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by Keith McMahon

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The Institution of Polygamy in the Chinese Imperial Palace

KEITH McMAHON

This study examines Chinese imperial polygamy under two aspects, as institution and actual practice. Institution refers to its existence as a set of rules and expectations, practice to the actual ways in which imperial people carried out polygamy as recorded in both historical and fictional sources. The key to the institutionalization of polygamy had to do with the idea that a ruler did not engage in polygamy because he wanted to, but because he had to in order to fulfill his role as Son of Heaven. He was obligated to extend the patriline and was as if following a hallowed directive. Practice had to do with what rules and expectations could not control or predict, including how a man justified his role as polygamist, his polygamous transgressions, and how he dealt with the main challenge to polygamous harmony, women's jealousy and rivalry.

THE BIOGRAPHY OF THE first empress of the Sui dynasty (581–618) contains an unprecedented statement: “The emperor and empress were a companionate couple who swore that they would have children by no other woman.” As it turned out, however, the emperor impregnated one of his concubines, after which the empress had her killed. The infuriated ruler, Yang Jian (541–604), fled the palace on horseback and rode many miles until reached by pursuing attendants, when he heaved a deep sigh and said, “Here I am an emperor, yet I cannot do as I please” (Li Yanshou 1974, 14:532–33). The oath they made to have children by the empress alone was unprecedented because virtually all Chinese emperors were not only expected but pressured to have children by multiple wives. That the empress murdered the rival consort was a serious transgression, though not unusual in the history of Chinese imperial polygamy. That the emperor should complain in such a way signals that he who was allowed and expected to have multiple wives was in fact subject to limits upon his relations with women. Far from being a mere expression of his personal will, polygamy was an institution that governed him by rules and values. It was a set of sexual and marital expectations that was intimately influenced by the relations between one man, many women, and their offspring.¹

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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, Mayan and Aztec regimes, ancient Ireland and Iceland, and ancient Biblical kingdoms, among others. It was in general institutionally regulated. The profligate ruler who staged orgies in his harem was relatively rare, although widely known about. By the time of the Sui ruler, how to be a polygamist was something that had existed for centuries as a system of principles and beliefs. Besides what could be written down and preached, there was also that which the people around the emperor did to influence and affect him, of whom the murderous Sui empress was an extreme and transgressive example. Together the institution and the actions of people around him constituted a set of constraints, which fell into two general and sometimes overlapping categories: the institutional aspects of polygamy, on the one hand, which had to do with rules, values, and customs, and, on the other hand, the doings of actual people, which can be found in centuries worth of written sources about the imperial family.

Polygamy was an affirmation of male potency. The presence of many women connoted a strong ruler blessed with fertility. Many polygamous societies had the custom of segregating the ruler's women in special quarters, thus the Arabic loan word *harem*, often used to refer to the women's quarters of polygamous rulers all over the world. *Harem* comes from an Arabic root referring to the forbidden, sacred, taboo, and inviolable (in practice referring not just to the women's quarters but to any sanctuary or sacred place that was forbidden to common outsiders). Not all courts practiced such strict segregation, including Mayan and Aztec regimes and European courts. 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 Ottoman-Turkish worlds (Balabanlilar 2010; Lal 2007; Mermisi 1993; Peirce 1993). So were the wives of Mongol and other Inner Asian peoples, from whom the Mughals were descended. Where there was Christianity, on the other hand, there was monogamy, thus Europe and Byzantium (Duggan 1997; Garland 1999; Herrin 2001). Monogamy was the exception rather than the rule. But even in Christian realms, male rulers had mistresses. Although polygamy was foreign and prohibited, Christian men, even popes, engaged in what can be called polygamous mating. Louis XIV (r. 1643–1715) was open about his mistress Madame de Montespan (1641–1707), but secretive about others (Norberg 2008). Russia's Ivan IV (r. 1533–84) was like England's Henry VIII (r. 1509–47) in that, when he tired of one woman, he did away with her and married the next (Thyrêt 2008). 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 (Norberg 2008).

Polygamy in which a man is allowed and expected to have multiple wives contrasts with monogamy in which a man can only have multiple women by breaking the rules. Instead of thinking that the Chinese polygamist had the world of women at his will,

however, let us think of him as likewise bound by rules and constraints. The simplest illustration of this is that when a ruler took a concubine to have a son, he was obeying an institutional directive. It was his sacred duty to continue his line of succession, and taking multiple wives ensured that he would do so. What if, however, he took a concubine because she was beautiful and aroused his desire? It then seems that he did so because he wanted to, not because institutional values told him to. But even in this case he was subject to being monitored, even criticized; and he was subject to the behavior of the others surrounding him, including women, children, eunuchs, and officials. In short, how far a ruler went in breaking rules and satisfying his desires had to do with his encounter with the entire set of constraints, whether they belonged to the institution or the realm of interactions with others in the palace, whether the others accommodated, manipulated, or resisted him.

Two generalizations aid in summarizing polygamy as a whole. The first is that *taking multiple wives was a way in which men made themselves appear exceptional*. The exceptional men distinguished themselves from all other men and women by exerting privileges that others did not have. Their exceptionality had a kind of magical or even sacred quality to it, as if they harbored an essence that made them something like gods. Polygamy also of course relied on the social and economic power of men. Women became concubines because they suffered social and economic disadvantage. Rich and powerful men offered women and their families desirable advantages. The higher a woman's status, the less likely she would become a concubine. In the imperial family, it was generally the case that the higher a woman's social status, the higher her rank in the hierarchy of consorts—though there were plenty of exceptions in which a woman went from being a slave to empress or favorite.

The second generalization overlaps with the first, namely, that *for polygamy to function smoothly, for it to work in reality, it had to exist for the sake of a higher purpose*. The higher purpose was a guiding principle that all the participants supposedly lived for. The precise meaning of higher purpose did not need to be specified but in general had to do with the idea that polygamy was not merely a man satisfying his desire for many women, or a man expressing his superiority over other men. Those truths were too brazen to qualify as higher purpose. Believing in the higher purpose of polygamy was like believing in a supernatural being. It was something that supposedly elevated the participants above the level of mundane emotions and desires. In particular, the participants in polygamy were to rise above the man's obsession with multiple partners and the women's jealousies and rivalries. Exceptionality and living for a higher purpose defined an aura that justified polygamy to those both inside and outside it. The aura was something that had to be repeatedly supported and reinforced. Once it was lost, the emperor and the empire would fall, as in the classic cases of profligate last rulers, such as Jie of the Xia dynasty, Chen Shubao of the Chen dynasty, or Yang Guang of the Sui.

POLYGAMY AS INSTITUTION

First let me briefly define polygamy as institution. This aspect refers to the existence of imperial polygamy as a set of rules and prescriptions, most of which were expressed in ritual, moral, and historical texts. Examples of time-honored rules were: a concubine may

not replace a main wife; an empress should not be jealous; and an emperor should not indulge in sexual excess. In these senses, institution is chiefly understood as a set of values and ideals. Polygamy is a social custom that people follow. It is something people believe in and act upon as they do with any belief system. It has guidelines and it bestows privilege. An emperor took multiple wives to bear as many sons as possible in order to guarantee a successor. A husband and wife took a concubine because they failed to beget a son after many years of trying. These are the most proper reasons for taking concubines in premodern China. If a man broke the rules, he knew that he was doing so; others might criticize or try to restrain him.

The concept of institution as a system of rules and norms that can be written down in orderly fashion conceals another side that is not so orderly and that has to do with the acts of will and violence that took place in order for the institution to establish itself in the first place. Someone, let us say the founding emperor of a dynasty, initially fought for and gained supremacy, regardless of the niceties of rules and institutions. He was the law before he and his fellow founders adopted the formal set of laws that were written down in order to foster and maintain social harmony. The line is one between being the law, on the one hand, and subjecting oneself and others to the law as formally established, on the other. To take polygamy as an example, it was recurrent in Chinese history for dynastic founders to appropriate wives and concubines from conquered enemies. Liu Bang of the Han, Zhu Yuanzhang of the Ming, and Hong Taiji of the Qing all did so, among others. Taking another man's wife or concubine was a way of establishing dominance and claiming legitimacy. If rulers in peaceful times stole other men's wives, however, they were committing wanton acts, as in the cases of Emperor Hailing of the Jurchen Jin dynasty or Wuzong of the Ming. They were not heroic founders or conquerors but instead wanton profligates forever condemned and, as in Hailing's case, even posthumously demoted.

Four Principles

Polygamy as institution and set of constraints can be summed up in one sentence: *It was all about making the unlikely situation of many women marrying the same man appear natural and acceptable.* A man did not very easily become a polygamist. Polygamy was something that always had to justify itself. Sheer might was not enough. Justifying itself and making something unlikely appear natural and acceptable could only occur if there were principles, rules, and guidelines, which are what constitute polygamy as a hallowed institution. There were at least four core principles in Chinese polygamy.

The first institutional principle was the strict distinction between main wife and concubines. Her marriage rites were superior to the concubines'. The main wife was the number-one man's main counterpart. She was inferior to him and his parents, but superior to all other wives. Her job above all was to bow to the higher purpose of the principle of polygamy and guide the other women to do so as harmoniously as possible.

The second core principle was that women must not be jealous. Women, especially the main wife, had to rise above jealousy. They could do so because they were living for a higher purpose, which supposedly displaced the feelings of jealousy and rivalry.

Rising above jealousy in turn relates to a third core principle, which was the prohibition against passionate intimacy. Passionate attachment radically destabilized the polygamous hierarchy. Love and passion, like jealousy, detracted from the higher purpose. The

man must therefore have had no favorite; no one woman could monopolize the man. Love had to be generalized; it could not be too narrow and specific.

A fourth core principle was that polygamy could only survive if it observed order, hierarchy, and distribution of effort. Each dynasty had its own set of titles and ranks for the imperial wives, with the fewest women occupying the higher ranks and the most women occupying the lower. Hierarchy was determined at specific moments in time, such as when a new wife entered the imperial family and was assigned a specific rank. There were regular promotions and demotions. There were assignments of roles and jobs. There was order in the way the man divided himself between the women, that is, which women he spent time with sexually. Roles, duties, and distribution of time had to be continuously monitored and negotiated. In managing these affairs, the emperor could not do without the assistance of his empress and an inner palace of administrative assistants, including eunuchs and palace women.

Textual Examples of Polygamy as Institution

The notion of institution tends to imply rules and procedures that are written down and formally accepted. Most of the examples I cite can be found in such form, but I will also force the notion of institution to include guidelines that are not necessarily part of written tradition but are implicitly understood, such as taking wives from conquered enemies. The main principles of polygamy as institution can be found in early texts such as the Zhou dynasty (1020–221 BCE) *Zuo Tradition* (*Zuozhuan*), the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) *Mao Commentary* (*Maogong zhuan*) to the *Classic of Poetry* (*Shijing*), the *Book of Rites* (*Liji*), the *Rites of Zhou* (*Zhouli*), and each of the dynastic histories from the Han to the Qing, especially the chapters on empresses and consorts. These sources define what we can call proper polygamy. The primary orthodox reason for the emperor to take concubines was to bear as many sons as possible in order to guarantee a successor.

How many sons were enough? The institution does not clearly answer this question, but history tells us that the more sons the better. Having more sons in turn best occurs by having more concubines. As advisors told Ming Emperor Xianzong (r. 1564–87) when he was spending too much time with only one woman, the ancient wisdom was: “Having sons depends on there being many mothers” (*zi chu duo mu* 子出多母; Zhang Tingyu 1974, 176.4685). The advisors wanted him to see more women than the one he had been spending too much time with, who in this case happened to be his childhood nursemaid.

How was order established among the many wives? It mainly took the form of ranking. The Han dynasty *Rites of Zhou* refers to emperors of a mythical past who had a total of 121 wives. First there was the empress, after which there were the three “ladies” (*furen* 夫人), then the nine “lady guests” (*jiupin* 九嬪), the twenty-seven “hereditary ladies” (*shifu* 世婦), and finally the eighty-one “lady visitors” (*nüyu* 女御). A few of these titles were used in later times, though dynastic houses tended to generate their own systems of ranking and terminology. If a ruler did not follow the strict system of ranking, he was subject to criticism, as in the case of Sun Quan (182–252) of the kingdom of Wu. He was a brilliant and heroic man, said an ancient historian, but he “did not distinguish between main wife and concubines.” The chaos in the women’s apartments of Wu “made of them a historical laughingstock” (Chen 1982, 50.1203).

How did the emperor select his wives? There were regular procedures for drafting women into the palace, which in the Ming and Qing took the form of sending eunuchs into the realm and selecting a large number of women, from whom progressively smaller numbers were chosen until the final stages, which included examination of bodies, looks, and aptitudes. An account of the recruitment of a Ming empress reports that thousands were recruited, of whom palace women narrowed the number to fifty, whom they got to know personally and all of whom became consorts. A consort of a deceased former emperor then tested the final fifty in subjects such as writing, arithmetic, poetry, and drawing, and ended up with three for Emperor Xizong (r. 1620–27) to choose from (Ji 1996, 2a–3b; Soulliere 1987, 275–78). As such the process of the selection of wives was designed to guarantee him the highest-quality women.

Emperors were also pressured to select wives from important political allies. Marriage with an empress was a political arrangement that in some cases hardly involved sex, if at all. As compiled by Hans Bielenstein, striking statistics from the Wu and five other southern dynasties show that, during those 360 years, emperors had altogether nine sons by their empresses, but 247 by their concubines. Only four emperors were born of empresses, while twenty-one were born of concubines. Even considering the greater number of concubines than empresses, the difference in number of sons is striking. The implication is that in those times emperors tended mainly to have sex with their concubines (Bielenstein 1997, 36–37).

As for the rule that a concubine was strictly lower than a wife, one of its earliest enunciations came from the oath taken among feudal lords in 651 BCE, which included the famous statement “do not take a concubine as a wife” (*wu yi qie wei qi* 毋以妾為妻). The *Mao Commentary* (second century BCE) elaborates upon this notion when it says that the poem “Little Star” (*Xiaoxing* 小星) of the *Classic of Poetry* illustrates how the concubine internalizes the fact that she belongs to a lower order than the main wife. She can never expect to enjoy the same privileges as the main wife, who can come and go at a leisurely pace. Concubines, on the other hand, must come and go hastily, in a “shrinking” way, and can never stay the whole night with the master (*Chunqiu Guliang zhuan zhushu* 1999, 125; *Mao shi zhengyi* 1999, 94).

As to the principle that women must not be jealous, early reflections on this can be found in the *Mao Commentary*'s comment on the first poem in the *Classic of Poetry*: “‘Guanju’ is an expression of queenly virtue,” which is all about “the queen gladly finding chaste women to mate with the Lord.” Of the poem “Drooping Boughs” (*Jiumu* 樛木), the *Mao Commentary* says that the queen is not jealous because she knows how “to create harmony among the concubines” (*he xie zhongqie* 和諧眾妾). The poem “Locusts’ Wings” (*Zhongsu* 螽斯) 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; *Mao shi zhengyi* 1999, 4, 21, 41, 43). The words “*zhongsu*” still decorate the gateway to the section of the Qing palace in Beijing in which the imperial concubines lived (see figure 1). In other words, the jealousy-free main wife fosters and nurtures the concubines, introduces them to the husband, and stems jealousy not only in herself but in the concubines. Similar messages can be found throughout dynastic history. In the *History of the Later Han*, Empress Ma, the wife of Emperor Ming (r. 28–75), “often worried that the emperor failed to seek offspring from a wide enough range of women and therefore



Figure 1. “Gate of plentiful offspring,” quarters of imperial concubines, Forbidden City, Beijing (photo by author).

recommended and presented women from among the ones in her company” (Fan 1995, 10a.409).

Parallel to women not being jealous is the notion that the ruler should not become “infatuated” and “deluded” (*huo* 惑) because of his fascination with a woman. He must favor women equally, never let his affections ruin his good judgment, and never let any single woman monopolize his feelings. Han Emperor Shun’s (r. 125–44) Empress Liang Na (116–50) once told him: “To have plentiful offspring, as the poem ‘Locusts’ Wings’ says, 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” (Fan 1995, 10b.438–40). Besides citing the *Mao Commentary*’s interpretation of the poem in the *Classic of Poetry*, the empress also cited the *Book of Changes*. The words “among the bevy of palace ladies” are a translation of *guanyu* 貫魚, “a string of fish tied together at their heads,” which symbolized the notion of palace women receiving equal favor, as if strung on the same string (*Zhouyi zhengyi* 1999, 110). In short, the success of polygamy relied on the ability of the man and his wives to avoid the forces of lust and jealousy, which threatened the collective whole of polygamous harmony.

POLYGAMY IN PRACTICE

Polygamy in actual practice has to do with how people conducted themselves whether or not they followed rules and prescriptions and how they practiced polygamy whether or not they deserved it. Practice in this sense describes actual behavior and specific events. For example, Chinese emperors often took concubines who were talented in poetry or other arts. They did not take these women primarily in order to beget sons. A famous early example was Zuo Fen (d. ca. 276), sister of the poet Zuo Si

(ca. 255–ca. 306), known for her talents as a scholar and writer. Consort to Emperor Wu of the Jin (r. 265–90), she was said to be ugly and was never a favorite, but the emperor nevertheless enjoyed listening to her discourses on literature (Fang 1974, 31.957–58). An emperor took such a woman to enhance his image as a cultured and sagely ruler, in effect tempering his appearance as a sex-hungry man. As for the women of the imperial polygamous system, some obeyed and furthered its rules, while some departed from the rules and undermined polygamy, even trying to prevent or ruin it. Harming and murdering rival women was one of their most common methods. There were also less aggressive methods that kept them from becoming merely passive victims. It is safe to say that women were more constrained by the polygamous system than the emperor, but that they constrained him as well.

Considering polygamy in its actual practice poses questions such as: Did empresses actually create harmony among the concubines? Did empresses choose among the women to introduce candidates to the emperor? The answer to both questions is yes, though it is obvious that women did not act as transparently as institutional norms might have projected. Studying how polygamy actually worked involves looking at historical accounts of what people did and also patterns and motifs that repeatedly emerge in those accounts. Three main fields organize the discussion: First, how does a man justify and maintain his role as polygamist? This has to do with the question of who becomes a polygamist, how he remains so, and what image of himself he creates. Second, how does he break the rules and in some cases lose his position as polygamist? This has to do with polygamous transgressions, mainly in two forms: favoritism and profligacy. The third has to do with women's cooperation or lack of it within polygamy, their subversion of polygamy, and the conflicts between them to gain footholds. Polygamy is inherently endangered by women's rivalry, which in fact makes up a great part of the history of the imperial family.

Justifying and Maintaining Polygamy

First, who gets to be a polygamist, how does he deserve to do so, and how does he maintain his status? These questions indicate that a significant line has to be crossed, and it is a line that relatively few men get to cross. If we ask the institution this question, it answers that all emperors and emperor-like men get to be polygamists. Wealth and power are their main methods; and they do not doubt that they deserve multiple women. They are the exceptions to the average of monogamy and non-marriage that most men experienced. Polygamy defines a pyramid-like structure, with a minority of polygamists at the top and all other men and women surrounding him below. That singular position must be justified and defended, both by the institutional elaborations listed above and actual behavior and appearances.

Becoming and remaining a polygamist involves the question of what use people made of polygamy. In other words, how did they use it to further their goals? What distance did they maintain between the position of benevolent ruler who had multiple wives because that was what a ruler was supposed to do, on the one hand, and the opportunity to have sex with as many women as often as he wanted, on the other? The story of Wang Mang (45 BCE–23 CE), the Han dynasty usurper, is an example of using the institution of polygamy to illustrate one's virtue. Prior to his usurpation, he gave the appearance of opposing polygamy. Since previous Han rulers had overindulged their wives and the

wives' families, Wang Mang at first announced that he "had only one consort and no other." He did this by way of enhancing his image as a virtuous man. As it turned out, he had in fact fathered children by women other than his wife, but he called them "attendants" (*shizhe* 侍者), not concubines (Ban 1962, 99.4054, 4166, 4168–69). After he became emperor, his wife and sons all died, which left him with the need to produce new heirs. One of his advisors told him that he should take a new empress and 120 concubines. To do so was to follow the venerable model of the ancient Yellow Emperor and accorded with the *Rites of Zhou*, which referred to the ideal number of wives and consorts for a king as 121 (Sun 1987, 552). Wang Mang followed the advice and took an empress and precisely 120 wives. He is a prime example of the man who becomes a polygamist because being an emperor says he must do so. As an advisor even told him: "The Yellow Emperor was able to achieve immortality by having 120 wives."

It was common for emperors to embellish their image as polygamists. They knew that others were watching, especially their officials and the imperial wives, mothers, and grandmothers. In another example of self-embellishment, in 273 Jin Emperor Wu launched an empire-wide selection of women for his harem. Since women entering the palace tended never to see their families again, families were known to react to such searches by hurriedly marrying off their daughters to avoid selection. To stem this tendency, the emperor prohibited marriage throughout the empire while the recruitment took place, then followed 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 his empress, who reportedly weeded out the exceptionally beautiful ones (Fang 1974, 3.63, 31.952–53). Like Wang Mang, Emperor Wu engineered an image of himself that corrected the transgressions of past rulers by pointedly adhering to models of proper polygamy. Although he was depriving people of their daughters, he ensured that it did not look as though he was indulging his personal fancy.

Yet another remarkable aspect of Emperor Wu was the number of women in his harem, reportedly ten thousand. That was unusually high, though there had already been thousands during the Han; the high number was in part because he acquired the harem of a defeated ruler. A famous story illustrated the emperor's frustration about deciding which women he would sleep with:

He used to ride along in a goat-drawn carriage, letting the goats stop wherever they liked. Where they stopped, there he slept. 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. (Fang 1974, 31.962)

In contrast to men who indulged in orgiastic profligacy, Emperor Wu was a case of relatively harmless extravagance. He cultivated an image of benign gentility, obscuring what appeared as outrageous lust. Sex with his ten thousand consorts was a leisure activity; he let his goats choose his partners for him—though how much of the story is farcical exaggeration is impossible to tell. Nevertheless, the motif of having his wife or goats choose the women conforms with the notion of polygamy as institution that constrains the emperor from the outside, monitoring him lest he be misled by lustful fancy and holding him to the principle of polygamous neutrality.

Building a harem through recruitment was standard throughout Chinese history, as just noted. It was an institutionalized process by which the emperor was presented with preselected women of rigorously high quality. Many emperors, however, jumped the line and chose women by means other than regular recruitment or monitored selection. They fancied palace maids regardless of the expectation that they choose from the officially designated consorts. To be sure, even maids were subject to a process of selection, so that a similar kind of filtering occurred with them as with the consorts. Having sex with a maid was a minor case of transgression that sometimes resulted in the woman's promotion to consort, especially if she bore a son who became heir apparent and/or she became a favorite. More irregular types of liaisons included taking the consort of one's father, one's son, or other men. Taking one's father's consort was especially heinous, even if the father was dead. Since ancient times such cases were referred to as "incest" (*zheng* 蒸). Such an emperor was acting as if he were above the law. Historians liked to think that he would lose his mandate to rule and wrote their histories to reflect such a moral causality.

Polygamous Transgressions: Favoritism

The second field of discussion for polygamy as actual practice has to do with transgressive behavior, of which there were two main categories: favoritism with one woman and orgiastic indulgence with many. Historians used common vocabulary to describe favoritism, such as *chong* 寵, to favor indulgently or dote upon, or *huo* 惑, to be deluded or bewitched by someone. Emperors and heirs apparent were persistently reminded of the dangers of favoritism. Vivid examples filled the history books. The last ruler of the Chen dynasty, Chen Shubao (553–604), had a favorite named Zhang Lihua. In describing a woman like her, biographers noted her beauty and talent, but especially her abuse of beauty and talent to mislead the ruler. She 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." She had splendid poise and fine features. "Just a look or a glance brimmed with radiance that shone all around." She liked to present the emperor with palace women, so that everyone in the harem vied in singing her praises. Since Chen was "lax in attending to court duties," Zhang involved herself in state politics. He would even "sit her on his lap as they worked out government matters." In the end, Chen lost the dynasty to the Sui, whose attack sent him running to the women's quarters where he hid in a well with Zhang and another favorite (Li Yanshou 1975, 12.347–48). Another last emperor was Gao Wei (557–77) of the Northern Qi, who delayed an important battle so that he could summon his favorite consort to watch it with him. The delay caused the siege to fail, soon after which he and his favorite were captured and his dynasty ended (Li Yanshou 1974, 14.525–26). The most famous example of favoritism leading to catastrophe was the affair between Tang Emperor Xuanzong (685–762) and Honored Consort Yang (719–56), who was originally the wife of one of his sons. Their affair lasted many years until a rebellion occurred which, it was said, could have been prevented had the emperor not been so preoccupied. After Xuanzong fled the capital, his soldiers demanded that Yang be executed. The emperor never recovered and abdicated to his son, under whom the dynasty restored peace.

Favoritism incapacitated a ruler and, even if the result was not as disastrous as the above examples, led him astray from not only his duties as ruler but also his role as

polygamist. Two emperors in a row at the beginning of the Qing were unable to recover from the deaths of consorts, though in each case royal succession still worked smoothly. Hong Taiji's (1592–1643) grief at the death of Hailanzhu (1609–41) and her son alarmed his family and officials. He no longer participated in military life as before and was supposedly unrelieved even after a great victory over the Ming, dying in 1643 at age fifty-two (Shenyang gugong bowuyuan 1987, 70–80; Wang 1993, 185–96; Zhang Ertian, n.d., 1.43a, 44a). The next ruler, Fulin (1638–61), the Shunzhi emperor, was born of Bumbutai (1613–88), Hailanzhu's younger sister, two days after the death of Hailanzhu's son. In what looked like an attempt to raise Consort Dong'e to empress, the emperor tried to depose his current empress, but both his mother and Dong'e stopped him. At Dong'e's death he gave her a sumptuous funeral, even ordering eunuchs and maids to accompany her in the grave. Deeply depressed, he died of smallpox a few months later (Hummel 1943–44, 255–59; Wang 1993, 218–37; Zhao 1976, 214.8904).

The notion that emperors could get away with favoritism without catastrophic consequences would have appealed to a Ming emperor such as Zhu Houzhao (1491–1521), commonly known as Wuzong. One of his favorites provoked disapproval among court officials. In 1516 he favored Lady Ma, who was not only married but also pregnant at the time. Her brother, a top military official, was likewise a favorite. In protest, court officials cited centuries of historical examples, blaming him for not only taking an unchaste woman but also indulging in the dangerous combination of “female favorites on the inside and male favorites on the outside” (*nürong waichong* 女戎外寵). They used ancient terms like “flood of disaster” (*huoshui* 禍水) and “kingdom toppler” (*youwu* 尤物), both typically applied to female favorites who brought about dynastic catastrophe (Mao 1996, 4.10a–11b; Xia 1962, 46.1729–30; Zhang Tingyu 1974, 307.7888). Both Zhu Houzhao and a later Ming emperor who had a favorite acted with relative impunity (Shenzong, 1563–1620). As with the two Qing emperors, the dynasty was stable enough at the time not to be affected by such negligence, though the Ming did not have long to last.

Polygamous Transgression: Profligacy

The point that the above stories illustrate is that favoring a single woman in effect turns the emperor into a monogamist within his larger polygamy. He has violated a pact, which is that he must be loyal to the entire group of women. He is supposed to be a polygamist for life; even being a polygamist involves lifelong loyalty. The other of the two types of polygamous transgression is at the opposite pole of favoritism, that of indiscriminate sex, which is commonly taken as the obvious choice of the polygamous ruler. With a few exceptions, sexual profligacy mainly occurred in short-lived dynasties and, considering the length of Chinese dynastic history, was relatively rare. The accounts of such affairs are difficult to evaluate because histories tend to suppress obscene detail in order to preserve the dignity of the imperial regime, not to mention the genre of dynastic history. Unofficial chronicles and fiction, on the other hand, wrote lavishly of profligacy and may have contributed to the notion that emperors were particularly prone to excess. If the sources can be believed, then the worst cases occurred in the Liu Song dynasty (420–79), the Sui (581–618), the Min (909–45) and Nan Han (Southern Han, 917–71) states of the period of the Ten Kingdoms (907–79), the Jurchen Jin (1115–1234), and the Ming (1368–1644), with isolated examples in other dynasties.

Indiscriminate sex, sometimes including group or public nudity, is the key defining feature of these accounts. Liu Ziyue (449–66) of the Liu Song dynasty ruled for only two years. 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 executed her sons and had her whipped. His end came one day after he ordered palace women to take off their clothes and chase each other around. When one of them refused, he had her beheaded. Not long after, a group of attendants assassinated him, after which he was posthumously deposed (Shen Yue 1974, 7.146–48, 72.1858). Centuries later, Liu Chang (942–80) of the Nan Han had a “slave from Persia” with whom he “cavorted lasciviously in the Rear Palace.” A seventeenth-century source expanded upon that description, perhaps without real basis, saying that he recruited young hooligans, matched them with palace maids, and “had everyone strip naked and join in pairs.” The Persian consort was carried around so that “she could enjoy herself watching them.” Liu Chang lost his kingdom to the Song in 971 (Ouyang 1974, 65.817; Wu [1669] 1983, 61.879). The two most famous profligate rulers in Chinese history were Yang Guang of the Sui, also known as Yangdi, the “Profligate Emperor,” and Hailing of the Jurchen Jin. Yang Guang’s profligacy began when he “committed incest” with two of his just-deceased father’s consorts (Li Yanshou 1974, 14.534). He was infamous for the luxury of his harem, which inspired writers of fiction in the Song and Ming who invented a palace called the Labyrinth (*Milou* 迷楼), not found in the dynasty histories. There he supposedly dallied for days on end with the three thousand virgins drafted into his harem. Emperor Hailing liked to have sex with others in attendance, at times ordering music to be played; he summoned other men’s wives to have sex with them. “Sometimes he had consorts sit in attendance while he took whomever he wanted as everyone else watched.” His end came in 1161 as he was about to invade the Song, when he was assassinated by his own generals (Li Youtang 1980, 27.473–74; Tuotuo 1975, 63.1514).

Ming emperors were notorious for indiscriminate excess. Zhu Houzhao (Wuzong), who never had children, liked to kidnap other men’s wives. It was said that he liked handsome young eunuchs and had a military retainer who “slept and arose with the emperor” (Shen Defu 1980, 1.820 [*buyi*]; Zhang Tingyu 1974, 307.7886, 7890–91). One account wrote, “At night whenever he saw a rich person’s house, he would gallop up to it and steal its women” (Xia 1962, 47.1753, 1776). Descriptions of sexual details are absent in Wuzong’s case, even in fictional accounts, but in general historians were less reserved than usual in recording his profligacy because they so disapproved of him. Another case was Zhu Houcong (1507–66), known as Emperor Shizong, who failed to beget children in the first ten years of his reign and sought experts for sexual advice. He finally had his first son in 1533 and two more within six months. The aphrodisiacs he took contained lead and arsenic, however, which caused excitation and sexual arousal, but also long-term damage to his health. As with rulers in earlier dynasties, especially the Tang, he experienced sudden fits of rage and madness, plus stomach and skin disorders. One of his Daoist advisors recommended intercourse with virgins after their first menstruation, which, according to ancient wisdom, allowed a man to absorb their vital essence and attain immortality. The emperor recruited hundreds of girls between the ages of eight and fourteen. It was said that in his later years he would take any woman or girl in the palace in whom he felt the slightest interest, to the point that records were not evenly kept and some consorts never received titles (Shen Defu 1980, 3.77–78, 1.803–4

[*buyi*]; Xia 1962, 62.2438). His successor, Zhu Zaihou (1537–72), known as Muzong, reportedly also took aphrodisiacs, which once gave him a case of priapism, “to the point that he could not preside at court” (Shen Defu 1980, 21.547). News of his sexual indulgence appeared soon after he assumed the throne. At first he tolerated remonstrating officials, but by the second year he had one of them severely punished. Officials continued to voice their concerns, culminating in a memorial two months before his death exhorting him “to refrain from indulging in pleasures night and day and from pursuing desires without end” (Xia 1962, 64.2502, 65.2553).

By way of counter-example, let us briefly consider a ruler who appears to have kept a level head, Xuan Ye (1654–1722), commonly known as the Kangxi emperor. He was a prolific polygamist who had fifty-six children of thirty consorts and at least twenty-four more consorts who did not have children. As far as we can tell, he escaped ugly conflicts between them. Unlike his father and grandfather, he never became attached to any one woman, transferring himself between a few greater and lesser favorites, who changed over time from his first sex as a boy of about twelve to the end of his life at sixty-eight. The most prominent woman in his life was his grandmother, Empress Dowager Xiaozhuang (Bumbutai), who cared for him during childhood after his mother died and helped free him from contending regents by age fifteen. Genealogical records are the main sources for gauging how he conducted himself sexually. Two Manchu women had the most children of all, six each, and slightly overlapped in time. Between 1667 and 1681, he had six children with one (Rongfei) and, between 1678 and 1688, six more with the other (Defei), the mother of his successor. An idea of his sexual activity—and a model for the hypothetical good polygamist—emerges from the birth records. Between 1667 and 1690, he had at least one child per year, except in 1676 and 1684 when he had none. In eight of those years he had two or more children, in 1674 and 1685 four each, and in 1683 five, continuing to have children until he was fifty-six. Besides the two wives with six children, five more had three children each, the rest one or two (Tang [1923] 1967, 10b–16b).

Women’s Cooperation and Conflict

The third main field that organizes the discussion of polygamy in practice has to do with women’s cooperation and conflict, including their support and subversion of the polygamous marriage. Wives vied with each other in jealous rivalry. They also formed alliances, while some withdrew as much as possible from involvement in the sexual politics of the palace. One of the earliest and most famous stories was that of Liu Bang’s (247–195 BCE) wife, Empress Lü (d. 180 BCE), who plotted against Liu’s favorite concubine, Lady Qi (d. 194 BCE), and her son Ruyi, whom Liu Bang wanted to designate as crown prince in place of Empress Lü’s son. As the story has it, the empress had Lady Qi tortured and left to die in a privy (Sima 1989, 9.397). Wu Zetian (625–705), the empress of Tang Emperor Gaozong (628–83), and Empress Li (d. 1200), the wife of Song Emperor Guangzong (1147–1200), committed similar acts of atrocity. Wu Zetian had two rivals imprisoned, tortured, and thrown into wine vats. In Empress Li’s case, one day the emperor became captivated by the hands of the palace woman serving him his wash water. A few days later, the empress sent him a container of food that he opened to find the woman’s severed hands (Tuotuo 1985, 243.8654). Both Gaozong and Guangzong became ill and left state matters to their empresses. Histories report

that Zhao Feiyan (ca. 32–1 BCE) of Han Emperor Cheng (51–7 BCE) and Honored Consort Wan (1430–87) of Ming Emperor Zhu Jianshen (Xianzong) forced pregnant consorts to abort their fetuses or had babies killed after birth. Other methods of assault throughout history included the casting of evil spells and poisoning.

As with profligate emperors, the official histories are often spare in detail about the jealous wife, using the mere word “jealous” or “viciously jealous,” then adding that she prevented the emperor from visiting his other consorts, struck terror in them, or plotted against them. Women generally attacked other women, but it is safe to assume that emperors who abused or slighted their wives and consorts must have incurred their hatred, such as Gao Yang (529–59), the first emperor of the Northern Qi, who during his reign became mentally unbalanced, committed acts of atrocity, and beat and whipped his consorts, even killing some of them (Li Yanshou 1974, 14.521). An Eastern Jin ruler was murdered by a concubine he had insulted (Fang 1974, 9.242).² A famous case occurred in the reign of the Ming emperor Shizong, the one who took aphrodisiacs and recruited virgins. In 1543 a group of palace women tried to strangle him. He was saved just in time. Their hatred may have had to do with the aphrodisiacs he took, which affected his temper. As some sources said, the emperor was extremely “irascible” (*bian* 卞) with his palace women, making them fear and hate him (He 1991, 30.27ab; Mao 1996, 5.8ab; Shen Defu 1980, 18.469–71).

At the opposite pole were women noted for outstanding virtue. Even though most sources were written by men, who tended to idealize such women, there is no reason to completely doubt them. Chen Shubao’s empress was Shen Wuhua, described as intelligent, well-educated, and virtuous. Although Chen favored Consort Zhang, the empress reacted with a complete lack of resentment, it was said, preferring a simple life of reading, Buddhist scriptures in particular. During the dynasty’s last moments, while the emperor and his two favorites hid in a well, Empress Shen and the young heir apparent waited respectfully for the Sui representatives to arrive. Shen became a Buddhist nun and lived into the Tang dynasty (Li Yanshou 1975, 12.347–48).

Shen was an example of the virtuous last empress, of whom there were many in Chinese history, some of whom sacrificed themselves in the dynasty’s last moments, such as Wang Mang’s daughter (d. 23) at the end of the Former Han, who threw herself into the fire of the burning palace, or widowed Empress Zhang (d. 1644), wife of Ming Emperor Xizong, who hung herself. There was also the good first empress, symbolic of a new dynasty starting off well. The first emperor of the Song, Zhao Kuangyin (927–76), had a succession of three main wives, all of whom the official histories describe in glowing terms (Tuotuo 1985, 242.8607–8). The wife of the first Ming emperor, Zhu Yuanzhang (1328–98), was Empress Ma (1332–82), who was widely praised for her frugality, self-sacrifice, and lack of jealousy. At times she managed to control the emperor’s notoriously bad temper and influence an occasional decision, but she was mainly a helper, not an advisor. She was noted for the humbleness of her attire, “coarse silk that had been through many washings. Even when her clothes were worn out, she could not stand to replace them with new ones” (Zhang Tingyu 1974, 113.3505–7). The words for much-laundered clothing (*huanzhuo zhi yi* 洗濯之衣) are the same used to

²Hans Bielenstein (1996, 95) is skeptical about sensational accounts like this, however.

describe the similarly frugal mother of the first emperor of the Jin (third century), likewise regarded as an exemplar of imperial womanhood (Fang 1974, 31.950).

If creating harmony among wives was a key element of queenly virtue, it was far from being simple and transparent. Women maneuvered themselves and others. They pleased the emperor, consolidated their own position, and won praise from other wives. Initiating the choice of a concubine ensured control of the choice. In a classic gesture of wifely sharing, the highly ranked Lady Ban presented Han Emperor Cheng with one of her servants, whom he raised to the same high rank. Unfortunately, the emperor became involved with Zhao Feiyan and her sister, who slandered both the empress and Lady Ban. Another famous case likewise backfired. Tang Emperor Gaozong preferred a certain consort who, because she had a son, aroused the jealousy of his wife, Empress Wang (d. ca. 655). In an attempt to divert the emperor's attention from the consort, the empress recommended that he take one of his deceased father's concubines, Wu Zetian. But in Zhao-Feiyan fashion, Wu took advantage of the situation to slander both the empress and the consort and, as told above, had them tortured to death (Liu 1975, 51.2170; Ouyang and Song 1975, 76.3473–75). Harmony was possible, however, especially when wives had joint interests, as in the case of Song Empress Wu (d. 1197) and Consort Liu Wanrong (d. 1187). Reflecting the high culture of Gaozong's (1107–87) court, the empress was well-educated, a good calligrapher, and a connoisseur and collector of art, and she was noted for her lack of jealousy. Consort Liu, likewise a connoisseur, trained young palace women in artistic and scholarly skills for the sake of entertaining the imperial couple. In return for the gift of two highly trained girls, the empress had Liu richly rewarded (Lee 2010, 131–35, 264 n.36; Tuotuo 1985, 243.8647–49; Zhou 1984, 7.116).

If an emperor transgressed, wives sometimes withdrew in order to avoid the turmoil and in some cases were perceived as occupying a moral high ground for doing so, as in the case of Chen Shubao's Empress Shen. At times imperial women successfully remonstrated with an emperor. Lady Ban famously rejected Emperor Cheng's request to ride with him in a carriage, asserting that only notorious rulers rode together with a woman. After she was slandered by Zhao Feiyan, she moved out of the consorts' quarters to live separately in the empress dowager's palace. Sometimes, however, a woman's remonstrance ended disastrously, though she still might be extolled. The Qianlong (1711–99) emperor's second empress, Lady Ula Nara (b. 1720s, d. 1766), reportedly criticized Qianlong's interest in a certain consort. When he reacted furiously, she protested by shaving her head and becoming a nun (Zhao 1976, 214.8918; Wang 1993, 261–69; *Qinggong yuwen* [1915] 1981, 1.42). Other women were ordered to commit suicide, “died suddenly,” or “died of worry,” ominous ways historians had of referring to the deaths of fallen palace women.

Considerations of space limit discussion of an additional factor related to the competition between wives, namely, competition between sons. One of polygamy's greatest potential blessings was the production of sons, in some cases as many as thirty to over forty. But polygamy also suffered when sons competed in vicious power struggles or when large numbers of offspring in later generations—up to tens of thousands—created heavy financial burdens. Finally, even though polygamy was supposed to guarantee the production of sons, sometimes it produced none. An emperor might die leaving only very young sons, or he might fail to name a successor. Three types of people typically

filled the gap: officials, empresses or dowagers and the male members of their families, and eunuchs. Sometimes such people deliberately chose a young successor, whose growth to eligibility would take many years and thus guarantee lengthy tenures for the stand-ins. Some young emperors managed to prevail against them, such as Qing Emperor Kangxi, whose grandmother helped remove the regents and then stood out of the way. In contrast, Empress Dowager Cixi (1835–1908) kept power in her own hands until she died, overwhelming two successive young emperors, her son and her nephew.

CONCLUSION: IT IS GOOD TO HAVE A JEALOUS WIFE

If the official justification for polygamy was to guarantee sons for the sake of succession, what if one were also to suggest that the institutionalization of polygamy be read as the formal recognition of the important man's desire for multiple sexual partners? As said at the beginning, such a statement was considered too brazen for formal codification. Even so, the recognition of the man's right to multiple partners was tantamount to the institutionalization of an illusion, namely, that the multiple women would serve the one man happily, as if that one man could unite and satisfy them all. In support of the illusion, polygamy invented the ideal wife, the woman who introduced other women to her husband and even loved the concubines as much as the husband did. She suppressed jealousy in herself and the others. In this way the institution subtly appointed the woman as manager of the man's relations with his wives. It was in particular the strong main wife who managed the marital relations of the polygamous family. The man was beholden to the morally superior woman who protected him from himself and the women from each other. Such a wife was idealized throughout dynastic history. One could go so far as to say that the strong main wife embodied a strong form of jealousy. In other words, there was good, constructive jealousy that channeled or reconfigured bad jealousy into good management of the family. Emperor Wen of the Sui was the one who, after his empress killed the consort he impregnated, sighed that as ruler he was not free to do as he desired. After his empress died, he became "infatuated" (*huo*) with two of his consorts, fell ill, and died. While on his deathbed, he told his attendants: "If the empress were still alive, I would not have come to this," meaning, presumably, that she would have prevented him from becoming infatuated with his two consorts (Li Yanshou 1974, 14.533–34). A jealous empress, in other words, was a good thing, since she prevented the emperor from going astray in the harem.

As I have noted, polygamy was the rule rather than the exception in royal courts throughout the world. In contrast to the contiguous cultures of Asian nomads and Islamic realms, the unique feature of Chinese polygamy was the designation of one main wife who was distinct from all the other women who were designated as concubines. Nomadic polygamy generally allowed multiple wives, while Islamic polygamy allowed four, though both recognized one wife as superior. Both cases then allowed any number of concubines. Another major difference between Han Chinese and nomadic regimes had to do with the fact that women of the nomadic elite participated in political and military decision making, in some cases leading armies, as happened during the Liao (907–1125) and Yuan (1279–1368). In spite of these differences, the Islamic, Han

Chinese, and nomadic regimes had in common the recurrence of concentrated power in the hands of the empress, especially when powerful ones took control at the emperor's death. The Ming and Qing finally resolved this problem by selecting empresses from non-elite or lower elite families. Such women would supposedly be both less ambitious and less able to rely on the power and influence of their natal families. Similarly, by the sixteenth century, Islamic rulers of the Ottoman Empire suppressed the power of main wives and their families by ceasing to take legal wives and instead exclusively producing successors through slave concubines (Peirce 1993, 17, 30–31).³ Another method already existed in China, though not an institutionalized one, which was simply to refrain from designating an empress, as happened in the Northern Wei and the Tang after the era of Suzong (r. 756–62, after which only three of thirteen emperors named living empresses). A strong main wife had to be just right: she had to be able and willing to manage the polygamous family, but was not to enter into dynastic politics. Suppressing the latter tendency had become a chief goal by the Ming and Qing.⁴

Let me finally speculate about another unarticulated goal of Chinese polygamy, dispersing the power of women. Forcing them to tolerate polygamy made them devote their energy to competing with each other, thus draining them of energy to influence political affairs. But the picture could never be so simple. For dispersing the power of women coincided with the fragmentation of the man. Historians and moralists often construed that fragmentation in terms of the literal depletion of the emperor's sexual energy. There were in fact emperors who took aphrodisiacs and died of chemical poisoning as a result, especially in the Tang and Ming. But fragmentation was more than simply a case of sexual energy. The one man was fragmented by his relations with multiple wives and sons—hence one of polygamy's greatest challenges, controlling mothers and sons. 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 regime and even the dynasty itself. Given that emperors took concubines throughout their reigns, they introduced rivalries that lasted for decades and acquired new dimensions as the aging emperor drafted new and younger women. Harmonious polygamy and smooth succession were weighty ideals too heavy for practical use. The best that can be said for the men is that some did a relatively good job of avoiding polygamy's traps. Otherwise, although women were severely constrained, their constructive, destructive, and self-destructive behavior usually found a way to have its effect.

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³Regarding the connection between powerful women and aristocratic privilege in China, see Holmgren (1986).

⁴For further discussion of women rulers, see McMahon (2013a, 2013b).

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