan, including the main official source, the *History of the Liao* (*Liao shi* 遼史), which was written two hundred years after the Liao ended. It was authored by a commission of writers headed by a Mongol official from the Yuan dynasty, Toghtō (Tuotuo 脱脱 in Chinese), who began the work in 1343 and completed it a year later. The chapter on empresses and consorts is sketchy and, like the one in the histories of the Five Dynasties, does not read like the accounts of empresses and consorts of Han-Chinese dynasties. Absent are portraits of debauched emperors infatuated with favorite concubines, empresses murdering pregnant rivals, and inner palaces of beautiful and talented women. Only a few scandals emerge, including the bare bones of one in which an emperor's cousin was caught having an affair with a palace woman, for which he was castrated; and a fuller account of a conniving official who caused an empress to be deposed by falsely accusing her of adultery. Otherwise the main note is of empresses leading armies and governing the empire, including one empress who allegedly remarried after the emperor died and had a son with her new husband, a Chinese senior counselor.²²

Two Intermarrying Royal Clans

In terms of marriage practices, several features distinguished the Khitan royal house from the Han Chinese. First of all, according to guidelines laid out early in the dynasty, emperors and empresses came from two clans that intermarried exclusively. The idea was to maintain purity and in particular to exclude Chinese bloodlines. The Khitan traditionally did not use surnames (*xingshi* 姓氏), but Abaoji adopted the name Yelü 耶律 for his descent group and that of his brothers, while his wife acquired the surname Xiao 蕭 for the lineage of her father and her mother's first husband, who were called the imperial maternal uncles (*guojiu* 國舅; they later expanded to include other branches of her lineage). Only these two clans had surnames. The Xiao supplied women for all future emperors, emperors' brothers, and emperors' nephews. Certain lineages in each clan were preferred over others. At the same time, they sometimes adopted outsiders, including Han Chinese, so it

was not a rigidly closed system. In declaring himself permanent ruler, Abaoji caused rivalries with other members of the Yelü clan who contested his rulership, especially brothers and uncles. To suppress opposition, he relied on members of the Xiao clan and, in reward for their service, promised them hereditary rights to key posts in the Liao government. The Xiao clan thus had privileged access to posts throughout the Liao, though the privilege was applied flexibly and non-Xiaos, including Chinese, often took their place. In general, Abaoji and later Liao rulers restricted access of close paternal kin to major positions in the civil and military administrations and in doing so furthered Abaoji's initial suppression of his closest family rivals.

The fact that each ruler's mother and wife were from the Xiao clan, as were the wives of his uncles, brothers, and nephews, ensured ongoing Xiao influence over the Yelüs and the dynasty as a whole. We can thus say that Liao rulers received support from and were influenced by both their mothers and their mothers' uncles and brothers, who might also serve as high court officials, and also by their mothers' sisters and nieces, who married the rulers' uncles (fathers' brothers), brothers, and nephews (brothers' sons). A common feature of these relations was cross-generational marriage, which was widely practiced among nomadic and seminomadic peoples in Inner Asia, though it was forbidden and condemned by the Chinese. The tendency was for the Xiao women to marry into a younger generation of the Yelü, while the Yelü men married upward into the Xiao clan. Xiao and Yelü women were therefore generally older than their spouses. These various aspects of Liao marriage practices underscore an important connection between powerful women and aristocratic privilege in Chinese history. In short, the guaranteed prominence of the Xiao clan, which enjoyed aristocratic privilege, allowed its women continued access to power. The same phenomenon occurred in other dynasties from the Han to the early Tang. Some Liao rulers reacted against Xiao dominance and tried to choose less powerful non-Xiao women; other dynasties made similar moves. Tang emperors after the late eighth century, for example, tended to refrain from naming empresses at all, as we saw above, while Ming emperors instituted a policy of appointing empresses from commoner ranks and keeping the empress's male relatives out of influential positions. Qing emperors likewise avoided taking empresses from families of the elite.²³ Tables listing imperial offspring in the *History of the Liao* demonstrate

the prominence of Liao empresses. Of sixty-seven recorded children, twenty-nine were born of empresses. For five of nine emperors, empresses gave birth to the majority and, in two cases, all of the offspring (Xingzong and Daozong).²⁴

Another feature of Khitan marriage practices recalls other nomadic groups in which polygamy meant wives of roughly equal rank. Once the Liao emperors began ruling a Chinese-style dynasty, however, they became like Han men and took one main wife who was superior to all other wives. Although the third emperor had two empresses, by the time of the sixth ruler, Emperor Shengzong, Han-style polygamy was the norm. But Liao rulers never officially adopted the Chinese practice of primogeniture. The traditional custom was to pass rulership to uncles or brothers, a practice called collateral succession. But they sometimes went both ways. They might pay their respects to the old custom by granting uncles or brothers, even deceased ones, a special title which symbolically awarded them the right to succession. But a ruler might then on his deathbed designate his son as actual heir apparent. Some died naming no one at all. In the case of the eighth ruler, Daozong, he named his eldest son as successor earlier than usual, probably because an uncle of his revolted during his reign. Daozong wanted to secure succession by primogeniture well in advance of his death.²⁵

An Empress Severs Her Hand and Affirms Her Power to Rule

Abaoji's wife was Empress Yingtian 應天 (878–953), who gave birth to three of his five children. “Austere and imposing, resolute and decisive, and a brave strategist” (簡重果斷, 有雄略), she accompanied her husband on military campaigns and had her own army, which she once led to save him from a dangerous ambush. When a Chinese ambassador from the Later Tang visited the Liao in 926, he encountered Abaoji and the empress sitting on facing couches, something that would have been impossible in Han China, where an empress would usually never be present. The ambassador had come to report the death of the Later Tang emperor, with whom Abaoji had sworn ties. Abaoji “wept uncontrollably,” thereby paying proper respect to a former ally, but he added that the Later Tang emperor had been overindulgent in women, drinking, and hunting, and that a ruler like that could not expect to last long. At the end of the visit, Abaoji told the ambassador to relay his demand

for two important pieces of territory bordering their two realms and finished by stating that, although he spoke Chinese, he did not like doing so in front of his tribesmen, who might imitate him and thereby become “timid and weak.”²⁶

When Abaoji died not long after, Empress Yingtian took control of the military and claimed the authority to pick a successor. The Khitan custom was that the widow should either sacrifice herself when her husband died or resort to the levirate and marry a younger brother or cousin of her deceased husband (she should not marry an older brother or cousin, nor a man outside the husband’s clan). Yingtian did neither. According to the *History of the Liao*, she originally wished to follow her husband in death, but desisted because of the objections of relatives and officials. Instead she “cut off her right hand to place in the coffin.” Fuller versions of the story appear in the *New History of the Five Dynasties* and a twelfth-century source, the *History of the Khitan Kingdom*, which report a dialogue she had with a Chinese general, whom Abaoji had deeply trusted. The general supported Abaoji’s original choice for successor, his first son, but Yingtian promoted her second son. In order to gain her way, she had over one hundred opponents killed, including one of Abaoji’s brothers. She parried with the general as follows:

“You were a trusted confidant of the deceased emperor,” she said. “Why don’t you pay him a visit?” “But surely no one was closer to him than the empress. Why doesn’t she go instead?” he replied.

The empress said, “At first I did want to follow the deceased emperor underground. But my sons are young and the affairs of the nation weigh heavily, so I have not been able to do so. But I am willing to give him my severed arm.”

Her attendants vigorously protested, so she severed a hand instead and granted the general a reprieve from the death sentence.

The empress thus daunted her critics and further enhanced her authority. The throne remained empty for about a year before her second son assumed power, that is, Emperor Taizong 太宗 (reigned 927–947). He died in 947 after a successful invasion of the Later Jin and was succeeded by the original heir apparent’s son, who became Emperor Shizong 世宗 (reigned 947–951). Empress Yingtian stayed involved in state affairs during Taizong’s reign and wanted her third son to succeed him.

She sent an army against Shizong, but lost, after which Shizong had her and her son banished from court. She died in 953 at age seventy-four.²⁷

An example of a ruler who tried to resist the influence of the Xiao clan was Emperor Shizong, who enthroned a Chinese empress. She was Consort Zhen 甄, a cultured woman who had been a member of the Later Tang harem. Shizong had “obtained” her as concubine during an invasion of China during the reign of Emperor Taizong (the Khitan liked to abduct Han women; this was perhaps a case of it). When members of the Xiao clan protested his choice, he finally installed a niece of Empress Yingtian’s as empress in 950. He thus had two empresses at once, though he allowed the Chinese one to play the dominant role. Shizong and both empresses were killed during a revolt in 951 led by a son of Abaoji’s brother, who declared himself emperor but was killed. The next ruler was the second emperor’s eldest son, Emperor Muzong 穆宗 (reigned 951–969), who imitated Shizong in two ways, by taking a weak and ineffective Xiao woman as empress and by avoiding highly ranked male members of the Xiao clan as officials.

Sometimes dramatic occurrences in the imperial family receive only minimal reference. According to a sketchy report in the *History of the Liao*, in 969 Emperor Muzong discovered his cousin, a son of Emperor Shizong and Consort Zhen, having an affair with a palace woman. The emperor had the cousin whipped, had his eye pierced, and had him castrated. He was about to be exposed in the marketplace when Muzong was murdered; the next emperor had the man freed (the latter two were half brothers). Other sketchy details about the cousin include that he loved learning, was fluent in both Khitan and Chinese scripts, and wrote poetry.²⁸

An Empress Leads an Army to Defeat the Song

Emperor Muzong was murdered by attendants outraged by his violent and capricious behavior during his frequent bouts of drunkenness. After him came Emperor Jingzong 景宗 (Shizong’s second son, reigned 969–982), then Shengzong 聖宗 (Jingzong’s son), who had the longest rule in the Liao, from 982 to 1031. The *History of the Liao* considers him the most successful ruler, adding that the great part of his success was “due to the instruction and guidance of his mother the dowager.” She was Emperor Jingzong’s wife, known as Empress Dowager Cheng-

tian 承天 (954–1009), an expert leader who headed civil and military branches of government with equal confidence and authority. Appointed by Emperor Jingzong, her father was both northern prime minister and northern chancellor. She became empress shortly after her father's appointment and gave birth to six of the emperor's eight children, including the future Emperor Shengzong (born 971).

During her husband's reign, she managed state affairs during his absences and frequent illnesses and took charge of all matters of war with the Song. She assumed control of government in 982 when Jingzong died and the eleven-year-old Shengzong became emperor (in this case the principle of primogeniture worked smoothly). Before his death, Jingzong had issued an edict allowing her to use the masculine imperial first-person singular pronoun *zhen* (Wu Zetian had used *zhen*, but less than a century after Chengtian, Han officials in the Song prohibited dowager-regents from ever using the word). Thirty years old, Chengtian dominated her son and, with the help of loyal officials, ruled until her death in 1009. For high offices she employed both lower-ranking members of the Yelü clan and Chinese officials, in particular one named Han Derang 韓德讓 (941–1011), whose father and grandfather had served the Liao since Abaoji's time and who had been awarded the Yelü surname. By way of establishing her authority, the dowager performed a rite normally limited to emperors when assuming the throne, the ritual of rebirth (*zaisheng yi* 再生儀). It involved a special building that the ruler entered in order to be reborn, ceremonial actors, libations, ritual objects and incantations, and the act of undressing and redressing in special clothing.

Empress Chengtian's most glorious act was the defeat of the Song-dynasty army, for which she can claim a unique position in Chinese history. The Song emperor and his generals seriously underestimated her capacity as military commander when they launched an invasion of Liao territory in 986. Because Emperor Shengzong was still a youth, the Chinese expected an easy victory. The fifteen-year-old emperor and his mother rode personally with their army and utterly defeated the Chinese, who fled with the Khitans in pursuit. The dowager captured around one hundred boys, whom she ordered castrated, thus adding to the corps of eunuchs already imported during an invasion of the Later Jin in 947 (the Khitan rulers had imported other new things from China at that time, including astronomical maps, classics carved in stone, mu-

sical instruments, and palace women). Eunuchs were not part of Khitan tradition and information about them is sparse. Of the two appearing in the chapter on eunuchs in the dynastic history, one was among Chengtian's captive boys and became a favorite of Emperor Shengzong.²⁹

No account of Chengtian can omit reference to her alleged relationship with Han Derang. The *History of the Liao* does not refer to it, but two Song-dynasty visitors to the Liao court and the *History of the Khitan Kingdom* do. According to these, the empress and Han were betrothed when young, but the imperial clan requested her for themselves and had her break off the engagement. While serving as regent for Shengzong, however, she asked Han to resume their relationship, after which he had "free entry to her curtained chambers." It was further said that they had Han's wife poisoned and that they had a son; neither of these assertions is found in the *History of the Liao*, which says that Han was sonless. One of the Song visitors was an ambassador, Lu Zhen 路振, who wrote an official report about his trip to the Liao and his audiences with Han Derang and Empress Chengtian. Twelve years older than Chengtian, Han was one of her main advisors, rising to commander in chief of the Northern Chancellery, a position normally reserved for Yelü and Xiao nobles, and later serving as grand counselor. In Lu Zhen's report, the empress appeared to be about fifty years old, wore "a cap of kingfisher-feather adornments and jade pendants in her ears," and sat on a stack of cushions on a chair, with a dozen or so female Khitan attendants. Lu also saw "a boy of about ten years of age, wearing a Khitan hat and brocade clothing, playing around in front of the dowager," who resembled Han Derang and was "probably" their son, he guessed. Although the reports of the marriage and the son may be secondhand, the fact that Lu Zhen wrote as an official ambassador lends weight to his account. If the empress and Han indeed had such an open bond, it was the last of its kind in Chinese history.³⁰

"Dark Face and Wolfish Eyes"

In contrast to the Tang, most Liao emperors had relatively few children and—unless the records are deficient—few wives. Emperor Muzong appears to have had no children at all. Only Shengzong resembled a Chinese emperor in both number of children, twenty in all, and wives, his empress plus ten and possibly eleven other women. As noted above,

the Khitan originally practiced a polygamy in which the wives were of equal status. Khitan rulers also took concubines, but it appears that at first they did not distinguish between the offspring of an empress and a concubine. By Shengzong, however, polygamy worked according to the Chinese model in that the main wife was strictly above a concubine. In 1027 he issued an order that distinguished descendants of a wife from those of a concubine—unless the son of a concubine was adopted by the main wife. He also ruled that sons of concubines should no longer be eligible for hereditary service in office. Further, low-ranking members of the noble lineages and common persons were no longer eligible to hold offices reserved for noble lineages. His goal was to prevent further dilution of the highest-ranking lines of the Yelü and Xiao clans. Shengzong had six sons and fourteen daughters, including two sons and two daughters by Empress Qin'ai 欽哀, his second empress.

She was the next powerful woman in the Liao, coming from Empress Yingtian's branch of the Xiao clan, which rivaled Empress Chengtian's. Qin'ai had "a dark face and wolfish eyes," says her biography (*aomian langshi* 黝面狼視). Her mother once dreamt of a golden column stretching to heaven which none of her sons could climb. But when the empress tried, she and her attendants ascended easily. She began as one of Shengzong's palace women and gave birth to a son whom Shengzong's first empress raised as heir apparent. When Shengzong died in 1031, however, Qin'ai took the reins of government, declared herself empress dowager, and slandered the empress, who was named Qitian 齊天. Although Qin'ai's son, Emperor Xingzong 興宗 (reigned 1031–1055), questioned his adopted mother's guilt, he banished her and later sent agents to murder her. Qitian declared her innocence, asked the agents to wait while she bathed, and promised to accept death. When they returned, she was dead by her own hand, at fifty years of age. Qin'ai next plotted in 1034 to dethrone Emperor Xingzong in favor of her second son, Zhongyuan 重元, who thwarted his mother by telling his brother of the plan. The emperor had his mother banished, but allowed her to return. Although she still favored her second son, she made no more moves to install him. Xingzong's designated heir, his eldest son, assumed the throne in 1055. Empress Qin'ai died in 1058.³¹

An Empress Falsely Accused of Adultery

If Abaoji thought that speaking Chinese in front of his tribesmen showed him as timid and weak, things had changed by the time of Emperor Daozong 道宗 (1032–1101, reigned 1055–1101) and his main wife, Empress Xuanyi 宣懿. Both knew Chinese well, wrote poetry, and liked Chinese culture. The empress was Qin'ai's niece and gave birth to all four of the emperor's children. She was beautiful, skilled with words, and a good musician who wrote lyrics and played the pipa. But Daozong was a weak and passive ruler, the historians report. For most of his reign he allowed a powerful group of officials to influence government, especially a man named Yelü Yixin 耶律乙辛 (died 1083), who plotted against both the empress and the heir apparent. By that time, Daozong had survived a rebellion launched in 1063 by Zhongyuan, who was his uncle, and Zhongyuan's son. Daozong's mother, Empress Dowager Renyi 仁懿 (died 1076, Xingzong's empress) had warned him about the possibility of revolt and led a section of the royal guard to repel the attackers. The rebels briefly declared Zhongyuan emperor, but he fled south and committed suicide.³²

The story of Yelü Yixin's conspiracy is a classic case of palace intrigue and a miniature novel in itself. The powerful Yelü Yixin felt threatened by the heir apparent, the eldest son of Daozong and Empress Xuanyi, whom Daozong designated in 1065. Yelü Yixin decided to slander first the empress, then the heir apparent. In 1075 a palace slave woman and a low-ranking member of the office of music accused Empress Xuanyi of an illicit affair with a court musician. The accusers were presumably coached by Yelü Yixin, who reported the affair to the emperor, produced false evidence, and succeeded in bringing about the execution of the musician and the forced suicide of the empress. Next, in 1077, Yelü Yixin accused the heir apparent of a conspiracy to overthrow his father and had the heir killed. Yixin replaced the fallen empress with a Xiao woman, who shortly after the death of Daozong's mother became empress in 1076. Unfortunately, the woman bore no sons and was replaced by her younger sister, who had originally been the wife of Yixin's son; Yixin had them divorce. But she had no sons either. In 1080, Daozong finally expelled Yixin, who died soon after. The story continued with a tail ending when, not long after, the mother of the two replacement empresses was executed for using black magic against the new heir

apparent, the son of the original heir. Because of her mother's crime, the first of the two replacement empresses was reduced to commoner status, but was summoned back many years later and granted the rank of great consort dowager.³³

A Consort Who Wrote Verse Satirizing the Emperor

Emperor Daozong's grandson assumed the throne in 1101, becoming Emperor Tianzuo 天祚, who reigned until 1125. During this period the Liao began to suffer attacks from the Jurchen, who conquered the Liao in 1125 and subsumed it into their own dynasty, the Jin 金 (1115–1234). Emperor Tianzuo was despised for his cruelty, self-indulgence, and reliance on personal favorites. There were two failed attempts to dethrone him, one by his uncle in 1115, the other by his own Consort Wen 文 in 1121. In 1122 the emperor abandoned his court and fled the Jurchen and other enemies, leaving the Liao rulership in the hands of a series of figures, one of whom established the Western Liao far to the west of the original Liao state. Tianzuo's empress and a consort followed him when he fled the court, after which both died of illness (none of his six sons and six daughters were born of the empress, who was from the Xiao clan).

The story of Consort Wen bears the features of a recurrent tale about heroic women at the end of a dynasty. She belonged to the clan of imperial maternal uncles, and the emperor first saw her in the home of a member of the Yelü family. The emperor liked her and hid her in the palace for several months. She was well educated and skilled in music and poetry. Finally, an imperial uncle urged him to marry her formally, which he did in 1103, favoring her greatly. But when the Jurchen menace increased and the emperor ignored it, she wrote satirical poems comparing him with an ancient emperor who lost the empire because of reliance on corrupt officials. She joined with her brother-in-law to overthrow the emperor and install her son in his stead, but the plot was exposed and she was ordered to commit suicide. Although the poems may have been forged after the fall of the dynasty, there is no doubt about her involvement in the plot. In the historians' eyes she fit the mold of the capable woman who filled the breach when male leaders failed.³⁴

NOTES

1. The Five Dynasties were the Later Liang 後梁, the Later Tang 後唐, the Later Jin 後晉, the Later Han 後漢, and the Later Zhou 後周. The Ten Kingdoms were Wu 吳, Southern Tang 南唐, Former Shu 前蜀, Later Shu 後蜀, Southern Han 南漢, Chu 楚, Wu-Yue 吳越, Min 閩, Jingnan 荆南 (also called Nanping 南平), and Northern Han 北漢.

2. Xue Juzheng et al., *Jiu Wudai shi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1976) and Ouyang Xiu et al., *Xin Wudai shi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974). The latter is translated by Richard Davis, *Historical Records of the Five Dynasties* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

3. See *Xin Wudai shi*, 13.129 (held wife in awe); *Zizhi tongjian*, 259.8440 (military advice); *Xin Wudai shi*, 13.137 (son's wives); *Jiu Wudai shi*, 18.250 (bandit's wife); *Jiu Wudai shi*, 12.165 and *Xin Wudai shi*, 13.136 (prostitute mother); *Xin Wudai shi*, 13.127 (indulgence in women).

4. See *Xin Wudai shi*, 4.39–40 (lines of descent), 6.66 (fathers and sons), 17.187 (adopting), and 16.173 (three surnames).

5. See *Xin Wudai shi*, 16.171 (vicious temper), 17.176 (empress of first ruler of Later Jin), and 17.180–81 (addressing the casket and uncastrated man); and *Zizhi tongjian*, 283.9254–55 (casket).

6. See *Xin Wudai shi*, 14.143–44, 146 (refusing to see father, eunuchs and actors, suicide); *Jiu Wudai shi*, 49.674 and *Xin Wudai shi*, 37.398 (antics). Another notable woman was the wife of Li Keyong 李克用 (856–908), father of the Later Tang founder, Li Cunxu 李存勳 (885–926). She was knowledgeable in military strategy and liked to train female attendants and concubines in horseback riding and archery (Lady Liu 劉).

7. See *Jiu Wudai shi*, 104.1381.

8. He also worked on the compilation of the *History of the Ming*. See Wu Renchen, *Shiguo chunqiu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983).

9. Li Bian's son was Li Jing 璟 (916–961). See *Shiguo chunqiu*, 18.262; and Lu You 陸游 (1125–1210), *NanTang shu* 南唐書, in *Sibu congkan xubian, shibu* (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshu guan, 1934), 13.1ab (drugs, anger, Empress Wu). Also see *Zizhi tongjian*, 283.9244–45, for the year 943, which adds that he warned his son not to take the drugs.

10. See *Shiguo chunqiu*, 18.262–63 (as if an immortal, food, human hog); Lu You, *NanTang shu*, 13.1b (food, human hog); and Ma Ling 馬令 (eleventh and twelfth centuries), *NanTang shu*, in *Sibu congkan xubian, shibu* (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshu guan, 1934), 6.2b (human hog).

11. See *Shiguo chunqiu*, 17.256 (tears). The last poem is to the tune of “Pleasure in the Lovely Women,” Owen, trans., *An Anthology of Chinese Literature* (New York: Norton, 1996), 568.

12. See *Shiguo chungiu*, 18.264–69; Ma Ling, *NanTang shu*, 6ab; Lu You, *NanTang shu*, 13.3b; and on the son's death, *Shiguo chungiu*, 19.284. All three sources report the incident between the two sisters.

13. See Ma Ling, *NanTang shu*, 6.9b–10a (coming to no harm); Lu You, *NanTang shu*, 13.4ab; and *Shiguo chungiu*, 18.268. The latter two say nothing about harm.

14. *Shiguo chungiu*, 18.269. Nothing about her can be found in the *Xin Wudai shi* or *Zizhi tongjian*. On the history of foot binding, see Dorothy Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), and for the thirteenth-century reference, see 114–15 and note on 262.

15. See *Shiguo chungiu*, 38.560; 562–63 (Wang Yan's consorts); 50.747–48; and the Song poet Su Shi's 蘇軾 prefatory note to "Dongxian ge" (洞仙歌), which mentions that he once met a nun who recalled visiting the Shu palace when she was young and seeing the last emperor sitting with Lady Huarui enjoying a cool breeze on a hot summer night. The consort struck by lightning was Zhang Taihua 張太華. The woman who presented the poem to the Song emperor was Consort Xu 徐 (more famously known as Lady Huarui), surnamed Fei 費. Legends from Song sources say that she attempted to poison the Song emperor, but that his brother killed her. On Lady Huarui, see also Wilt Idema and Beata Grant, *The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2004), 293–97.

16. Persia was referred to as *Bosi* 波斯. The two women were Lu Qiongxián 盧瓊仙 and Fan Huzi 樊胡子 (the sorceress), of whom the *Xin Wudai shi* says Fan was the more powerful. See *Xin Wudai shi*, 65.811 (torture), 814 (father lying in state), and 816 (actress); *Shiguo chungiu*, 60.862 (eunuchs); *Xin Wudai shi*, 65.817 (eunuchs and passing mention of the Persian); and *Shiguo qunqiu*, 61.879–80 (naked in twos).

17. The first Min ruler was King Wang Yanhan 王延翰 (died 926), whose wife was Lady Cui 崔. See *Xin Wudai shi*, 68.847; and *Shiguo chungiu*, 94.1359, 1362.

18. See *Zizhi tongjian*, 279.9128, 9132–34; *Xin Wudai shi*, 68.849–50; *Shiguo qunqiu*, 94.1360–1362; and Xu Tong 徐燧 (1561–1599), *Jinfeng waizhuan* 金鳳外傳, in *Xuelin manlu* 學林漫錄, 15 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2000): 231–40.

19. The "Unofficial History" says that Chen Jinfeng was made empress in 932; Sima Guang says 935. The confidant is Gui Shouming 歸守明, whom Sima Guang and the "Unofficial History" say had "free access" to the emperor's bedchamber (*Zizhi tongjian*, 279.9133). *Zizhi tongjian* refers to Wang Yanjun as Wang Lin. *Zizhi tongjian*, *Xin Wudai shi*, and the *Jinfeng waizhuan*

report that during the coup Wang Yanjun was wounded so severely that his palace women killed him out of mercy.

20. Only *Springs and Autumns of the Ten Kingdoms* and the “Unofficial History” mark time clearly enough to calculate Chen’s age.

21. Referring to the affair between Wang Jipeng and Li Chunyan, *Shiguo chunqiu* and *Xin Wudai shi* use the word for “incest”; *Zizhi tongjian* says “was intimate with” (*si 私*). All sources tell of Wang Jipeng having Chen Jinfeng ask his father for Li Chunyan on his behalf.

22. A major study of the Liao in English is Karl Wittfogel and Feng Chia-sheng, *History of Chinese Society, Liao (907–1125)* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1949). See also Denis Twitchett and Klaus-Peter Tietze, “The Liao,” in *Alien Regimes and Border States, 907–1368*, vol. 6 of *The Cambridge History of China*, edited by Herbert Franke and Denis Twitchett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 43–153; and Linda Cooke Johnson, *Women of the Conquest Dynasties: Gender and Identity in Liao and Jin China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011).

23. Much of this information comes from Jennifer Holmgren, “Marriage, Kinship and Succession Under the Ch’i-tan Rulers of the Liao Dynasty (907–1125),” *T’oung Pao* 72 (1986): 44–91, including the connection between powerful women and aristocratic privilege; and Johnson, *Women of the Conquest Dynasties*, including “generation-gap marriage,” 98–99.

24. See Tuotuo, *Liaoshi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), chapters 64 and 65, which refer mainly to empresses but only to some of the consorts.

25. See Holmgren, “Marriage, Kinship and Succession,” 80–84, 90–91.

26. The quote from Empress Yingtian’s biography is in Tuotuo, *Liaoshi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 71.1199. For the ambassador, see Frederick Mote, *Imperial China 900–1800* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 45, citing a Liao historical source called the *Qidan guozhi* 契丹國志 (Mote provides a full translation of the ambassador’s report); and Wittfogel and Feng, *History of Chinese Society*, 538, also citing the *Qidan guozhi*. The Later Tang emperor was Li Cunxu (r. 923–926).

27. See *Liaoshi*, 71.1200 (cutting off her hand; the general was Zhao Siwen 趙思溫); *Xin Wudai shi*, 73.902–903 (dialogue with general); and *Liaoshi*, 5.64 (banished). See also Johnson, *Women of the Conquest Dynasties*, 106–7, also citing Ye Longli 葉隆禮, *Qidan guozhi* 契丹國志 (Taibei: Guangwen shuju, 1968), 13.127–28.

28. See *Liaoshi*, 71.1201 (Consort Zhen) and 64.985–986 (castrated cousin, named Zhimo 只沒). On Zhen’s possible abduction, see Johnson, *Women of the Conquest Dynasties*, 89.

29. On Empress Chengtian, see *Liaoshi*, 71.1201–2; and *Qidan guozhi*, 6.53. For the edict regarding the use of *zhen*, see *Liaoshi*, 8.95. She was also

known as Empress Ruizhi 睿智. The Song ruler was Emperor Taizong (r. 976–997). On the rebirth ritual, see Wittfogel and Feng, *History of Chinese Society*, 273–74; *Liaoshi*, 53.879–80; and on eunuchs, *Liaoshi*, 109.1480–82.

30. See Chen Shu, ed., *Quan Liao wen* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), 360–61 (report by Liu Bin 劉斌 about son and murder); *Qidan guozhi*, 13.132 (affair with Han); and Lu Zhen, *Chengyao lu* 乘輶錄, in Jiang Shaoyu 江少虞, *Songchao shishi leiuyan* 宋朝事實類苑 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1981), 1010–16, especially 1011 and 1013–14 (official report). For a translation of *Chengyao lu*, see David Curtis Wright, *The Ambassadors Records: Eleventh-century Reports on Sung Embassies to the Liao, Papers on Inner Asia* 29 (Bloomington: Research Institute for Inner Asian Studies, 1998), 29, 30 (free entry and exit, wife killed, birth of son) and 38 (seeing son, description of empress; using Wright's translation with minor modification). On Han Derang in *Liaoshi*, see 82.1289–1291 (sonless). Also see Johnson's discussion of the validity of the Song ambassadors' accounts in *Women of the Conquest Dynasties*, 154–62 (including reference to archaeological evidence of Han being buried in a tomb next to Chengtian's).

31. On both Qin'ai (originally known by the name Noujin 耨斤) and Qitian, see *Liaoshi*, 71.1203.

32. See *Liaoshi*, 71.1204. Renyi bore all of Xingzong's five children.

33. See *Liaoshi*, 23.277–78 and 71.1205–1206. Twitchett and Tietze say that the mother was executed for having seduced the heir apparent and question how that could have occurred since the heir apparent was still very young ("The Liao," 136n201). But the words in the *History of the Liao* are *yanmei* 厭魅, to curse with black magic, which have nothing to do with seduction. For another account of the affair, citing the maid's accusation from the *Quan Liao wen*, see Johnson, *Women of the Conquest Dynasties*, 113–16.

34. See *Liaoshi*, 71.1206 and Johnson, *Women of the Conquest Dynasties*, 101–2.

CONCLUSION TO PART III

Strong Women and Weak Men

At the same time that women were commanding armies in the Liao, a reinvigoration of the positions of both empress and dowager-regent occurred in the Song (960–1279) to the south. The story of imperial women of the Song and other regimes to the end of imperial history will be saved for another volume, but a short summary is as follows. Song emperors regularly enthroned empresses, while dowager-regents served a total of nine times; six of them were especially honored for their virtue and sagacity. Nevertheless, allowing no more Wu Zetians was of key importance, and the Song succeeded with minor exceptions. Empresses studiously avoided the appearance of someone like Wu Zetian and officials strongly objected whenever they saw Wu Zetian-like behavior. Empress Liu 劉 (969–1033, wife of Emperor Zhenzong 真宗, reigned 998–1022), was one of the most powerful dowager-regents, taking the reins of government for her twelve-year-old son, Renzong 仁宗 (reigned 1022–1063), and refusing to step down even after the emperor was old enough to rule and even when officials demanded that she retire. When the subject of Wu Zetian was raised, she condemned her as a traitor to her ancestors. In a distinct departure from the past, officials devised new rules for her and the other eight dowager-regents that clearly signaled their lesser status as rulers. Dowager-regents had to hold court from behind a curtained divide, never face-to-face with officials. They could not hold court alone but only in company with the

young emperor. They were not allowed to use the masculine word *zhen* to refer to themselves. Only one Song reign reads as if the lessons of the Han and Tang might have been forgotten, that of Guangzong 光宗 (reigned 1189–1194), whose Empress Li 李 is the only imperial wife in the *History of the Song* to be labeled as “jealous.” She insisted that her son be named heir apparent. When she was opposed by Guangzong’s father, the retired emperor, she convinced Guangzong to stop visiting him, in a stunning transgression of the principles of filial piety. Her power finally waned after the retired emperor died, when Guangzong was forced to abdicate and her son became Emperor Ningzong 寧宗.¹

As a non-Han dynasty, the Liao prepared the way for the stories of the Jurchen of the Jin dynasty (1115–1234), the Mongols of the Yuan (1271–1368), and the Manchus of the Qing (1644–1911). The Qing would model itself partly on the Liao and especially the Jin, their ancestors, but would try to avoid their faults. As we have seen, even when alien regimes adopted Han imperial practices, they differed most from the Han in the method of choosing successors and the relatively less sequestered behavior of women. The Mongols and Manchus retained nomadic customs of selecting successors and rejected the Chinese method of primogeniture. The Khitan, Mongols, and Manchus never adopted the Chinese custom of foot-binding, which began among the Han in the Song. Jurchen, Mongol, and Manchu women resembled the Tabgatch and Khitan in that they rode horseback, practiced archery, and hunted. Khitan and Mongol women attended court with their husbands and, even when governing as regents, did not use a curtain to divide themselves from courtiers; Qing dowager Cixi did, however. The royal families of all four regimes—Khitan, Jurchen, Mongols, and Manchus—were concerned with ethnic purity and favored marriages with select clans of their own people. But emperors sometimes took wives from other groups, including Han and Korean, who in some cases became mothers of heirs apparent. The nomadic regimes all practiced polygamy with multiple wives (the first Jin ruler, Aguda, had four empresses) but for the most part eventually adopted Chinese-style polygamy and the ranking system for consorts (some Yuan rulers had more than one living empress). Compared to others, both Khitan and Manchus maintained a relatively greater level of stability in the inner palace throughout their reigns. No Jurchen, Mongol, or Manchu empresses ever led armies, but a number of Mongol imperial women resembled

the powerful empresses of the Liao. In general, Qing women did not stand out in this way, although of course at the end of the dynasty, Empress Dowager Cixi became one of the most powerful women in Chinese history.

In between the Mongols and the Manchus was the Ming (1368–1644), a Han regime that was particularly marred by profligate and negligent rulers and manipulation of power by eunuchs. But the Ming introduced a unique policy of curtailing the influence of women by decreeing that all spouses of the emperor, heir apparent, and princes come from non-elite families. Such women would be unable to use their family influence to assert power. Only one woman served as regent during the Ming, and did so unofficially, Empress Dowager Zhang 張 (died 1442), who came from a humble background and who, when asked to serve as official regent, refused to do so because, she said, it was against ancestral mandate. She earned a respectable reputation. Later Ming women who interfered in politics were minor in rank, including two who were nursemaids of the ruler. None was as capable or ambitious as women such as Tang Wu Zetian, Liao empress Chengtian, or Song empress Liu.

The phenomenon of empresses taking lovers continued its occasional history in the aftermath of Wu Zetian, with Liao empress Chengtian being the most prominent example. Nevertheless, although scandalous stories never ceased, actual cases were rare. Empress Chen of the Min dynasty had affairs with two palace men, as recorded in both Ouyang Xiu's and Sima Guang's histories. Liao empress Xuanyi was falsely accused of adultery as part of a plot to depose her; she committed suicide. In the Jin, one of the wives of the profligate wife stealer, Emperor Hailing 海陵 (reigned 1149–1161), reportedly had an affair with one of her female servants; another of his wives was said to have smuggled a lover into her chambers and disguised him as a woman.² For many centuries, people wrongly believed that Empress Yang 楊 of Song emperor Ningzong had an affair with a court painter.³ The rumor of an unofficial chronicle reported that a Yuan-dynasty minister visited Empress Dowager Budashiri secretly at night.⁴ Consort Zheng 鄭 of Ming emperor Shenzong 神宗 (reigned 1573–1620) was said to have had an affair with a conspirator in a plot to seize power.⁵ A final case is that of Qing empress dowager Cixi, about whom both Chinese and foreign writers fabricated reports of her affairs with eunuchs and young men

smuggled into the palace. Although other reports exist, the lack of solid evidence is nevertheless remarkable. Could it be that in the aftermath of Wu Zetian and for about the next eleven hundred years imperial women actually behaved differently in this regard? What did not change was the impulse to create rumors about imperial women's sexual affairs in order to malign them.

While it is true that the prohibition against women rulers firmly cemented itself after Wu Zetian, it continued to be the case that the order or lack of it in marital relations was never solely in the emperor's hands, as profligate or autocratic as he might be. Polygamy did not exist simply for his pleasure. Even though women were severely constrained by the polygamous hierarchy, their constructive, destructive, and self-destructive behavior usually found a way to have its effect. The best that can be said for the men is that some did a relatively good job of avoiding polygamy's traps. We should view polygamy as something that, though favoring the man, governed him through a combination of institutional rules, habits, and expectations and the personalities of the people involved. Women could take the man's place only by default, that is, when the man was weak or incapacitated. They were filling in during an in-between time that would not last. Women were unable to create a framework for justifying themselves as rulers in their own right. When they did rule, they coordinated with male and sometimes female helpers and thereby created an alternate though temporary set of roles within the standard framework. Otherwise they took their place in the hierarchy of women, where they were expected to create harmony and rise above jealousy. Their political arena was mainly confined to issues of marriage, child rearing and early education, family-oriented palace ritual, and, if possible, occasional matters of state, though not all women necessarily wished to expand into that zone. Nevertheless, the conditions for female rulership predictably occurred regardless of the dynasty. Women ruled when men were unavailable, the implication being that men had failed and were no longer men. All this left a mystery that the rule of "women shall not rule" never resolved: women were always women, but men predictably failed to be men.

NOTES

1. There were other cases of jealous rivalry in the Song, but they were not as dramatic. Empress Li was called “jealous and brazen” (*duhan* 妬悍); see Tuotuo et al., *Songshi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), 243.8654. The rules about women holding court can be found in the chapter on rites in the *Songshi*, 117.2774–75.

2. Tuotuo et al., *Jinshi* 金史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 63.1509–10.

3. See Hui-shu Lee, *Empresses, Art, and Agency in Song Dynasty China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010), 19–20, 192–205.

4. See Quan Heng 權衡, *Gengshen waishi* 庚申外史, cited in John Dardess, *Conquerors and Confucians: Aspects of Political Change in Late Yuan China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), 68. The minister was Baiyan 伯顏.

5. See Zhang Tingyu 張廷玉 (1672–1755), *Mingshi* 明史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 114.3539.

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