Asia Pacific Perspectives

EDITORIAL BOARD

Editor
Melissa S. Dale

Managing Editor
Dayna Barnes

Editorial Board
Ezra Vogel, Professor Emeritus, Harvard University
Thomas Gold, Professor, UC Berkeley
Margaret Kuo, Assistant Professor, CSU Long Beach
Rachel Rinaldo, Assistant Professor, University of Virginia
John Nelson, Professor, University of San Francisco
Shalendra Sharma, Professor, University of San Francisco

University of San Francisco
Center for the Pacific Rim

Melissa S. Dale, Executive Director
ARTICLES

Editor’s Introduction
Melissa S. Dale  4

Empress Meishō (1623–96) and Cultural Pursuits at the Japanese Imperial Court
Elizabeth Lillehoj  6

Women in the Imperial Household at the Close of China’s Ming Dynasty: 1573–1644
Ellen Soulliere  33

Plurality in Qing Imperial Medicine: Examining Institutional Formations beyond the Imperial Medical Bureau
Sare Aricanli  61

Fertility and Childbirth among Royal Women in Nineteenth-Century Korea
Kim Jiyoung  84

“Think Piece” · Domestic Diplomacy: Empress Dowager Cixi, Sarah Pike Conger, and the Chinese Butler Who Brought Them Together
Grant Hayter-Menzies  109
Editor’s Introduction

We are pleased to announce the publication of the Fall/Winter 2013–14 issue of Asia Pacific Perspectives. This special issue highlights papers from the University of San Francisco Center for the Pacific Rim’s spring 2013 symposium “The Imperial Court in China, Japan, and Korea: Women, Servants, and the Emperor’s Household (1600 to early 1900s).”

The five papers in this issue shed new light on the lives of women and servants, and how the imperial courts of China, Japan, and Korea ran their households from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. These diverse articles present themes relevant for our understanding of these often-overlooked inhabitants and important organizations living and operating within the walls of the imperial palace, namely the study of women, gender, art, ethnicity, and medicine as presented by scholars from the fields of history, anthropology, art history, and the history of medicine.

The first two papers examine the lives of women in the imperial courts of Tokugawa Japan and Ming China. Elizabeth Lillehoj’s examination of the Empress Meishō’s engagement with art (from her enthronement through her years of retirement) provides a lens for understanding the importance of art in the lives of the Japanese imperial family during the seventeenth century. Lillehoj’s vivid account of the art and diversions enjoyed by the Empress gives voice to Meishō and reveals her engagement with the art and material culture of Tokugawa Japan.

Ellen Soulliere presents readers with a comprehensive overview of the Ming (1368–1644) imperial household and its familial system. Her study reveals the dynamics of the workings of the inner court as imperial women and their families negotiated with other players at court (eunuchs, civil officials, etc.) for power and influence. Exploring the lives of women at the Ming imperial court, ranging from the imperial to the servile, from the Empress Dowager Li (1546–1614) to female officials and wet nurses, Soulliere provides insight into the important roles women filled within the palace.

Turning to the workings of the imperial court, Sare Aricanli presents an institutional history of the Qing (1644–1911) Imperial Medical Bureau (Taiyiyuan), Imperial Pharmacy (Yuyaofang), and Ministry of Imperial Stables, Herds, and Carriages (Shangsiyuan). Arincali’s research reveals the breadth of medical activity during the Qing and argues that medicine within the imperial court was characterized by a wide range of medical practitioners, patients, and linguistic and cultural influences.

Kim Jiyoung provides an anthropologist’s view of the importance of fertility and childbirth in the lives of imperial women at the Joseon court in nineteenth-century Korea. Kim analyzes the preparations made for the delivery of the king’s offspring, comparing the treatment of queens during childbirth with that of the
king’s concubines, and reveals the intricacies involved in ensuring the future health, fertility, and auspiciousness of the imperial family.

We end this issue with a piece by Grant Hayter-Menzies, keynote speaker at the spring 2013 symposium. As an author who focuses on chronicling the life experiences and friendships of notable women, here the friendship of Sarah Pike Conger and China’s Empress Dowager Cixi, I knew that he would be the perfect speaker to invite to deliver the keynote address for a symposium aimed at giving voice to women and servants, groups who have often been silenced in the historical record.

We hope you enjoy these papers and that they cause you to think about the lives and contributions of these previously overlooked important people and organizations in the imperial courts of China, Japan, and Korea from the 1600s–1900s.

Last but not least, I would like to thank those who contributed their time and energy into producing this issue. Thanks to Jan Vaeth for his attention to detail and InDesign™ formatting skills. I would also like to thank managing editor, Dr. Dayna Barnes, for all of the hard work and dedication she has put into seeing this issue through to publication.

Melissa S. Dale
Editor

Editor’s Introduction  5
Empress Meishō (1623–96) and Cultural Pursuits at the Japanese Imperial Court
Elizabeth Lillehoj, DePaul University

Abstract: In 1629, a seven-year-old girl was selected as Japan’s Empress Regnant. Known as Empress Meishō, she was the daughter of the current emperor and, on her mother’s side, she was the great-granddaughter of the founder of the Tokugawa warrior government. Although scant scholarly attention has been paid to Meishō, surviving documents and artifacts reveal that she participated in a rich material culture at the Japanese imperial court. Extant sources tell of her engagement with art works, entertainments and diversions, particularly during her retirement. Even though Meishō was in many respects an exception, her case is indicative of the unique role of the sovereign in Japan’s early modern political and ideological landscape. This article—meant both for specialists and a larger reading audience—thus provides insights on traditions of the Japanese court.

Keywords: Meishō, empress, court, art, Tokugawa, Edo

One noteworthy member of the Japanese imperial family during the seventeenth century was Empress Regnant Meishō (1623–96; r. 1629–43). Meishō was the daughter of Emperor Go-Mizunoo (1596–1680; r. 1611–29) and Empress Tōfukumon’in (1607–78), both of whom were renowned in their lifetimes. Go-Mizunoo is remembered even to this day for his numerous attempts to resurrect imperial prestige during an era in which military lords of the Tokugawa clan were establishing a new regime centered in Edo (present-day Tokyo). Meishō’s mother, Tōfukumon’in, was famous as the daughter of the second shogun of the Edo period, Tokugawa Hidetada (1579–1632). This made Meishō exceptional in yet another way; she was the first close relative of a military leader to be born into the imperial family in hundreds of years. Meishō came to the throne in 1629, at the age of seven, as the first woman in over eight hundred years to be installed on the throne as Empress Regnant (jotei). In fact, Meishō’s name was formed by combining the last parts of names of two previous empresses: Gemmei (660–721; r. 707–15) and her daughter, Genshō (683–748; r. 715–24).

Following in the footsteps of her father and mother and other prominent aristocrats and warriors, Meishō was actively involved with art; she was a recipient, a sponsor, and a creator of artworks. Numerous objects made by or associated with Meishō are found at temples in and near Kyoto, including not only possessions and furnishings, but also paintings and calligraphic works. These pieces exhibit a traditional, even conservative quality, revealing that Meishō followed time-honored practices in collecting and creating art. Examination of the pieces also suggests that Meishō learned to produce and appreciate art from those close to her, especially her mother Tōfukumon’in. There is, however, a more private aspect of Meishō’s engagement with art, especially in her later years.

Although few modern historical accounts offer detailed commentary on Meishō, several aristocratic diaries of the seventeenth century make repeated reference to her. Two diaries, in particular, provide intimate glimpses of Meishō’s sequestered life in retirement: the Dividing Plant Record (Kakumeiki),
a daily journal kept by tonsured nobleman Hōrin Jōshō (1593–1668), and the *Diary of Mujōhōin* (*Mujōhōin-dono gonikki*), written by Meishō’s half-sister Shinanomiya Tsuneko (1642–1702). Yet, there is limited discussion of Meishō’s life after retirement in official Edo-period records. This leaves us with several key questions. Did the Tokugawa accept that Meishō would only be a short-term place-holder on the throne? Knowing all along that she would not be allowed to marry or have children, did her father and mother discourage Meishō from maintaining extensive social ties outside of her family or from moving about freely in the world? Given that her story no longer addressed a pressing need of elite parties, did later leaders even conspire with chroniclers in an erasure of Meishō from the written record? And does Meishō’s obscurity relate to the very practices that were meant to preserve the prestige of court and shogunal institutions?

This article expands upon what has been published about Meishō, focusing on her life in retirement from 1643 to 1696. Meishō’s birth and enthronement, examined in an earlier publication, are summarized below to provide a context for readers. Elaborated upon here are little-studied objects and texts related to Meishō’s adult years, which tell us about the role of sitting and retired sovereigns in the changing political and ideological landscape of seventeenth-century Japan. Recent publications have significantly enhanced our understanding of the close but conflicted relationship between emperors and warlords in this era. Additionally, a number of sources have provided new information on the value attached to artistic and cultural activities. In the past few decades, research on women and Buddhism has also blossomed, including the recovery of treasures long held in storage at imperial convents. Although these sources provide a broad background for the study at hand, they offer only scattered evidence on the life of Meishō. This article thus fills a need in the existing scholarship by examining artifacts left to posterity by Empress Meishō, along with documents on her life in retirement.

**Background: Meishō’s Early Years and Enthronement**

Meishō’s immediate predecessors on the throne—her father and her grandfather, Emperor Go-Yōzei (1571–1617; r. 1586–1611)—had labored to reassert the venerated status of the imperial court, a status that often revealed itself in interactions with warrior leaders. Military overlords upheld age-old practices suggesting that the emperor was uniquely able to ministrate to divine imperial ancestors in seeking beneficial results for the country. While it is unclear whether the warrior lords personally revered the emperor, by word and deed, they implied that the emperor performed valuable, even sacred functions, and presumably that is why they insisted on sealing an arrangement for Go-Mizunoo to marry Tōfukumon’in—the shogun’s daughter—in 1620, after years of negotiation.

Despite the coerced circumstances of their marriage, Go-Mizunoo and Tōfukumon’in learned to live together in apparent harmony, and Tōfukumon’in gave birth to nine of Go-Mizunoo’s children, including their first child—Meishō—and several sons who died in infancy. Although Tōfukumon’in was at first considered an outsider at court, she persevered. She is said to have been
protected by her mother-in-law, Chūkamon’in (1575–1630), reportedly a wise and kind-hearted woman, the one responsible for the success of her son’s marriage to Tōfukumon’in. As a consequence of having provided an imperial Tokugawa offspring, Tōfukumon’in rose to the rank of “Center of the Palace” (chūgū), and two years later, the Tokugawa hosted the imperial family for a five-day reception at their Kyoto stronghold, Nijō Castle.

One of the first appearances of Meishō in art occurs in a set of painted handscrolls of the Imperial Procession for the Nijō Imperial Excursion (fig. 01). Strictly speaking, however, it is not the figure of the two-year-old future empress that is pictured here; instead, it is her ox-drawn carriage, shown following those of her mother and grandmother. The inscription above begins with the girl’s designation: First Princess (Onna Ichinomiya). The Nijō Imperial Excursion was one of many ways in which the Tokugawa, headquartered far to the east in Edo, demonstrated they could be generous patrons of the imperial court in the old capital of Kyoto; all the while, the Tokugawa also pressured the emperor to comply with their dictates. If the marriage of Go-Mizunoo and Tōfukumon’in were not enough to reveal Tokugawa plans for the imperial family, the Nijō Imperial Excursion of 1626 made those plans unmistakably clear. Since the emperor was rarely called out of his special, secluded place in the palace, the procession of carriages that moved through the streets of Kyoto transporting the emperor and his family to Nijō was an overt display of Tokugawa power.

Only three years after the Nijō Imperial Excursion, Emperor Go-Mizunoo announced his decision to abdicate, frustrated by demands and constraints placed on him by the shogunal overlords. The suddenness of Go-Mizunoo’s actions has been interpreted as an angry refusal to tolerate any further encroachments on imperial authority. That said, retirement was also an opportunity for Go-Mizunoo to free himself from endless duties and to exercise his authority as imperial guardian and patron.

With his precipitous abdication, Go-Mizunoo named his young daughter Meishō as his successor, and thus a Tokugawa dream came true: a Tokugawa descendant had been named imperial sovereign. Several seventeenth-century pairs of screen paintings, entitled Enthronement Ceremony of Empress Meishō and a Procession, are thought to illustrate Meishō’s advancement at the palace.
these pairs, one screen shows the Accession Audience (sokui), at which Meishō’s investment was officially recognized. The ceremony announced to the spirits of imperial ancestors, as well as the human world, that yet another descendant of the Sun Goddess had taken the throne. The other screen shows a procession, likely one in which Meishō visited her retired parents soon after being named empress. The screens convey a sense of stately grandeur, expressing the seriousness that leaders of the shogunate and residents of the palace attached to these events.

Go-Mizunoo had made careful plans for Meishō’s expensive enthronement ceremony, which was funded by the Tokugawa. Although the accession had always been one of the most significant rites of the court, for his daughter’s enthronement Go-Mizunoo revived an ancient, formal version of the ritual that had not been practiced since the fourteenth century. Dignitaries from Edo were among the select party that attended Meishō’s accession rites. Tokugawa Iemitsu (1604–51)—who had been appointed shogun in 1623 and who was Meishō’s uncle—sent a number of governmental officials to the ceremony, and he ordered Hayashi Razan (1583–1657), a respected specialist on Chinese scholarship, to document the proceedings in detail. Razan elaborates upon the events in his Record of the Imperial Accession of the Kan’ei Era. Additional information on the ceremonies is included in later compilations entitled the True Tokugawa Records.

According to the True Tokugawa Records, Edo authorities ordered the ranking official artist, Kano Tan’yū (1602–74), to produce a painting illustrating Meishō’s accession. It is possible that one of the extant pairs of screens of Enthronement Ceremony of Empress Meishō and a Procession is the original work that Tan’yū painted. Tan’yū had already participated in a number of major commissions for the Tokugawa, even though he was only twenty-eight years old when Meishō took the throne. Over ten years earlier, he had been appointed official painter to the Tokugawa, and several years after that, he had moved from Kyoto to Edo. In addition, Tan’yū painted screens for Meishō’s new chambers at the Kyoto imperial palace in 1629, and he would return again on three occasions to participate in the decoration of interiors of new and refurbished imperial structures.

Empress Meishō’s Palace Surroundings and Abdication

Meishō was never far from her parents. After retiring, Go-Mizunoo and Tōfukumon’in established their base of operations adjacent to the imperial palace on separate precincts: Go-Mizunoo lived at Sentō Gosho and Tōfukumon’in at Nyoin Gosho. They could thus direct their daughter, the young empress, and her court ministers from close by. For more than fifty years after abdicating, Go-Mizunoo and Tōfukumon’in continued to involve themselves in court affairs as guardians and advisors of successive monarchs—first Meishō and then three of her half-brothers—each of whom was a child of Go-Mizunoo. Only Meishō, however, was born to Tōfukumon’in and thus a Tokugawa descendent.

We can partially reconstruct Meishō’s imperial quarters from extant fragments of palace painting and documentary sources, which reveal the elegant luxury of her rarified surroundings. A set of eight panels with paintings of Red Maples at the Tatsuta River, attributed to the leading court painter Tosa Mitsuoki.
buildings at Kajūji, an imperial temple, had been destroyed in a fire, and were restored in the late-seventeenth century with imperial and shogunal support. Thus, like many other temples associated with the imperial family, Kajūji became the recipient of structures that had originally stood on palace grounds. The Kajūji Shoin panels capture a scene with autumnal colors on the banks of the Tatsuta River, one of the admired “famous sites” (meisho-e) of Japan. Several clusters of figures—young and old, male and female—enjoy this enchanting setting. The painter used sprinkled gold dust for mists and squares of gold leaf for clouds stretching across the upper and lower composition, providing a brilliant atmospheric effect. The painter also employed fine brushwork to delicately delineate the red maple leaves, demonstrating techniques similar to those in documented works by Tosa Empress Meishō and Cultural Pursuits / Lillehoj
Mitsuoki, who was a direct descendent of the main line of Tosa painters in the employ of the court.23

Another of the buildings that still survives from the imperial palace further indicates that Meishō benefitted from her mother’s legacy as a recipient of gorgeous art and architectural ornamentation, much of which was paid for by the Tokugawa. This building is the Otsubone, a structure reserved for the empress’s attendants that had formerly stood on her mother’s palace grounds. Tōfukumon’in’s Otsubone was incorporated into Meishō’s palace in 1629, and was later donated to Enman’in, a subtemple of Onjōji located in Otsu in Shiga Prefecture.24 Panel paintings from the interior of that building at Enman’in, the Shinden, feature figures in landscape, including some playing battledore and shuttlecock in a lower zone and others near a sacred precinct in an upper zone of New Year Festivities at Sumiyoshi Shrine (fig. 03).25 The scenery with tall pines, along with the distinctive arched bridge in the upper part of the composition, confirms that the location is Sumiyoshi Shrine, another famous site. The figures and landscape details are painted in a meticulous style comparable to that of panels picturing Sumiyoshi Shrine ascribed to a prominent artist, Kano Sadanobu (1597–1623), installed in the Taimenjo of the Honmaru Palace at Nagoya Castle. Based on similarities with the Nagoya Honmaru panels, some scholars assign the Enman’in Shinden paintings to Sadanobu as well.26

Although the panels from Kajūji and Enman’in—which were likely painted by leading artists and likely ornamented Meishō’s palace—are among the oldest large-scale genre scenes from elite interiors that survive, records indicate that artists had been decorating certain palace chambers with scenes of famous sites for some time and point to a conventional tendency in the rich ornamentation of Meishō’s surroundings at the palace.27 Other court furnishings and utensils of the empress were presumably of similar sumptuous appeal and traditional manufacture, although most have been lost.

A few rare items said to have been owned by Meishō—and likely preserved by her since her childhood—do survive, including two dolls, one with silk garments intact.28 For centuries, it had been customary for dolls to be made for a child at birth and to serve as protective talismans throughout life. The main body of the dolls consisted of wood or bamboo dowels arranged in a “T” shape, with facial features painted on the round heads and a small robe draped over the form and tied around the waist. A small number of other objects related to the young Empress Meishō also survive; most extant items associated with Meishō are thought to date, however, to her years following abdication.29

After serving as Empress Regnant for fourteen years, Meishō stepped down from the throne in 1643, at the age of twenty-one, presumably because now a male successor had reached an appropriate age to replace her. Her successor was the eleven-year-old Emperor Go-Kōmyō (1633–54; r. 1643–54), her half-brother. For the remainder of her life, in other words for more than five decades to come, Meishō would remain unmarried. In fact, none of the previous reigning empresses had married after their abdication, although several had been married before ascending the throne and had even given birth. Meishō, however, had been much too young for that. Meishō’s family likely discouraged her from marrying to avoid disputes over succession. After abdicating, Meishō took the

Empress Meishō and Cultural Pursuits / Lillehoj 11
Buddhist vows known as bodhisattva precepts, likely on the advice of her father and mother.

Meishō’s parents maintained the long-standing imperial practice of finding a home for unmarried sons and daughters at prestigious temples and convents affiliated with the court (monzeki); nearly half of Go-Mizunoo’s thirty-some children took Buddhist vows and became abbots or abbesses. At the monzeki, they undertook religious duties such as daily prayers, funerary observances, ceremonial services, seated meditation, and maintaining the legacy of their institutions. However, many tonsured princes and princesses also studied Confucian texts, read classical narratives, composed court poetry, participated in annual festivities, mastered games and pastimes, entertained relatives and friends, and kept abreast of developments at the palace. Life at the monzeki thus allowed many imperial offspring to train in cultural and scholarly pursuits as they would at the palace; in fact, many of the imperial temples and convents were essentially an extension of the palace.

Meishō, however, did not join a convent; instead, she was granted a retirement palace of her own. There, she led a cloistered life, but apparently not one involving severe abstinence or discipline. Indeed, she enjoyed much of the aristocratic lifestyle to which she was accustomed, practicing cultural pursuits such as writing poetry and creating paintings. Meishō did observe religious devotions, though, like most of her relatives.

**Retired Empress Meishō and Religious Activities**

In her spiritual life, Meishō was most closely affiliated with the Tendai temple of Jūzenji in Yamashina, a centuries-old institution that was rebuilt under its abbot, Kōgyoku Shinkei (late 16th–mid 17th century). Meishō trained under Shinkei and assisted in restoring Jūzenji. During the ceremony celebrating completion

---

**Fig. 04. Shūi miyako meishō zue**

Empress Meishō and Cultural Pursuits / Lillehoj 12
of construction at the temple, Shinkei is said to have appeared riding an ox and wearing a garment formerly owned by Meishō.\(^{30}\)

Meishō’s role in refurbishing Jūzenji is recounted in pages of the woodblock printed volumes of the *Shūi miyako meisho zue (Supplement: Illustrations of Famous Places of the Capital)*, a 1787 Kyoto guidebook by Akizato Ritō (late 18\(^{th}\)-early 19\(^{th}\) century).\(^{31}\) The *Shūi miyako meisho zue* and other Edo-period guidebooks serve as frequently-cited sources of information on temples and their collections and were often augmented with illustrations, such as the rendering of the Jūzenji grounds (fig. 04). Text in the *Shūi miyako meisho zue* explains that Meishō was inspired by a dream and, in 1655, she ordered the construction of a two-storied pavilion at Jūzenji, the Tokugetsudai (shown at upper left in the rendering). The text continues, stating that the main icon of Amida Nyorai housed in the Tokugetsudai was created by Emperor Go-Yōzei, Meishō’s grandfather. Meishō is said to have visited here frequently and to have loved the scenery nearby. Preserved at Jūzenji are a number of items documenting Meishō’s spiritual pursuits, including scriptures, letters, poems, and paintings.\(^{32}\) One of these is her inscription of a mystical Buddhist incantation known as the *Zuigu darani*, or “wish-fulfilling spell” of the Zuigu Bodhisattva.\(^{33}\) To create the *Zuigu darani*, Meishō copied five lines of Chinese characters in gold ink on dark blue paper, and then donated this to Jūzenji following her mother’s death. Meishō and other women from her family copied Buddhist *darani* and sutras praying for the repose of relatives who had died and gave these to temples once frequented by the deceased individual, requesting that memorial services be held on designated days. These transcriptions were meant to aid in accruing spiritual merit for one’s self and others. Meishō also presented Buddhist sutras that she had written in
gold on blue paper to the Kyoto temple of Unryūin, where services were held for her parents. Joshū Chōrō (b. 1594), abbot of Unryūin, had gained the respect of many members of the imperial family, including Meishō.  

Several letters that Meishō wrote to Jūzenji’s abbot, Shinkei, survive at his temple in Yamashina and elsewhere. One of the letters, which is tentatively dated to 1665, refers to guardians of the Izumo and Yamashiro Shrines and also conveys Meishō’s wishes for the safe travels of Shinkei, who was about to depart on a trip to the villa of Emperor Reigen (1654–1732; r. 1663–87) (fig. 05). Meishō wrote the letter mainly in kana, or Japanese syllabary. The calligraphy reveals her reliance upon a delicate script employed by court women, as well as her debt to the sophisticated and graceful calligraphic manner of her father. Another letter she wrote to Shinkei is found in the Fujii Eikan Bunko in Kyoto, and concerns a Buddhist icon Meishō had commissioned, documenting her activities as a disciple and as a patron presumably patterned after the sponsorship practice of her parents (fig. 06). Furthermore, Meishō produced a calligraphic hanging scroll with seven Chinese characters of the “Icon Name” that pays homage to the bodhisattva Jizō (J: Kṣitigarbha) (fig. 07). This follows a pattern seen in many aristocratic inscriptions with the names of Buddhist deities written out and used as incantations; the physical substance of the scroll was revered as a manifestation of the divine being. Meishō relied upon this piece, which was apparently an object of personal devotion, during stays at Katsura Villa in southwestern Kyoto. What is remarkable about the piece is its tiny scale; it is only about eighteen centimeters (roughly seven inches) in height. Making use of her calligraphic skills, Meishō also created an image of a Buddhist deity, employing small Chinese characters from a Buddhist sutra for the contours of the form. The work, a hanging scroll found in the collection of

---

**Fig. 06. Letter to Kögyoku Shinkei**

---

Empress Meishō and Cultural Pursuits / Lillehoj 14
Jūzenji, pictures a seated figure of the bodhisattva of compassion, Kannon (S: Avalokiteśvara). The technique can be traced back to earlier eras in which sutra inscriptions were used to form the outlines in pictorial representations of pagodas.

Meishō shared her interest in painting with other members of her family, including her parents and several siblings. Although her father is known to have created a small number of paintings, works by her paternal grandfather Emperor Go-Yōzei survive in larger number. Go-Yōzei reportedly studied painting with Kaihō Yūshō (1533–1615), an artist born into a warrior family, raised in a Zen temple, and independent of any artistic lineage. Go-Mizunoo, on the other hand, is not recorded as having trained under an established painter, although one of his surviving works—a monochrome ink sketch of the Daruma, the founder of Zen, which is preserved at Hōkyōji in Kyoto—features a style similar to that seen in paintings by the Zen cleric of Daitokuji, Isshi Monju (also read Bunju or Bunshu; 1608–46). Isshi delivered sermons at the palace to members of the imperial family. Like her father, Meishō may have practiced painting under Isshi, or copied works by him. Alternatively, it may have been her mother who taught Meishō to paint and make pictures from pieces of cut fabric, an artistic form known as “pressed pictures” (oshi-e).

Notable among Meishō’s sisters who created paintings were Daitsu Bunchi (Princess Ume; 1619–97) and Shōzan Gen’yō (Princess Mitsuko; 1634–1727). Bunchi took religious vows under Isshi Monju and likely learned to paint from him. Gen’yō was a student of the professional painter Kano Yasunobu (1613–85) and the Ōbaku priest-painter Takuhō Dōshū (1652–1714). Both sisters established Zen imperial convents (bikuni gosho); Bunchi founded Enshōji in Nara and Gen’yō founded Rinkyūji in Kyoto. Among the treasures held at their convents are objects donated by Meishō, including a pair of framed inscriptions on silk that she personally wrote and gave to Rinkyūji. The two inscriptions, which are dated to 1691, give temple names—one reads “Shōmyōzan” and the other reads “Rinkyūji”—each written vertically with three large Chinese characters rendered with strong and lively brushstrokes. As in other cases, Meishō’s presentation of these two inscriptions to Gen’yō reveals how she fostered familial relations in part by bestowing her works as gifts.

In addition, Meishō likely gave one of her paintings to Bunchi. The work—a hanging scroll picturing the Daruma—is preserved at Enshōji, which had been founded by Bunchi (fig. 08). Meishō pictured the Daruma seated in meditation and shown in profile, using a few brushstrokes for the patriarch’s robe and a few
darker brushstrokes for his face. In this, Meishō likely followed ink sketches of the Daruma painted by the aforementioned Zen cleric Isshi Monju. Isshi created a number of paintings of the Daruma with pale ink in a manner known as “apparition painting” (mōryōga). On Meishō’s painting, her half-brother, Emperor Gosai (1637–85; r. 1654–63), inscribed four lines of Chinese characters above the figure, referring to the Daruma as the “cliff-gazing priest.”

A subject that Meishō turned to repeatedly in pictorial work is Tenjin Crossing the Sea to Tang China, which captures the divine form of the courtier and poet Sugawara no Michizane (845–903). Michizane had long been revered as a Shinto divinity (tenjin), yet he is typically represented wearing a Daoist hooded robe and holding a branch of flowering plum, as in Meishō’s representations. Her ink paintings of this figure are found in the collections of Jūzenji and Yōmei Bunko. There is also a hanging scroll by Meishō with Tenjin Crossing the Sea to Tang China preserved at Kōshōji, which she fashioned from pieces of fabric (fig. 09). At the top of the scroll, Meishō inscribed a poem by Michizane. Related to this, the aristocratic diarist Hōrin Jōshō mentions in his journal, the Kakumeiki, that Meishō bestowed upon him an oshi-e of red maples, perhaps made by her. He also refers to a folding fan that the retired empress had made, likely with an ink sketch or inscription.

Not all of the artistic works associated with Meishō are depictions of religious figures. Several of her extant paintings feature scenes from nature, including the undated Splashed Ink Landscape in
Meishō used quick dashes of a wet brush to create the elegant effect of a misty mountainous vista.

A piece once owned by Meishō that is secular in nature is the six-fold screen with a large red bunting painted on a gold ground preserved at the Kyoto temple of Sennyūji; according to temple records, it was formerly in the possession of the retired empress (fig. 10). The bunting in the Sennyūji screen is an outdoor curtain set up for picnics and other gatherings. It is studded with three white emblems—imperial crests of uragiku (a chrysanthemum flower seen from the back)—rendered on a grand scale. With its bold graphic design, this screen could readily function as a dramatic backdrop to court events, and palace and villa residents may have draped hanging scrolls over the top for display. Screens, often meant to be used as backdrops and props, were gifts frequently given to prominent individuals. Several other items that reportedly once belonged to Meishō also survive at Sennyūji, where the graves of Meishō, her parents, and many other imperial figures are found. Sennyūji had served for centuries as a temple dedicated to memorial services for emperors and their consorts. In this capacity, Sennyūji received a variety of imperial gifts, including paintings and sculptures.

At one time, Sennyūji also preserved a set of shelves said to have been among Meishō’s possessions. These shelves, decorated in maki-e or sprinkled lacquer, are featured on the pages of an illustrated book, the *Collected Works of Enkōan* (*Enkōan gashū*), produced in 1785 to document an exhibition of objects from Sennyūji held at the Nagoya temple of Dairyūji (fig. 11). According to a caption above the shelves, seen at left behind a monk who lectures on the exhibited objects, these were in the collection of the retired Empress Meishō. Seven illustrated pages feature the Sennyūji treasures—including reliquaries, statues, calligraphic inscriptions, rosaries, and costumes—many formerly owned by members of the imperial family.

Examining Meishō’s belongings—along with her paintings, letters, and related sources—we can begin to reconstruct her interests and a group of acquaintances that she maintained through her life. Among her associates were
members of her own family and a small circle of others they trusted, including a cohort of religious figures. The clerics with whom she and her sisters interacted came mainly from leading temples of Kyoto, who were called to the palace by her parents, and while a majority of the imperial princesses who entered convents were followers of Rinzai Zen priests, Meishō adhered to the teachings of a Tendai cleric, Shinkei. The two aforementioned sisters of Meishō, Bunchi and Gen'yō, adhered to the disciplined, spartan lifestyle of Zen. Meishō, though, was apparently less intensely involved in religious devotions. Instead, she preferred pleasurable pastimes such as making fabric pictures and planning fashionable diversions and entertainments (ふゆい).

**Meishō and Diversions**

Based on entries recorded by tonsured nobleman Hōrin Jōshō in his Kakumeiki, we know that Meishō participated in many cultural activities. Hōrin regularly attended gatherings in the ancient capital, including at the imperial palace and residences of retired emperors, which made him familiar with elite cultural circles in Kyoto. In the years from 1643 to 1668 (from Meishō’s abdication to Hōrin’s death), he mentions Meishō over fifty times in diary entries. These entries often describe ceremonies, banquets, and other gatherings with members of the imperial family, and in many cases both Meishō’s father and mother were present.\(^5^4\) In an entry of 1662, for instance, Hōrin makes note of a palace event attended by Go-Mizunoo, Tōfukumon’in, and Meishō with a Kuchikiri Tea party to celebrate the opening of a fresh jar of tea leaves.\(^5^5\) On nearly an annual
basis in the early 1660s, Hōrin records that he was present for Meishō’s visits to Iwakura and Shugakuin in the northeastern hills outside Kyoto, where members of her family kept villas. In addition, Hōrin was invited to Meishō’s retirement palace in central Kyoto on at least three occasions in 1668. These gatherings often featured such sophisticated pursuits as Nō drama, poetry composition, tea preparation, incense appreciation, and performance of music and dance. Rarely, however, does Meishō’s name appear in diary entries recording events that took place outside the palace or aristocratic villas.

Among the pursuits that Meishō enjoyed was creating ensemble installations populated by toys in dioramas or by her personal attendants in landscape settings. Assembling this sort of playful arrangement had been a pastime of courtiers for centuries. In the tenth century, for instance, Minamoto Tōru (822–95) had ordered that salt from Osaka Bay be brought to the garden of his Kyoto residence, the Kawara’in, to simulate a shoreline with a salt flat. Simulacra of town settings and commoners at work also suggest Meishō’s interest in the larger world, fueled perhaps by her inability to move about freely in society. These and other of Meishō’s activities are described in the Diary of Mujōhōin, written by her sister Shinanomiya Tsuneko.

Tsuneko speaks of visiting the retired empress at her Kawara Imperial Villa, which Meishō established as her retreat along the Kamo River in central Kyoto in 1688. In that year, Tsuneko started to call at her sister’s villa and, over the next nine years, she made more than twenty visits to the residence. In a 1688 diary entry, Tsuneko exclaims:

There is a wonderful sense of style in the garden and in the exquisite pavilions [of my sister’s Kawara Villa]. It’s so interesting! We spent the whole day touring her palace. There’s a fabulous view of Sanjō Bridge from the east side of the river.

Recording her experiences on another visit later that year, Tsuneko relates how the sixty-six-year-old Meishō had fabricated an arrangement of objects to imitate a fishing village, which she had set up on her estate:

We ambled through the garden [of the Kawara Villa], and took in the views at each of the pavilions. A number of maids served us meals. On an island in the pond, there was a structure imitating a beach hut built near salt works (shioya) and smoke was coming out of the boiler. Along the shore were scattered shells, and fishing nets were laid out with seaweed strewn here and there. It was all quite wonderful. It really looked like a beach.

From the diary of Tsuneko—as well as that of her husband, the prominent aristocrat and head of the Fujiwara-Konoe family, Konoe Motohiro (1648–1722)—we learn that there were enactments staged by people at Meishō’s villa, such as maids dressed as rice planters and guards outfitted as fishermen. Meishō also assembled a townscape with figurines and shop-settings decorated with toys and artificial flowers, displayed inside her garden tea pavilion. In addition, Meishō enjoyed observing passersby beyond her garden walls, like her father who had asked Tsuneko to order a bay window for her home so that he could watch the pedestrians outside her compound.

Tsuneko and Motohiro frequently gave the retired empress gifts. Tsuneko sent Meishō a tall picnic box, which was topped with miniature ornaments. The ornaments included a figure of the legendary Urashima Tarō and his boat, along
with a metal sake container shaped like a tortoise. Motohiro sent Meishō treats to eat, arranged on a tray set on short legs, resembling a low table. This was topped with a miniature landscape that contained sculptural forms shaped as auspicious plants and animals. It was customary to decorate the tops of trays of this type—known as suhama trays or as shimadai (island stands)—with small landscapes, such as that of Mount Hōrai, realm of the immortals. Although originally used at ceremonies as places for the gods to descend and bring blessings, by the seventeenth century such trays had come to serve a secondary role at outdoor gatherings as tables for elaborate picnic arrangements. In exchange for the items she received, Meishō bestowed gifts upon Tsuneko and Motohiro, including a stringed musical instrument, or koto. In an entry recorded late in Meishō’s life, Tsuneko asked her sister if she might have the unused koto that she had seen at her sister’s residence. Meishō sent Tsuneko the koto, which boasted a venerable pedigree.

From Tsuneko’s diary, we learn that Meishō’s brother, Reigen, presented the former empress with painted screens on the occasion of her seventieth birthday in 1692, just four years before Meishō’s death. These were screens of Flowers of the Twelve Months by Yamamoto Soken (fl. ca. 1683–1706), an artist who trained in the Kano-school style under his father Sotei. The screens, which survive in the collection of Konbuin in Nara, feature themes of the twelve months (tsukinami). Tsukinami had long served as inspiration for composing poems, and since at least the twelfth century, tsukinami screens had often been given as gifts. Furthermore, Soken painted a second pair of screens to celebrate Meishō’s seventieth birthday, Scenes of the Twelve Months in the collection of Enshōji (fig. 12). Soken added his signature and seal on the lower edge of each of the two screens. The screens capture figures in the out-of-doors amongst plants and animals, with each panel illustrating a separate month, starting with a New Year’s scene on the first panel of the right screen. Attached above are verses inscribed on squares.
of colored paper, composed by acclaimed poets. Soken’s screens in Konbuin and Enshōji testify to the refined, traditional nature of art works made for Meishō in retirement. Up to her last days, she was surrounded by luxurious accommodations and age-old imagery of a vaunted court culture.

Conclusion

Meishō’s production and collection of art works—and, more generally, the material cultural associated with her—are key to our understanding of the former empress. These objects and texts tell us a great deal about the value attached to artistic and cultural activities in the early-modern court, as well as the role of sitting and retired sovereigns.

Over the course of Meishō’s life, Tokugawa shoguns successfully fashioned their regime into a well-tuned organization, and by her late years, the supremacy of their rule was undeniable. Through this phase, the shoguns maintained cordial but increasingly distant relations with the imperial family, including with their direct relative Meishō. The two elite parties were interdependent: the shoguns still relied upon the legitimacy that emperors granted and the emperors required the financial support that military overlords provided. While the shoguns extended generous support to the imperial family, they simultaneously maneuvered to limit the political power and the physical movement of court leaders. Nevertheless, members of the imperial family—male and female—expressed the continued significance of a courtly legacy in artistic, cultural, and religious practice.

By the time of Meishō’s abdication, the Tokugawa had apparently come to accept that Meishō was merely a place-holder on the throne, that court leaders would select her successor, and that no Tokugawa descendants would follow her as sovereigns. Meishō’s parents, while themselves connected with numerous individuals from different backgrounds, seemingly encouraged their daughter to lead a sequestered life. Meishō came to terms with her circumstances and, even though many of her interests might strike us as frivolous, she embraced her life, perhaps fatalistically but without complaint. Diary entries verify that she maintained a small circle of acquaintances and rarely ventured out beyond palace and temple grounds. Indeed, few of Go-Mizunoo’s children revealed an interest in mixing with individuals outside the military and civilian aristocracy.66

Recognizing that Meishō would cause problems for the imperial line if she were to bear children, her father and mother likely recommended that Meishō take religious vows and limit her movements in the world. Like many of her sisters who became celibate nuns, Meishō never experienced motherhood, but she had two long-lived, devoted parents and a large group of siblings to provide familial support and companionship. In later generations, leaders of the imperial court focused on a male order of succession to the throne, interrupted only once again during the early-modern era, when Go-Sakuramachi (1740–1813) was named Empress Regnant. The emphasis on a male-dominated imperial lineage seems to explain the abbreviated treatment of Meishō in most historical accounts. Her story no longer addressed a pressing need of the shogunate or the court, and after her death, her name was seldom mentioned in writing. Thus, in the end, we sense that Meishō remains hidden, even more so than are her mother and sisters,
and it is undeniably the very nature of her position as Empress Regnant that made an enigma of her. The obscurity of Meishō as an historical figure owes to patriarchal practices that were meant to ensure the preservation and continuity of elite institutions in early-modern Japan, as in so many places in world history.
Figures

Fig. 01. Carriage of the First Princess from the Procession for the Nijō Imperial Excursion; detail of scroll two from a set of five handscrolls with ink, colors, and gold on paper; H. 33.5 cm., 17th century. Museum of the Imperial Collections, Sannomaru Shōzōkan, Tokyo.

Fig. 02. Tosa Mitsuoki, attrib., Red Maples at the Tatsuta River; detail from eight painted panels with ink, colors, and gold on paper; 192.9 x 93.2 cm., 17th century. Kajūji, Yamashina.

Fig. 03. Kano Sadanobu, attrib., New Year Festivities at Sumiyoshi Shrine; detail of painted panels with ink, colors, and gold on paper; 248 x 380 cm., 1619–20. Kyoto National Museum. Important Cultural Property.

Fig. 04. Jūzenji, two pages from the Shiki miyako meisho zue; woodblock-printed pages with ink on paper; 1787.

Fig. 05. Empress Meishō, Letter to Kōgyoku Shinkei; hanging scroll with ink on paper; 28 x 40.5 cm., ca. 1665. Private collection.

Fig. 06. Empress Meishō, Letter to Kōgyoku Shinkei; hanging scroll with ink on paper; 32 x 45 cm., 17th century. Fujii Eikan Bunko, Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto.

Fig. 07. Empress Meishō, “Icon Name” in praise of Jizō; hanging scroll with ink on paper; 18.1 x 7.5 cm., 17th century. Museum of the Imperial Collections, Sannomaru Shōzōkan, Tokyo.

Fig. 08. Empress Meishō, Daruma; hanging scroll with ink on paper; 61.9 x 31.6 cm., 17th century. Enshōji, Nara.

Fig. 09. Empress Meishō, Tenjin Crossing the Sea to Tang China; hanging scroll with fabric and ink on paper; 64 x 27 cm., 17th century. Köshōji, Uji.

Fig. 10. Bunting; six-panel screen with ink, colors, and gold on paper; 176 x 384 cm., 17th century. Sennyūji, Kyoto.

Fig. 11. Kōriki Tanenobu, Collected Works of Enkōan; two pages featuring an exhibition of art objects from Sennyūji; book printed in ink and colors on paper, 1785. Nagoya City Museum.

Fig. 12. Yamamoto Soken, Scenes of the Twelve Months; detail of a pair of six-panel screens with ink, colors, and gold on paper; 141.5 x 255.3 cm., 1692. Enshōji, Nara.
Notes
1. As a child, she was known as Ichinomiya Okiko; it was only later, after stepping down from the throne, that she was given the name Meishō.
2. The most recent instance in which something similar had occurred was when the shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu (1358–1408) had maneuvered to have his wife named mother of the emperor.
3. The most recent Empress Regnant had been Shōtoku (also known as Kōken, 718–70; r. 764–70).
4. Surviving paintings, inscriptions, letters, and poems attributed to Meishō are also found in private collections and museums, such as the hanging scroll preserved in the Umi-Mori Art Museum; http://www.umam.jp/en/japanesecalligraphy.html (accessed 06-04-2013).
5. While many women’s engagement with art in pre-modern Japan was largely private, the case of Tōfukumon’in is an exception; she exhibited a wide range of social connections in her sponsorship and collecting of art. For more see Elizabeth Lillehoj 2011, pp. 147–53.
6. Two of the few recent publications that focus on Meishō are an abbreviated biography in Fujii Jōji and Yoshioka Masayuki 2005, and the catalog to an exhibition held in 1997 at the Saitama Kenritsu Hakubutsukan, entitled Jotei: Meishō tennō to shogun Iemitsu—Matsudaira Nobutsuna to sono jidai.
7. Hōrin, who kept the Kakumeiki from 1635 to 1668, was the aristocratic abbot of Rokuronji in Kyoto; Hōrin Jōshō, Kakumeiki, ed. by Akamatsu. Tsuneko recorded entries in her diary from 1666 to 1700; for more see Cecilia Segawa Seigle 2001 and 2002.
8. I discuss Meishō’s birth and enthronement in Art and Palace Politics in Early Modern Japan, 1580–1680, pp. 199–204, 217. In the book, I also introduce basic information about Meishō’s later years, but I give few details. This article explores new ground, focusing mainly on art works and diary entries not discussed in the book.
9. For more on recent re-evaluation of the court’s restored standing in the seventeenth century see, among others, Kumakura Isao 1982; Lee A. Butler 2002; Hashimoto Masanobu 2002; and Nomura Gen 2006.
10. See, for example, the exhibition catalogs: Kasumi Kaikan 1995; Kanagawa Kenritsu Rekishi Hakubutsukan 1996; Kendall Brown 1989; and John T. Carpenter 2006.
11. Much of this research has been organized by the Institute for Medieval Japanese Studies based at Columbia University, which sponsors the Imperial Buddhist Convent Survey Team. See, among others, Institute for Medieval Japanese Studies 2009.
14. Although usually translated simply as “empress,” chūgū was the highest rank that a woman could attain while married to the reigning emperor. Tōfukumon’in’s appointment as chūgū was a rarity at the time; it had been centuries since a woman had been granted the title.
15. For more on the scrolls, known in Japanese as Kan’ei sannen hinoe tora Tōfukumon’in jūdai ni tsuke Go-Mizunoo tennō Nijō e gyōkō robo oyobi Tokugawa nidai shōgun Hidetada jōraku emaki-mono, see Lillehoj 2011, pp. 155, 161–63. Illustrated in the book are scenes of Nijō Castle and Go-Mizunoo’s palanquin (plates 61, 64–66). See also Kanagawa Kenritsu Rekishi Hakubutsukan 1996, p. 108.
16. In fact, there is no known surviving portrait of Meishō from the premodern era. In contrast, portraits of her father, mother, and many siblings are preserved at temples in and around Kyoto.
17. One pair of screens that pictures Meishō’s accession is found in the Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City; for illustration see Lillehoj 2011, plate 87. Another pair is found in the Imperial Household Collection, Sannomaru Shōzōkan, the title of which is read Meishō tennō gosokui gyokō-zu byōbu; Nakamachi in Mainichi Shinbunsha, Gobunko gyobutsu: Kōshitsu no shihō, vol. 2, Kaiga, pp. 286–7. A pair of nearly identical screens formerly belonged to the Mannō
Collection in Hyōgo Prefecture; see Takeda 1980a, plates 31–32. In addition, a single screen attributed to Kano Shunsetsu (1614–91), entitled *Imperial Procession: The Enthronement Ceremony of Empress Meishō*, is found in the William Sturgis Bigelow Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/imperial-procession-the-enthronement-ceremony-of-empress-meisho-25853 (accessed 06-04-2013). I use the term “enthronement,” but to clarify, there was no throne-chair at the palace.

18 See Hayashi Razan, Kan’ei sokui ki. In addition, a surviving album entitled the *Record of the Accession of Empress Meishō (Meishō tennō gosokui ki)* is kept by the Imperial Household Agency; see Saitama Kenritsu Hakubutsukan 1997, pp. 11–13.


20 Unfortunately, there is no corroborating documentation, and so the most we can say is that several of the screen pairs exhibit a manner similar to that employed by a number of Kano artists working soon after Meishō took the throne. Nakamachi in Takeda 1980a, p. 95.

21 The Nyoin Gosho is now known as Ōmiya Gosho. Only two original structures are thought to survive on these compounds: the Seikatei and the Yushintei.

22 Saitama Kenritsu Hakubutsukan 1997, p. 28. Another theory holds that the Kajūji Shoin panels derive from the Hirogoshо palace of the later, retired Emperor Gosai, moved to Kajūji in 1697; it is nevertheless likely that the panels were first placed in a building on Meishō’s palace grounds and that building was later incorporated into Gosai’s Hirogoshо before being moved to Kajūji; see Fujioka Michio 1968, p. 156.

23 See, for example, the pair of screens of *Flowering Cherry and Autumn Maples with Poem Slips* by Tosa Mitsuoki in the Art Institute of Chicago; for illustration see Janice Katz 2009, entry 12.

24 The Otsubone was incorporated into the palace of Meishō after Go-Mizunoo abdicated, and was refashioned again in 1647, when it was donated and moved to Enman’in. Fujioka 1967, plates 116–19; Lillehoj 2011, pp. 140–41.

25 *Sumiyoshi shatō shogetsu fūzoku-zu*; the paintings are now housed in the Kyoto National Museum.

26 See, for example, Fujioka 1967, pp. 404–5. Other scholars, while praising the quality of the painting, refrain from assigning the Enman’in panels to a particular Kano artist; see Saitō Ei 1979, p. 206.

27 One early reference is found in a 1479 diary entry by nobleman Mibu Harutomi (1422–1504), mentioning a painting with famous sites. Entry from the 3rd day, 7th month, 1479, in the *Harutomī sukan kei*; see Takeda 1966, p. 10; and Matthew Philip McKelway 2006, pp. 241, 242, note 78.


29 The young Meishō wrote and signed a prayer sheet that served as a record of a ceremony asking for long life (*Tensōchifusai tojō*), for instance; see Imperial Household Agency 1991–92, vol. 5, plate 60.


32 See, for example, Saitama Kenritsu Hakubutsukan 1997, plates 7–10, pp. 16–19.

33 The full title is: *Fuhengōmyō shō jōshijō nyoihōin shinmunō datmyō daizuigu darani kyō*. For illustration see Saitama Kenritsu Hakubutsukan 1997, plate 8.


35 See, for example, Sakakibara 1988, entry 78.

36 This letter is held in a private collection. Ibid., p. 199.


39 The inscription reads Namu Jizō daibōsatsu; Saitama Kenritsu Hakubutsukan 1997, p. 15.
40 Carpenter 2006, p. 132.
41 This piece, like a majority of extant works by Meishō’s hand, is undated, and whether she was creating images such as this while she was empress is possible; however, she was young and the ceremonial duties and cultural responsibilities of sovereigns were so numerous and time-consuming that it seems unlikely she had much leisure time for such activities while empress.
43 For illustration of a painting of the Daruma attributed to Go-Mizunoo, see Institute for Medieval Japanese Studies 2009, p. 153. For more on paintings by Go-Yōzei, see Lillehoj 2011, pp. 77–79.
44 For more on works created by Tōfukumon’in, see Lillehoj 2011, pp. 150–51.
48 Totō tenjin-zu; Saitama Kenritsu Hakubutsukan 1997, p. 21.
49 Entry from the 9th day, 6th month, 1668, in the Kakumeiki, vol. 6, p. 651. Whether this was a fabric construction or another type of “pressed picture” remains unclear.
50 Entry from the 11th day, 4th month, 1665, in the Kakumeiki, vol. 6, p. 58.
51 Haboku sansui-zu; see Patricia Fister 1994, plate 63, p. 193.
52 The screen bears no signature or seals, but according to temple tradition it was painted by Kano Tan’yū; Sennyūji 1992, p. 134.
53 This is a seven-volume set of printed books with text and images produced by Kōriki Tanenobu (1756–1831), who used the literary pseudonym “Enkōan.” Nagoyashi Hakubutsukan 2006, vol. 13, pp. 18–19, 64. Part one of the fifth volume of the Enkōan gashū focuses on the art-viewing event held at Dairyūji in Nagoya in October of 1784; it includes eleven scenes, many stretching across two pages. Another item displayed at this event was a white garment identified as having belonged to retired Empress Meishō; Nagoyashi Hakubutsukan 2006, vol. 13, pp. 20, 64.
54 Kakumeiki, vol. 2, pp. 553 and 556; vol. 3, pp. 165, 301, 360, and 382; vol. 4, pp. 232, 272, 483, and 632; vol. 5, pp. 19, 315, 374, and 636; vol. 6, pp. 53 and 62.
55 Entry from the 21st day, 10th month, 1662, in the Kakumeiki, vol. 5, p. 315.
56 Entries from the 9th day, 2nd month, 1661; 23rd day, 3rd month, 1663; and 11th day, 9th month, 1664, in the Kakumeiki, vol. 5, pp. 28, 374, and 636.
57 Entries from the 5th day, 1st month; 21st day, 3rd month; and 1st day, 5th month of 1668, in the Kakumeiki, vol. 6, pp. 569, 626, and 637.
58 Entry from the 26th day, 3rd month, 1688, in the Mujōhōin-dono gonikki; Seigle 2002.
59 Entry from the 14th day, 10th month, 1688, in the Mujōhōin-dono gonikki.
60 Motohiroki; see Tanaka Akira 2011, p. 74.
63 Tamamushi 2009, p. 46.
65 Entry from the 29th day, 9th month, 1692, in the Mujōhōin-dono gonikki.
For example, records of tea gatherings hosted by retired Emperor Gosai in the 1660s and 1670s indicate that participants belonged exclusively to the nobility. Kumakura 1989, p. 159.
**Glossary**

*bikuni gosho* 比丘尼御所, imperial convent  
*chūgū* 中宮, Empress  
*Daitokuji* 大德寺  
*Daitō bunki* 大通文智  
*Edo* 江戸  
*Enman'in* 円満院  
*Enshōji* 円照寺  
*Go-Kōmyō* 後光明  
*Go-Mizunoo* 後水尾  
*Gosai* 後西  
*Go-Yōzei* 後陽成  
*Hayashi Razan* 林羅山  
*Hōrin Jōshō* 凰林承章  
*Isshi Monju* 一条文守  
*jotei* 女帝, Empress Regnant  
*Kaihō Yūshō* 海北友松  
*Kano Sadanobu* 狩野信信  
*Kano Tan'yū* 狩野探幽  
*Konoe Motohiro* 近衛基熙  
*Kōshōji* 興聖寺  
*koto* 琴, stringed musical instrument  
*Kuchikiri* 口切, opening of a fresh jar of tea leaves  
*Kyōto* 京都  
*Meishō* 明正  
*meishō-e* 名所絵, illustration of famous sites  
*monzeki* 門跡, temples and convents affiliated with the court  
*Mujōhōin-dono gonikki* 無上法院殿御日記, *Diary of Mujōhōin*  
*Nijō Castle* 二条城  
*Nyoin Gosho* 女院御所  
*Ōbaku* 黃檗  
*oshi-e* 壓し絵, “pressed pictures”  
*Otsubone* お局  
*Reigen* 霊元  
*Rinzai* 臨済  
*Sannomaru Shōzōkan* 三之丸尚蔵館  
*Sennyūji* 泉涌寺  
*Sentō Gosho* 仙洞御所  
*Shōzan Gen'yō* 照山元瑤  
*Shugakuin* 修学院  
*sokui* 即位, Accession Audience  
*tenno* 天皇, Emperor
Tōfukumon’in 東福門院
Tokugawa Hidetada 徳川秀忠
Tokugawa Ieyasu 徳川家康
Tokugawa jikki 徳川実記, True Tokugawa Records
Tokugawa Masako 徳川和子
Tosa Mitsuoki 土佐光起
Unryūin 雲龍院
References


Nagoyashi Hakubutsukan (ed.). 2006. “Enkōan no hon” [Volumes by Enkōan], in *Nagoyashi Hakubutsukan shiryō shōshō*, vol. 13, no. 3.


Elizabeth Lillehoj is a Professor of Japanese Art History at DePaul University, Chicago, where she teaches courses on the arts of Asia. Her specialization is Japanese art of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with a focus on patronage by members of the imperial court. Her book *Art and Palace Politics in Japan, 1580s–1680s* was published by Brill in the Japanese Visual Culture Series in 2011. She was the editor of *Critical Perspectives on Classicism in Japanese Painting, 1600–1700* (University of Hawai‘i Press, 2004), *Acquisition: Art and Ownership in Edo-Period Japan* (Floating World Editions, 2007), and *Archaism and Antiquarianism in Korean and Japanese Art* (Art Media Resources and Center for the Art of East Asia, University of Chicago, 2013).
Women in the Imperial Household at the Close of China’s Ming Dynasty: 1573–1644

Dr. Ellen Soulliere

Abstract

Ming China’s imperial household and the family system at its heart developed from the founding of the dynasty in 1368 until its end in 1644 through constant interplay among the powers of emperors, their male kin, imperial women and their families, court eunuchs, women servants in the palace and senior civil officials and their wives. The marriage system embedded within the imperial family limited the power and prerogatives of individual women, while maximizing the opportunities of each emperor to produce a legitimate male heir. In this context, this paper explores what various kinds of sources can tell us about the roles of women in the imperial household in the last seventy years of the dynasty. It highlights the political and cultural achievements of Empress Dowager Li (1546–1614), and explores the roles, responsibilities, and opportunities of some of the many women who worked within the household, including literate female officials, wet nurses, and other lesser palace women. All contributed to the achievements of the household and the family and to the rituals that reflected the culture and the political order of the imperial family, the household and the court.

Marriage, Monogamy, the Succession, and the Court: A Comparative Perspective

Throughout history, families and households have been organized to deliver social outcomes that enhance the ability of their members to survive, adapt to their environments, and pass on advantages to their offspring. The social structures within which women lived in the imperial household of China’s Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) were designed to do all these things, but they did so in ways that were dramatically different from those of fourteenth- to seventeenth-century Europe, where societies of comparable wealth and complexity existed. They differed in significant ways, too, from other East Asian imperial families and households and from the ethnic majority Han Chinese and non-Han states that governed China in earlier and later periods. The household functioned through the interplay of the activities of emperors and their male kin, imperial women and their families, eunuchs, women servants, and the senior court officials and their wives. At the center of the court and the imperial household within it were the emperor and the empress, the symbolic father and mother of all in the empire. The marriage system that shaped their lives and the public expression through ritual of their wealth, power, and status in an intensely hierarchical society were at the heart of the culture and the politics of the court in the late Ming. Textual and material records of the life of Empress Dowager Li (1546–1614) provide an opportunity to examine how one late-Ming woman was able to adapt to and act within the family and household structures that both constrained and empowered her.
At the start of the dynasty, the founding emperor had decreed a system of primogeniture similar to the European model in the importance it gave to the idea that only the son of a monogamously married wife should succeed to the throne. After the reign of the founder, however, the position that became enshrined in the customary law of the dynasty was that, adopted in earlier Chinese dynasties, the son of the empress took precedence, but when the empress had no son, the emperor’s eldest son by any woman should inherit the throne. At the beginning of the Ming, the position of the empress had been strong and stable. The biographies of these women in the official history

Fig. 1. Empress Dowager Li’s court overvest, dated 1595, front view

**Ming Imperial Marriages: Monogamy, Primogeniture and the Succession**

...
portray them as wife, adviser, and counselor of the emperor and manager of his household. However, from the middle of the fifteenth century, emperors were often successful in deposing their first empress when it suited them and replacing her with a favorite consort. From this time onwards, it was unusual for one woman to be both empress and mother of the heir. A much more common pattern was for one woman to be empress, while another enjoyed the emperor’s affection and still another was the mother of the heir.

The position of a Ming empress as a wife was weakened by the fact that, for a range of reasons, she often had no son, by the success of mid-Ming emperors in deposing their wives, by the fact that her male relatives depended on her position for theirs, by the high status accorded to her husband’s other consorts and by the legitimacy of all the emperor’s offspring. This weakened version of monogamy was accompanied in the mid- and late-Ming system by a version of primogeniture that was also weak when contrasted with the early-Ming system or with the systems of many other cultures. In the mid- and late-Ming system, the status of the principal wife of the emperor was separated from the inheritance rights of his sons. This diminished the status and power of the empresses, while strengthening the hands of lesser imperial consorts, especially if they were the mothers of sons who might contest the succession. It ensured that rivalry among imperial women was fierce and endemic and it empowered the civil officials of the inner court, who successfully asserted their right to define and interpret the rules that governed the succession, significantly eroding the powers of the imperial family.

In the Chinese state, the greatest possible importance, both secular and sacred, was attached to the idea that the throne must pass in the patriline down through an unbroken succession of male heirs. Even deviations to another branch of the founding emperor’s lineage were regarded with the utmost gravity, as could be seen in the controversies of the Jiajing reign (1522–67). The ideology of the state depended on the emperor having a surviving son, or, in a worst-case scenario, a brother or cousin to succeed him and to continue the sacrifices to the imperial ancestors. This approach is in dramatic contrast to the succession rules and household structures of Europe in the same period, where inheritance by a child legitimately born to a monogamously married wife was the prevailing principle for royal families and the nobles at their courts. The natural limit to the number of children one wife could bear, coupled with high rates of maternal and child mortality, often meant that royal families were left without the desired male heir and so looked to the females of the same lineage and generation. The insistence on inheritance by the child of a monogamously married wife meant that, in the absence of a son, the lineage of a daughter was regarded as more important than her gender. In Europe, when there was no legitimate male heir, women of royal lineage succeeded their fathers as Heads of State in a way that was unthinkable in China.

Roles of Imperial Women in Late-Ming China

In China, both the imperial family and the families of the elite characteristically adopted a marriage pattern of monogamy or serial monogamy with concubinage in order to provide the strongest possible guarantee of a legitimate male heir to
inherit and carry on the sacrifices to the ancestors in each generation.\textsuperscript{5} For this purpose, the imperial household provided the emperor with very large numbers of potential sexual partners.\textsuperscript{6} Laura Betzig\textsuperscript{7} has drawn attention to one purpose of large harems such as the one at the center of the Ming imperial household. She argues that the rulers of intensely hierarchical societies are likely to maximize their own representation in the gene pool by maintaining large numbers of wives and concubines, while limiting or removing completely the opportunities of other men and women for successful reproduction. As I have previously noted,\textsuperscript{8} the mothers and grandmothers of emperors enjoyed both unassailable security of tenure and the same reproductive advantage as their sons and grandsons. Their daughters also reaped the benefits of being senior members of the imperial family. The hope of achieving such a position was a powerful motivating factor in the lives of imperial women. From the emperor’s perspective, the sequestering of large numbers of nubile young women in a harem enhanced both his status and his reproductive advantage. Those elite households which imitated the imperial household, though on a smaller scale, also served to maximize the reproductive advantage of the heads of these households at the expense of their neighbors of lower status.

A key feature of the imperial-family system after the early Ming was that the children of lesser consorts were, for legal and inheritance purposes, regarded as the legitimate offspring of the principal wife. Such a system is in stark contrast to that of sixteenth-century England, where King Henry VIII struggled with the consequences of a strong version of monogamy. In Chinese commoner families, concubines could be regarded as lowly and expendable.\textsuperscript{9} This was not the case with imperial consorts. Though their status was always marked as clearly inferior to that of the principal wife, imperial consorts held ranks traditionally described as parallel to ranks in the civil service. They were honored members of the imperial family, with ritual and customary prerogatives to mark their rank and rich rewards for their natal families. This system meant that in Chinese dynasties, in stark contrast to European monarchies and despite high infant mortality, there was almost always a selection of legitimately born males of the correct lineage in each generation to inherit the throne.

When women entered the Ming imperial household, they were assigned to a carefully prescribed role. The most fortunate might immediately be appointed to the position of empress, principal wife of the emperor; others might be made lesser consorts to the emperor or consorts to one of the imperial princes. The vast majority of the women brought into the palace were appointed as servants attached to the service of a higher-ranking member of the household or to one of the household-service offices staffed by women. The role of each woman was carefully defined within the hierarchy of the family and the household. Nevertheless, there was potential for women to cross status boundaries and improve their positions within the hierarchy. Thus, women who had entered the palace with the status of a servant could rise to the position of empress dowager if they attracted the attention of the emperor and bore a son who lived to become emperor.\textsuperscript{10} Conversely, even women who had occupied the position of empress could be stripped of their titles and prerogatives and die disgraced and miserable.
After the early Ming, the women with the most secure positions in the imperial household were the mothers or grandmothers of a reigning emperor, who held the titles Empress Dowager and Grand Empress Dowager. The dowagers had important roles in managing the imperial family, including aspects of its household finances, the education of the young princes and princesses, and the selection of their marriage partners. The most successful dowagers were also intensely involved in the political activities of the outer court, as will be seen in the discussion of Empress Dowager Li, below. Furthermore, despite stern normative constraints on such activities, imperial women worked to promote the interests of their own kin, especially their sons, but also their daughters, fathers, and brothers.

With the exception of Empress Wu of the Tang Dynasty, Chinese imperial women in dynasties other than the Ming ruled only as regents when their husbands, sons, or grandsons were incapable of ruling for reasons of age or infirmity. Through the successful fragmentation of imperial women’s powers and prerogatives and intense normative pressure, despite some close calls, the civil officials of the Ming Dynasty succeeded in preventing all of its numerous and ambitious dowager empresses from establishing a formal regency.

Estimates of Numbers of Women in the Palace

Despite the highly specified roles of many of the women who lived and worked in the Ming palace, their number is hard to estimate. The available biographies indicate that there may have been between twenty and a hundred titled imperial women at any given time. There were a minimum of 283 women officials in the service offices of the imperial household, and there clearly were in addition hundreds of maids, laundresses, wet nurses, women chair-bearers, who could not have bound feet, and other servants. There is little information on the numbers of women of low status whose work was essential to the running of the palace. Fulin, who became Emperor Shizu, the first Manchu emperor of China, stated that at the end of the Ming the palace had been staffed with 9,000 women and 100,000 eunuchs. Like the Ming founder before him, however, he was anxious to contrast the modesty of his own requirements with the extravagance of his predecessor. His own establishment, he went on to say, was not to exceed 400 or 500 persons. The late-Ming Jesuit observer Alvaro Semedo estimated that there were 3,000 women and 12,000 eunuchs living in the Ming palace in about 1626. Semedo’s estimates can only have been based on hearsay, but they were made without the same political intent and thus are more likely to be reliable than those of Emperor Shizu.

Social Backgrounds of Imperial Women

A further important feature that distinguished the Ming imperial family from other Han Chinese and non-Han systems is that women were recruited into the palace from families of relatively low status. This is in contrast to the situation in Tang and Song China, when the empresses were often the sisters or daughters of civil and military officials who held high rank in their own right. Lee Hui-shu has highlighted the obscure social origins of Empress Yang, wife of the Song Emperor Ningzong, but it is clear that her modest family background
was the exception. Under the Mongols (1260–1368), different marriage and inheritance practices prevailed, but the wives of the emperors were generally selected from the families of prominent military families. In the Qing period, only the Manchu Banners could provide women for the imperial household. The Banners were the basic social-administrative units which supplied the state with men for military service and women for service in the palace.

While as Jennifer Holmgren has pointed out, a range of strategies was employed in both the Han Chinese and non-Han dynasties that ruled China to prevent the dominance of any one woman in court politics, no previous dynasty set out to select imperial women from the daughters of commoner families. The Ming founder decreed that the wives of the princes should be selected from “good families,” whose fathers held no official or noble position. He reiterated this principle in 1397 when he stated that the daughters of the rich and powerful would be systematically excluded from the selection. While in practice, after the early Ming, imperial women were regularly recruited from military families, these were characteristically families of modest means who owed the high positions they later attained to the position of their daughter at court, not the other way around. A common formula in describing the positions is that the men were “honored because of their daughter.” This was the case with the family of the Wanli Emperor’s mother, Empress Dowager Li. When her son was appointed heir apparent in 1568, her father was made Vice Commissioner-in-Chief of a central military commission and Earl of Wuqing. When her son became emperor in 1572, her father’s noble title was raised to Marquis of Wuqing. The natal families of Ming empresses did not have power bases that could help to protect their daughters’ positions, and these families, like their women, were regularly at risk of losing their positions.

**Women Officials in the Imperial Household**

At the beginning of the dynasty, the Ming founder established six services, offices within the imperial household staffed by women officials and charged with governing the women’s quarters. The descriptions of the positions of women within these services were based on the ancient ritual text, the *Rites of Zhou*, and on the official histories of the Sui and Tang Dynasties. The women officials were each given a rank parallel to a rank in the civil service. The highest-ranking women were the two heads of the General Palace Service and the head of the Office of Palace Staff Surveillance, who held civil-service rank 6a, equivalent to a mid-level male civil official. The roles of each of the services were spelled out in detail. The women officials were charged with the transmission of some documents and with keeping the records of the names, titles, native places, and family backgrounds of imperial women for later incorporation into burial tablets or the draft biographies of the most prominent women, which were written by the (male) court historians. Women officials organized and participated in all the rituals that involved the women of the imperial family and the wives of the court officials. They were involved in the disbursement of funds to the families of all the women who served in the palace and the provision of food, wine, textiles, needlework, clothing, and headgear. The Office of Palace Staff
Surveillance investigated infringements of palace regulations and imposed fines and punishments.

The detailed prescription of the ranks and duties of the women officials that appears in the official history of the Ming Dynasty\(^23\) has a long history. The Tang Dynasty account of their ranks and duties is very similar to that given in the Ming history. Priscilla Ching Chung\(^24\) and Lee\(^25\) have described aspects of the Song Dynasty system which also overlap with the Ming. The lineage of the Ming description of offices can be traced even more precisely, however. The account of the women officials of the Jin Dynasty (1115–1234) is almost identical to the Ming account.

The account in the *Draft Treatise of the Ministry of Rites* of 1620, compiled near the end of the dynasty, differs little from that published at the beginning of the dynasty. Thus, the description of these offices remained almost unchanged over a period of five hundred years. There are some small changes and developments in the prescriptions for the formal structures but this is probably very much less than the amount of actual change in functions that took place over this long period.

As servants and advisers in the inner court, women officials both competed with and cooperated with the eunuchs, whom emperors found indispensable as administrators, private secretaries, transmitters of documents between the palace and the officials of the outer court, keepers of the imperial treasury, procurers of goods, and personal representatives in many kinds of financial and political transactions, both within the empire and beyond.\(^26\) The official history records that the services staffed by eunuchs came to dominate those staffed by women and that “[a]fter the Yongle period [1402–24], all the responsibilities (of the six services) were transferred to the eunuchs and only the four offices of the Seals and Tallies Office remained.”\(^27\)

Throughout the Ming Dynasty, however, seals and tallies were required to authorize the use of cash and goods of all kinds within the palace and were thus at the heart of every financial transaction in the imperial household. These objects were emblems of the authority of the person who authorized the expenditure. A seventeenth-century eunuch, Liu Ruoyu (1584–ca.1642), has left a valuable unofficial account of some aspects of daily life in the palace. He makes it clear that at least some of the offices staffed by women continued to function into the late-Ming period. According to his account, one of the twelve eunuch directorates of the late-Ming system was called the Directorate of Seals and Tallies and one of its subsidiary offices was the Inner Office of Seals, which was staffed by the women officials. He gives the following account of its function:

> All the seals were in the charge of the women officials of the inner office of seals. When a seal was required, the Office of Seals informed the Directorate of Seals by sending them a card.
> The Directorate requested authorization and then instructed the Inner Office to bring the seal.\(^28\)

### The School for Palace Women

Literate, educated women officials were often recruited from outside the palace, but in the Yongle period a school for young women was set up within the palace itself. A number of men with Confucian educations were persuaded to
allow themselves to be castrated so that they could enter the palace to instruct the ladies of the court. Liu Ruoyu’s account shows that by late-Ming times the school for palace women, staffed by eunuchs, had a fixed curriculum and standard techniques for evaluating its students. The eunuch teachers were chosen from among the staff of the twenty-four eunuch directorates. The criteria for their selection were that they should be virtuous, well-read, good calligraphers in the standard kaishu style, and that they should not be powerful. There was a set curriculum to be followed in this school. Students were first taught to read the Hundred Surnames and the Thousand Character Classic, the standard primers used for teaching children embarking on the long road to literacy in Chinese. Subsequently, they read the Classic of Filial Piety, the Admonition for Women by Ban Zhao of the Han Dynasty, and the Instructions for Women by the Jiajing Emperor’s mother. They went on to study the “Pattern of the Family” section of the Book of Rites, the Book of Poetry, the Great Learning, the Doctrine of the Mean, and the Analects. Those who mastered these works were given the title “women graduates.” These women were then available for appointment as Bearers of the Seals in the Office of Palace Attendance or in one of the six services.

The Laundry Service

In addition to the six services, there were several other agencies of the emperor’s household staffed by women. One of these was the Laundry Service. Located to the northwest of the imperial city, it was the only department of the imperial household located outside the imperial city. Palace women who were old or ill or who had committed crimes were sent there to live out their days. The Laundry Service was under the direction of eunuch supervisors. According to Liu, they kept the women supplied with basic rations of rice and salt until they died of natural causes; the women were not allowed to leave the Laundry Bureau alive, “in order to guard against the divulging of secrets.”

Imperial Wet Nurses

Another special group of women were also administered by an agency staffed by eunuchs. These were the imperial wet nurses. Outside the imperial city to the north of the Dongan Gate were the headquarters of the Office of Rites and Propriety. The office was attached to the Embroidered Uniform Guard and was supervised by the powerful eunuch Director of Ceremonial. One of the responsibilities of the eunuchs in this agency was to recruit between twenty and forty lactating women in each quarter of the year. Local officials were required to supply an additional eighty such women each year to be kept in reserve.

Early in the year, officials and eunuchs began the search for lactating women among the military and commoner families in the vicinity of Beijing. They were to be between the ages of fifteen and twenty sui [about fourteen to nineteen years old in the Western system of calculating ages] and both they and their husbands were to be healthy and normal in appearance. Midwives examined the candidates to determine that they were free from disease and then handed the chosen ones over to the eunuchs, who provided them with accommodation until they were needed in the palace. Each wet nurse received a substantial daily allowance of rice and meat. Although the sources do not mention this, it must
have been essential that the wet nurses kept their babies with them during this period of waiting to maintain lactation.

During a month when a child was expected in the palace, a few wet nurses who had themselves borne male children and a few who had borne female children were taken to live in a small building west of the Hall of Literary Brilliance beside the palace moat. If the emperor’s child were female, a wet nurse who had borne a male was used. If the emperor’s child were male, a wet nurse who had borne a female was selected. No explanation is given for this practice. On the day on which she was to enter the palace, the woman’s hair was done in a high coif and she was dressed in the fashion of a palace woman. Thus attired, she entered the palace to take up her duties. Nothing is said of what, if any, provision was then made for the nurses’ own children.

By the beginning of the seventeenth century, the orderly system for the recruitment of wet nurses, if indeed it had ever functioned as prescribed, was under severe pressure. Because of the prestige associated with being the nurse of an imperial infant and the opportunities it provided for advancing the interests of one’s own family, there was intense competition for the positions, and the official system was often bypassed by those who had influential connections. Village women chosen in the prescribed way had no hope of success and “the roads were thronged with protégés and their promoters.”

Recent studies of elite women in Britain and France show that their use of wet nurses can be seen as part of a reproductive strategy that enabled some of them to give birth to twenty or more children over their lifetimes. The available evidence shows that Ming imperial women, by contrast, did not use wet nurses to increase their own fertility. The titled imperial women who were important enough to merit biographies and who may all be assumed to have had access to wet nurses, gave birth to an average of only 1.8 children. Most of them had one child, two children, or none at all. A more likely rationale for the use of wet nurses was to mark the high status of the mother and to spare her the physical challenge of breastfeeding an infant.

During the reign of the Tianqi Emperor (r. 1620–27), Empress Dowager Li had died and the imperial household was without a powerful empress dowager. The empress was weak and she had no children. In addition, the emperor himself was ill-prepared for his role and withdrew from it to a remarkable degree. In this situation, and in concert with the eunuch Wei Zhongxian (1568–1627), the emperor’s former wet nurse, Madame Ke (d. 1627), was able to move well beyond the usual comforts and largesse that were accorded to women in her position and to contest dominance in the imperial household and the inner court. She was bold enough to spread malicious rumors about the empress’s father, and she and Wei persecuted other imperial women to death. They are accused in the official Ming history of having forged a decree from the ill-fated Taichang Emperor, who reigned for less than a month in 1620, ordering one of his young consorts to commit suicide. The young woman, who had not yet even been invested with a title, took all the things the emperor had given her and arranged them on a table in front of her. Facing west, she made reverence to the Buddha and then, weeping bitterly, took her own life. Another of the Tianqi Emperor’s own consorts offended Wei and Madame Ke by her “direct and high-principled
nature.” They confined her in a separate palace and cut off supplies of food and
drink. She died after crawling on her hands and knees in the rain to drink the
run-off from the eaves of the palace. Madame Ke had relied for her authority on
her relationship with her former charge, the Tianqi Emperor, and when he died
in 1627, her authority evaporated. Once powerful enough to challenge even the
empress, she was sent for punishment to the Laundry Bureau, where she was
beaten to death.

**Ming Imperial Women and Ritual**

Ritual was among the most important daily concerns of all the inhabitants of the
Ming court, who were sensitive to the subtlest nuances of the status distinctions
marked by ritual. Emperors were taught through ritual to see their role as
the vital link between heaven and earth. On a practical level, they were also
aware of the importance of ritual in affirming the legitimacy of their rule and in
maintaining their authority over an empire whose governance sorely taxed the
resources of the state. As a result of the centrality of ritual in the politics of the
court, many of the fiercest controversies of the dynasty involved ritual matters.

For the women of the imperial household, rituals affirmed the symbolic
importance of the empress as the emperor’s wife, titular mother of all his
children, and exemplar of feminine virtue to the empire. Rituals marked
every important event in the lives of imperial women. There were rituals
for marriage and the investiture of the empress and the consorts, rituals to
celebrate the birth of children, banquets and festivals when imperial women
received the congratulations of the wives of the senior officials. The granting
of honorific titles, funeral rites, and places in the ancestral temples marked the
status distinctions among imperial women and defined the meaning of their
lives and their deaths. Ritual was the battleground for arguments about status
and prerogatives, with success dependent on the support of the emperor, the
eunuchs, and the civil officials. Directly or through their supporters, women
negotiated about matters such as honorific titles, places in the halls for ancestral
sacrifices, and places in the imperial tombs.

Because of the political importance of the program of ritual for the dynasty,
it was continually refined and developed, closely watched by all members of
the court who stood to gain or lose from any changes. In designing the program,
the officials of the Ministry of Rites drew on all three of the ancient classics of
ritual, the *Rites of Zhou*, the *Book of Ceremonial*, and the *Book of Rites*. The rituals
of the Ming were also modelled on Tang and Song Dynasty precedents. Rituals
were divided into five broad categories, three of which were important for
imperial women. The first of these categories were the auspicious rites. These
were the sacrifices of the state and the sacrifices to the imperial ancestors.
Five of the auspicious rites of Ming times involved imperial women: the
sericulture ceremony, the sacrifice to Gao Mei, and the sacrifices in the Imperial
Ancestral Temple, the Hall for Ancestral Worship, and the Temple for Ancestral
Compassionate Mothers. Women were also involved in the festive rites including
court audiences, banquets, the investitures of empresses and consorts, and
weddings and births. The inauspicious rites included funerals and mourning and
here again imperial women had key roles to play. In all of these rites, they were prepared, accompanied and attended by the women officials.

**Women’s Places in the Halls for Ancestral Worship**

The most public and important of the auspicious rites were the state sacrifices in the Imperial Ancestral Temple. This was the temple outside the palace walls where the dynastic sacrifices of the state were offered. It contained a room for the spirit tablets of each imperial ancestor, each emperor, and each emperor’s first principal wife. This practice had precedents from the Song Dynasty and the Ming founder intended that it should be followed throughout the dynasty. In practice, however, two Ming emperors succeeded in putting aside this precedent. The Xuande Emperor (r. 1426–36) and the Chenghua Emperor (r. 1465–88), who deposed their first empress and installed other women in their place, argued that the second empress was, in fact, the rightful principal wife. Both managed to have the deposed wife excluded from the Imperial Ancestral Temple and the new wife installed.

Later in the dynasty, the Jiajing Emperor (r. 1522–67) decided to provide a place in the Imperial Ancestral Temple for Empress Fang, his third empress. His officials were vehemently opposed, however, and when he died, his first principal wife, with whom he had quarrelled violently, was given the place, while Empress Fang’s spirit tablet was relegated to another hall. In spite of the early- and mid-Ming exceptions, Ming-dynastic practice upheld the principle that in the Imperial Ancestral Temple there could be only one emperor and one empress, and that the empress must be the first principal wife. Throughout the Ming, a place in this temple remained, jealously guarded, as the highest honor to which an imperial woman could aspire.

In a departure from earlier precedent, the Ming founder had ordered the establishment of a second hall, the Hall for Ancestral Worship, where sacrifices to the imperial ancestors were also carried out. This hall was located within the walls of the palace and was intended for family sacrifices, as distinct from dynastic or state sacrifices. Every morning and every evening, the emperor or one of his male descendants performed sacrifices and the empress and consorts also made daily offerings there. Births, deaths, and marriages were announced to the ancestors there and, from the Jiajing period onwards, most of the major festivals of the lunar calendar were also celebrated there.

According to the official history, up until the Wanli period (1573–1620), the selection of the women who were to be accorded a place in the family Hall for Ancestral Worship was not a contentious issue. Each empress who received a place in the Imperial Ancestral Temple also received a place in the Hall for Ancestral Worship.

In the third year of the Wanli Emperor’s reign, when he was just a boy of thirteen, he took the initiative in reopening the controversy concerning the honors due to the wives of his grandfather, the Jiajing Emperor. The young emperor suggested that Empress Fang, his grandfather’s third principal wife, and Empress Dowager Du, the mother of the Longqing Emperor (r. 1567–73), should both be honored in the Hall for Ancestral Worship. The emperor revealed to the officials that the spirit tablets of three women who had been the natural...
mothers of emperors, but had never been empress, were already being honored there. The arrangements for this, he said, had been made secretly without the knowledge of the officials, who had no access to this part of the palace. The young emperor invited Grand Secretary Zhang Juzheng to come to the hall to see for himself. Zhang observed that the Hall for Ancestral Worship was intended to be a place where emperors and their wives were honored and that all those women who had been granted the title of empress should find a place in this inner hall. He argued that the granting of places there should be separate from the system in the Imperial Ancestral Temple, where, he reiterated, there could be only one emperor and one empress. The boy emperor’s campaign on behalf of the natural mothers of previous emperors was surely the opening salvo in a campaign, which never did succeed, to secure a place in the Hall for Ancestral Worship for his own mother, who was “only” a natural mother and had never been empress.

A final irregularity in the allocation of places in the Hall for Ancestral Worship occurred near the end of the dynasty. Lady Wang, the natural mother of the Tianqi Emperor, was given a place there after her son ascended the throne in 1620. For the most part, however, Ming emperors were unsuccessful in their efforts to have second empresses or the natural mothers of emperors included in the sacrifices in the Imperial Ancestral Temple and the Hall for Ancestral Worship. In 1488, a new temple, the Hall for Ancestral Compassionate Mothers, had been established for these women. This solution to the problem prevailed through the next fifty years until, in 1537, the rites officials argued that it was both unnecessary and improper to continue the sacrifices to the natural mothers of emperors through the generations. These sacrifices should really only be carried out by the women’s sons and allowed to lapse in later generations. The Jiajing Emperor was persuaded and the temple for offerings to natural mothers was abolished. After this, the natural mothers of emperors were honored in several ancillary halls, including the Hall of Expansive Filial Piety, the Hall of the Spiritual Empyrean, and the Hall for the Veneration of the Ancestors and in the temples at the imperial tombs. Ming emperors never ceased to negotiate improved ritual positions for their natural mothers. The last Ming emperor gave instructions for the establishment of a new temple to honor all the women who had been second empresses or natural mothers of emperors, including his own mother. The name of the hall is not recorded, however, and it is unlikely that it was completed before the many internal and external challenges to the dynasty brought about its fall in 1644.

Court Audiences and Banquets for Women
Ming empresses did not receive the congratulations of the civil officials at public audiences as empresses had under the Tang. Their public audiences were attended by women only. On New Year’s Day, at the winter solstice, and on their birthdays imperial women of the rank of empress, empress dowager, and grand empress dowager received the congratulations of the titled ladies of the inner and outer courts. On the days appointed for the empress to receive the congratulations, a throne was set up in her official residence, the Palace of Earthly Tranquillity. The imperial insignia were displayed and, as female
musicians played, the imperial consorts approached in order of rank and made their obeisances to the empress. Each one in turn identified herself and offered her congratulations. Next, the wives of the nobles and the officials came forward, identified themselves and congratulated the empress. These titled ladies of the outer court, the wives of the senior metropolitan officials, all had ranks and clothing decorated with insignia carefully prescribed to show where their husbands stood in the hierarchy of the capital’s officials. The ceremony also included the reading by the female officials of an edict and a reply by the titled ladies. Often, when the emperor entertained his officials at state banquets, the empress held parallel banquets for their wives, usually in her residence. The titled ladies offered “long-life flowers” to the empress. In return, she offered them wine seven times and the food was served in five courses, in contrast to the emperor’s banquets, where the wine was offered nine times.

In the reign of the last Ming emperor, an incident occurred which illustrates the way such ceremonies could feature in the relationships of the participants. One New Year’s Day, the last Ming emperor’s consort, Lady Tian, went to the empress’s residence to pay her respects to the empress. At the time, Lady Tian was very much loved by the emperor and the empress, herself the mother of healthy sons, felt the need to bring home to her rival the limits of her position. The empress kept the consort waiting for some time before ascending her throne to receive her, and then accepted her congratulations in a perfunctory fashion. But when another consort, Lady Yuan, arrived later, the empress pointedly took the time to greet her and speak with her at some length. Lady Tian was humiliated, as it was intended she should be. At a more basic level, a woman’s status and ritual prerogatives determined how she was treated, down to the quality and amount of food and drink and the number of attendants to which she was entitled. When the eunuch Wei Zhongxian and Madame Ke failed to observe the protocols required by ritual in their treatment of the Taichang Emperor’s Lady Li, her death ensued. Again and again, women’s biographies in the official history make it clear that, for them, ritual was not a peripheral matter. It was central to their position in the politics of the court and often a matter of life and death.

**Empress Dowager Li and the Wanli Court**

Empress Dowager Li (1546–1614), the Wanli Emperor’s mother, was the most successful and influential of late-Ming dowager empresses. Like many Ming empresses and dowager empresses before her, she was active both within the imperial family and household and in the politics of the outer court. When Censor Cao Xuecheng was condemned to death for sedition, she took pity on his elderly mother and interceded with the emperor, who pardoned him. In her biography in the official history, she is accorded high praise for her political activities, primarily because of her cooperation with Grand Secretary Zhang Juzheng during the emperor’s minority. He asked her to oversee governmental affairs, the historians write, and during this period she made significant contributions to state affairs, including the evaluation of the performance of the officials [literally, *investigating the name and the reality*], so that the wealth and power of the state were enhanced. It is possible that the historians are here
suggesting a comparison between the empress dowager’s careful attention to affairs of state and her son’s subsequent neglect of them.

The dowager’s biography in the official history outlines her career. Her family was a military family originally from Huo Xian near Tongzhou at the northern terminus of the Grand Canal, southeast of Beijing. While her husband was still Prince of Yu, she became a secondary consort. When he ascended the throne in 1567, she became Honored Consort, but she never became empress. Her husband died in 1572, when she was twenty-six and the mother of three young children. When her nine-year-old eldest son became emperor, in 1573, she became empress dowager. Grand Secretary Zhang Juzheng invited her to move into the emperor’s residence, and there she supervised his daily life and early education. If the boy emperor did not study as he should, she made him kneel, a startling punishment for an emperor, even a nine-year-old one. Attendants who followed her commands were also exceedingly strict with the boy. The empress dowager supervised the “Classics Mat” colloquia, which took place in the Hall of Literary Brilliance immediately after the morning court audience. There, senior officials including Grand Secretaries and Hanlin Academicians, elite scholars who drafted official documents and advised the emperor, gave lectures on the meaning of the classics to the emperor and the most senior civil and military officials. At these august gatherings, the empress dowager ordered her young son to imitate the lecturing officials and to go up and speak at the front of the hall.

When the court was in session, the empress dowager would enter the emperor’s sleeping apartments before dawn and call out, “The emperor will rise!” She ordered the attendants to support him into a seated position, bring water to wash his face and assist him to get into the imperial carriage and go to court. When the emperor married at the age of fifteen, the Empress Dowager withdrew from his residence to signify that he was now of age and able to exercise his responsibilities in his own right. Despite his adult status, she more than once still found the need to rebuke him fiercely and publicly. One evening he was drinking wine at a banquet and some of his attendants could not sing the songs he wanted them to sing. When he took up a sword to strike them, all those in his party begged him to restrain himself. He then humiliated the attendants by cutting some hair from their heads, a mock punishment. When she heard of this the next day, the empress dowager was very angry. She instructed Grand Secretary Zhang Juzheng to write a memorial remonstrating with the emperor and to draft a decree in which the emperor would admit the wrong he had done. She ordered the emperor to kneel to receive these criticisms and only when he wept and asked for guidance in correcting his behavior was he pardoned.

A further instance of the empress dowager’s authority over her son occurred many years later, when he had adolescent children of his own. Once, when he came to call on her, the dowager asked him why he had not yet established his eldest son as heir apparent. He replied that his eldest son was only the son of a lowly palace woman. Recalling her own once humble status, the furious empress dowager replied, “You are the son of a lowly palace woman!” The terrified emperor prostrated himself before his mother and did not dare to rise.
A Perspective from Material Culture

A magnificent embroidered double-woven silk-brocade sleeveless robe decorated with symbols of long life and good fortune in the collection of the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco provides material evidence of ideas and images that were meaningful to Empress Dowager Li at the height of her powers. The quality of the workmanship of the robe is exceptional and it is likely to have been made as one small part of the celebrations on the occasion of her fifty sui birthday on December 7th, 1595. Craig Clunas has highlighted the pervasiveness of objects and images in elite society and at court that reminded women of the centrality of their role as the mothers of male children who would carry on the patriline. This robe gives a powerful indication of how the intense subordination, humility, and self-abnegation required of a woman in the early stages of her entry into the
imperial family were transformed into a vision of almost supernatural authority when she succeeded, against nearly impossible odds, in bearing and bringing up a son who lived to become emperor. The robe indicates the sumptuousness of the material surroundings of a successful late-Ming empress dowager, the breadth and depth of her material and ritual prerogatives and the status she enjoyed as the most senior member of the imperial family, before whom even the emperor had to kneel.

The front of the robe (fig. 1) has a symmetrical design. A Buddhist swastika, a homophone with the same sound and meaning as wan (10,000) adorns each shoulder immediately above the large golden character shou, long life. Together they form a rebus for wan shou, “ten thousand longevities,” a greeting that could be used only for the emperor, the empress, or the empress dowager. Beneath the golden characters, two white-horned, white-whiskered, five-clawed Wanli imperial dragons appear in profile, each holding a luminous white pearl in his mouth and each clutching a magnificent-bordered red cloud in his claws.

The back of the empress dowager’s robe (fig. 2) repeats the rebus begun on the front. Here, there are two Buddhist swastikas and just one “long life” character. If one “reads” first the front of the robe and then the back, it says, wan shou, wan shou, wan wan shou, “ten thousand, ten thousand longevities!” a cry that undoubtedly echoed through her palace when the empress dowager received the congratulations of the titled ladies of the inner and outer courts on her birthday. The back of the robe continues the theme of longevity, with two small peaches, Buddhist symbols of immortality, embroidered below the collar. Two further Wanli-period dragons, each with his pearl above him adorn the symmetrical panels of the back of the robe. Their rainbow-colored manes stream behind them and they clutch blue or green clouds in their claws. The decorations on the robe are rich in symbolism and word play. A surprisingly furry and realistic bat, fu, a homophone of fu (good fortune) descends over a conch shell, another Buddhist symbol. The clouds (yun) that are the most frequent decorative theme on both faces of the robe are also homophones for good fortune (yun).

The images on the robe convey a message of super-abundant blessings for the dowager and the imperial family, blessings that were secular and sacred, Buddhist and Confucian, popular and imperial, unlimited by gender.

Empress Dowager Li lived for nearly twenty more years after the celebrations for which the birthday robe was made, and her ability to command the resources of the imperial household and to influence the course of events only increased with time. Like many Chinese imperial women before her, she was an active patron of Buddhism, a religion which opened to women a different range of positive, gendered roles than did Confucianism. From 1573 until the end of her life, Empress Dowager Li had a profound impact on the life of Beijing and its suburbs through her generous patronage of Buddhist temples and clergy. She was responsible for establishing thirteen temples, restoring twelve more, and making substantial donations to a further six. In this, she was assisted by

Women in the Imperial Household / Soulliere 48
the eunuch Feng Bao, who was her ally early in her career, by other eunuchs, and by many of the court ladies, who all subscribed substantial sums to support the temples and their religious leaders. The renowned artist Dong Qichang (1555–1636) contributed an inscription for one of the steles. Furthermore, despite the record in the empress dowager’s official biography of Grand Secretary Zhang Juzheng’s opposition to her patronage of the temples, he composed at least five inscriptions for steles in temples sponsored by her.

Empress Dowager Li also continued to play an active role in the politics of the inner court. As noted above, in 1601, she cooperated with civil officials to end a fifteen-year stalemate and force the resisting emperor to name his eldest son as heir. Just before she died in 1614, the empress dowager used her position as the most senior member of the imperial family once more to cement the settlement of the vexed question of the succession. She defended the still tenuous position of the heir apparent against continuing pressure from her son’s favorite consort, Lady Zheng, who still hoped to improve her own position and that of her son. When Lady Zheng suggested that her twenty-six-year-old son, the Prince of Fu, should remain resident in Beijing for the dowager’s seventy sui birthday celebrations, the dowager responded by saying that in that case, she would summon her own second son, the Prince of Lu, back to Beijing to take part as well.59 This veiled threat from the empress dowager protected the position of the heir apparent and forced the emperor at last to send the adult son of his favorite consort away from the court to take up residence at his princely estate.

**Empress Dowager Li, Ritual, and the Court**

The court of the Wanli Emperor was beset with challenges, including unprecedented economic and social change that was rapidly moving the economy beyond its agrarian base and beyond the ability of existing systems to govern it. Challenges on the borders of the empire came from the Mongols and the Manchus as well as from Korea, Japan, the Philippines, and the Miao people in Guizhou and Yunnan. Europeans, including the Spanish, the Portuguese, and Italian Jesuit priests such as Matteo Ricci were beginning to arrive in Chinese ports and in the capital.60 As he grew older, the Wanli Emperor became profoundly alienated from his officials. His unwillingness to play the role they had designed for him and his inability to invent an effective new role allowed his court to drift into bitter and destructive factional infighting. The emperor and the imperial family asserted their continued political dominance by spending truly prodigious sums of money on court rituals, including weddings, investitures, and funerals. These magnificent events drained the resources of the state and sometimes cost more in a year than the imperial treasury contained.61

Empress Dowager Li was a close contemporary of Queen Elizabeth I of England (1533–1603), and the rituals of the Ming court, like those of the Elizabethan court, touched the people at many points. Ming clothing, marriage ceremonies, burial rites, and the sacrifices to the ancestors were all prescribed by the central government. The higher people rose in the social scale, the more likely they were to adopt these prescriptions and to attempt to move into the next band in the sumptuary ladder. This drew them more tightly into the network that linked the people to the court. Although the public were excluded from most
imperial rituals, many thousands of people were directly or indirectly involved
in the preparations for the great state occasions which were attended by all
the ranking metropolitan officials and their wives. Some rituals, including the
imperial funeral processions, were orchestrated as public spectacles in which the
whole population of the capital could share.

The elaborateness of funerals and tombs marked the social position which
a member of the imperial family had reached during their lifetime. Imperial
funeral processions provided the court and the people with an opportunity to
witness the grandest and most extravagant of all imperial rituals. A seventeenth-
century account by a Portuguese Jesuit priest corroborates the account of funeral
ceremonies contained in the official writings on ritual, but adds a great deal of
additional detail. Alvaro Semedo (1585–1658) was in Beijing in March of 1614
when Empress Dowager Li died, and he has left a colorful account of her burial
which was translated into English and published in London in 1655. On the
third day after Empress Dowager Li’s death, Semedo writes, her body was
placed in its coffin. The emperor himself helped to lower the body onto its quilt
and pillow and then strewn upon her pearls and precious stones to the value
of “70,000 crowns” and placed by her side “fifty pieces of cloth of gold and fifty
of cloth of silver, which would truly have been enough to have maintained a
gallant man all his lifetime.” Mourning continued for more than four months.
Hanlin Academicians wrote elegies, Buddhist monks carried out ceremonies,
and civil officials and commoners were required to wear mourning dress. More
than 50,000 soldiers guarded the processional route to the tomb and the tomb
site itself. A “multitude” of people lined the route to the tombs, hoping to see the
procession. A general amnesty and tax relief were declared and pieces of silver
wrapped in paper by the emperor himself were given to the poor as alms.

During her lifetime, the emperor had richly endowed his mother with
honorable titles. In 1579, the year of his marriage, and again in 1585, 1602, and
1607, he added more words of praise to her title. At her death she received a
magnificent title consisting of fifteen characters, “Filial, stately, chaste, pure,
imperial, humane, principled, majestic, assistant to heaven, blessed, sage,
imperial empress dowager.” Though she was buried with her husband in his
tomb, her son was unable to secure for her a place in the two most prestigious
halls for ancestral sacrifices and she was “separately honored” in the ancillary
Hall for the Veneration of the Ancestors.

For those who lived at the Ming court, scarcely a day passed without
some ritual event or seasonal observance. Ritual marked out the rhythms of
the seasons and the years. It affirmed the legitimacy of the reigning emperor
and his wife. The emperor used it to reward and control his officials. The ritual
observances of the court affirmed the high status of the officials and their wives
and their ranking in relation to each other. They highlighted the place of each
participant in stylized representations of the order that governed the empire
and the deference owed by all subjects to the imperial family. In their turn,
the officials used rituals to control the emperor. When the full ritual calendar
was observed, it occupied a substantial proportion of his time and energy and
encouraged him to conform to a view of his role which was sanctioned by them.
At the beginning of the dynasty, and at many points during its course, powerful
emperors were often able to drive the ritual agenda. By the end of the dynasty, the balance had shifted to favor the officials.

For the thousands of palace women whose status was low, the ritual calendar, with its repeated pattern of colorful events, provided distraction, diversion, and a sense of order, meaning, and purpose. For women in the imperial family, life was a constant struggle to secure ever higher ritual honors. The sons of imperial women often continued the battle to honor their mothers long after the women had died. Ritual provided a positive channel for the energies of imperial women. While their conflicts with one another were often intense, the violence and bloodshed that had often characterized the relations among imperial women in earlier dynasties were sometimes mitigated or avoided.

Conclusion

The Ming imperial household presented women with formidable challenges and limited opportunities. Their roles were rigidly prescribed, and yet flexibility could often be found. Their participation in the politics of the court was forbidden, and yet the most successful women negotiated their way to positions of influence over emperors, civil officials, and eunuchs as well as dominance over the other women of the household. Subordinate roles as wives and consorts could be transformed into powerful roles, sanctioned by the Confucian elite, as mothers, teachers, and advisers. For women who were not mothers, literacy and religion, especially Buddhism, opened up fresh pathways for activity, agency, and advancement.

The layered structure of the Ming court surrounded and protected the members of the imperial household at the same time that it constrained the scope of their activities. In the mid- and late-Ming imperial household, weak versions of monogamy and primogeniture governed the lives of senior imperial women and determined the succession. Thousands of women staffed the palace. Apart from those who had served his father, the emperor could select any of them as a sexual partner. If a young woman were very clever and very lucky, and especially if she had the protection of a more senior woman, she might become the mother of the heir. The resulting social mobility for the women and their families was consistently more dramatic than in earlier eras. The system gave a reproductive advantage to the emperors, to the mothers of the imperial princes and princesses and to the heads of elite households that imitated the imperial system of serial monogamy with concubinage.

The roles of hundreds of the women who worked in the palace required them to be literate. The education they received set them on the pathway to elite literacy and qualified them to participate in daily financial transactions within the household and in the literary, ritual, and historical writing that were fundamental to claims of legitimacy and the exercise of power. The rituals that pervaded all aspects of life in the imperial household sometimes provided a measure of safety and protection for imperial women and highlighted for all the advantages of conforming to the vision of order that they embodied. The Ming court and the imperial household within it constituted a delicately calibrated social mechanism for balancing the interests of the emperor and members of the
imperial family and their relatives with those of the eunuchs, palace women, and civil officials who served them. The civil officials dominated the discourse on the politics of the imperial household and they shared with the emperors and the imperial family a large measure of responsibility both for the robustness and longevity of the system and for many of the faults that led to its demise. It is noteworthy that the first Qing emperors moved immediately to exclude the civil officials from decisions about the succession, abandoned primogeniture as the principle for selecting the heir apparent and ensured that the imperial princes received an education outside the palace. All these changes impacted significantly the roles and opportunities of imperial women.

Some of the words and acts of the most prominent Ming imperial women are accessible through the filtering lens of the biographies written by the official historians. A greatly enriched view of their trajectories emerges when we consider the material objects they lived with, the unofficial histories including the writings of the eunuch, Liu Ruoyu, and the dated records on stone stele outside the walls of the imperial palace. Despite formidable structural constraints on their activities and the constant threat of inner court rivalry, persecution, and untimely death, women of the late-Ming imperial household contributed to the success of the imperial family in a rapidly changing world and shaped both the family and the system to their own ends. Women such as Empress Dowager Li, who were both very fortunate and very able, left a lasting imprint on the politics and the culture of the capital and the court.
## Glossary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Auspicious rites</td>
<td>jili</td>
<td>吉禮</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bat</td>
<td>fu</td>
<td>蝠</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bearers of the Seals</td>
<td>zhangyin</td>
<td>掌印</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book of Ceremonial</td>
<td>Yili</td>
<td>儀禮</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book of Rites</td>
<td>Liji</td>
<td>禮記</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cloud</td>
<td>yun</td>
<td>雲</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directorate of Seals and Tallies</td>
<td>Shangbaojian</td>
<td>尚寶監</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empress</td>
<td>huanghou</td>
<td>皇后</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empress dowager</td>
<td>huangtaibou</td>
<td>皇太后</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empress Dowager Li, the Compassionate and Sage Empress Dowager</td>
<td>Cisheng Huangtaihou</td>
<td>慈聖皇太后</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Festive rites</td>
<td>jiali</td>
<td>嘉裡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Palace Service</td>
<td>Shanggong Si</td>
<td>尚宮司</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good families</td>
<td>liangjia</td>
<td>良家</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good fortune</td>
<td>fu</td>
<td>福</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good fortune</td>
<td>yun</td>
<td>運</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand empress dowager</td>
<td>Taihuangtaihou</td>
<td>太皇太后</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hall for Ancestral Worship</td>
<td>Fengxian Dian</td>
<td>奉先殿</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hall for Ancestral Compassionate Mothers</td>
<td>Fengci Dian</td>
<td>奉慈殿</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hall of Expansive Filial Piety</td>
<td>Hongxiao Dian</td>
<td>弘孝殿</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hall of Literary Brilliance</td>
<td>Wenhua Dian</td>
<td>文華殿</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hall of the Spiritual Empyrean</td>
<td>Shenxiao Dian</td>
<td>神霄殿</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hall for the Veneration of the Ancestors</td>
<td>Chongxian Dian</td>
<td>崇先殿</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honored because of his daughter</td>
<td>yinigui</td>
<td>以女貴</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honored consort</td>
<td>guifei</td>
<td>貴妃</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hundred surnames</td>
<td>baijiaxing</td>
<td>百家姓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huo County</td>
<td>Huo Xian</td>
<td>濬縣</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imperial Ancestral Temple</td>
<td>Tai Miao</td>
<td>太廟</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inauspicious rites</td>
<td>xiongli</td>
<td>凶禮</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner Office of Seals</td>
<td>Neishangbao</td>
<td>內尚寶</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigating the name and the reality</td>
<td>zonghemeningshi</td>
<td>綜核名實</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laundry Service</td>
<td>Huanyijiu</td>
<td>浣衣局</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lingzhi fungus</td>
<td>lingzhi</td>
<td>靈芝</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long-life flowers</td>
<td>shouhua</td>
<td>壽花</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowly palace woman</td>
<td>duren</td>
<td>都人</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madame Ke</td>
<td>Keshi</td>
<td>客氏</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office of Palace Staff Surveillance</td>
<td>Gongzheng Si</td>
<td>宮正司</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office of Rites and Propriety</td>
<td>Liyifang</td>
<td>禮儀房</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Women in the Imperial Household / Soulliere* 53
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Office of Seals and Tallies</strong></th>
<th><strong>Shangbao Si</strong></th>
<th><strong>尚寶司</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Official Ming History</strong></td>
<td><strong>Mingshi</strong></td>
<td><strong>明史</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Palace of Earthly Tranquility</strong></td>
<td><strong>Kunning Gong</strong></td>
<td><strong>坤寧宮</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rites of Zhou</strong></td>
<td><strong>Zhouli</strong></td>
<td><strong>周禮</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ten thousand times long life</strong></td>
<td><strong>wan shou</strong></td>
<td><strong>萬壽</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Thousand Character Classic</strong></td>
<td><strong>Qianziwen</strong></td>
<td><strong>千字文</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Titled ladies of the outer court</strong></td>
<td><strong>waimingfu</strong></td>
<td><strong>外命婦</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Women graduates</strong></td>
<td><strong>nü xiucai</strong></td>
<td><strong>女秀才</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Notes

19. Ming Taizu 1381.
21. Yu Rui et al. 1620, ch. 61, p. 15.
25. Lee, p. 82 and elsewhere.
28. Liu Ruoyu ca. 1641, ch. 16, p. 56.
32. Liu ca. 1641, ch. 16, p. 38.
33. Ibid., ch. 16, p. 8B; Shen Shixing, p. 74; and Zha Jizuo 1670, ch. 27, p. 55a.
34. Shen Shixing, pp. 74–76.
35. Ibid., p. 75; Soulliere 1987; 2005; and Hsieh.
38. Ibid., p. 46.
42. Mote 1977, p. 214, citing Zhang, ch. 52.
44. Ibid., vol. 12, ch. 114, p. 3539.
46 Ibid., vol. 5, ch. 53, p. 1362.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid., vol. 12, ch. 114, p. 3536.
51 Ibid., vol. 12, ch. 114, p. 3535.
52 Chu Hung-lam 2008, p. 188.
54 Michael Knight and Li He 2008, fig. 33, p. 73.
55 Craig Clunas 1991, p. 56.
56 Knight and Li 2008, p. 73.
57 Ibid.
58 Susan Naquin 2000, p. 156.
60 Huang 1988.
62 See Huang 1981, p. 94 for another account of the funeral rites.
63 Semedo, p. 78.
64 Ibid., p. 83.
65 Zhang, vol. 12, ch. 114, p. 3535.
References


Yu Ruji 俞汝楫 et al. (eds.). 1620. *Libu zhigao 礼部志稿*. Photographic reprint of palace-library manuscript in *Siku quanshu zhenben chuji 四库全書珍本初集*. Taibei.

Zhao Jizuo 查继佐. ca. 1670. *Zuiweilu 罪惟錄*. Photolithographic reprint of manuscript with author’s corrections; Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1936.


Acknowledgements

Grateful thanks are here expressed to the curators of the Chinese collection at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco for permission to reproduce the two images of the sleeveless embroidered robe made for the birthday of the Wanli Emperor’s mother, Empress Dowager Li, the Compassionate and Sage Empress Dowager (Asian Art Museum 1990.214), to the anonymous reviewers of this article for their helpful comments, and to my students for their insightful reading of Ming history.

Ellen Souliere has a Ph.D. in East Asian Studies from Princeton University, where she studied Chinese History with Professor F. W. Mote and Art History with Professor Wen Fong. Her Ph.D. thesis, Palace Women in the Ming Dynasty, was completed in 1987. Dr. Souliere has taught at the Chinese University of Hong Kong; Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand; and Massey University, New Zealand, where she was Head of the School of Language Studies. She has recently retired from her position as Wellington Regional Director of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Massey University.
Plurality in Qing Imperial Medicine: Examining Institutional Formations Beyond the Imperial Medical Bureau

Sare Aricanli, Princeton University

Abstract

This article illustrates the value of using the lens of institutional history to study imperial medicine. Identifying and incorporating a range of organizations and posts into the narrative of imperial medicine in eighteenth-century China shows the breadth of medical activity during this time. The most familiar institution of imperial medicine is the Imperial Medical Bureau, and this study argues that we can greatly benefit from including the history of other formations such as the Imperial Pharmacy and the Ministry of Imperial Stables, Herds, and Carriages. Such an outlook reveals the overlapping spheres of institutions, practitioners, and medicinals between human and equine medicine, implies that ethnicity may have been a factor in the organization of medicine, and points to a wider range of medical practitioners and patients within the imperial realm. Furthermore, multiplicity did not only exist among institutions and practitioners, but also on the linguistic level, as evidenced by the divergence in the meaning of some Manchu and Chinese terminology. Finally, these pluralities suggest that an understanding of imperial medicine as being limited to the Imperial Medical Bureau greatly underestimates the diversity of institutions, posts, ethnicities, and languages within the eighteenth-century Chinese imperial medical world.

Keywords: imperial medicine, Imperial Medical Bureau, Imperial Pharmacy, equine care

Introduction

The history of Chinese medicine has benefited greatly from narratives that rest on the textual tradition. Chinese medicine is, however, reflected quite differently through the lenses of textual and institutional history. While medicine was a category for organizing information in textual collections and compendia in eighteenth-century China, such a form of classification was absent in institutional treatises. For example, there is no section for imperial medicine, or any medicine for that matter, in the Qing Collected Statutes (Qing huidian) which delineates institutional structures within the imperial realm. Information on medical organizations can be found in different sections of the text. One obvious consequence of this situation has been the lack of emphasis on the boundaries and contents of imperial medical institutions and posts, which has resulted in underestimating the extent of plurality within the imperial medical world.

This article shows that imperial medicine in China embodied a range of pluralities. The lens of institutional history reveals multiplicities in organizational structure, posts, ethnicities, and languages. Such an outlook also reflects the breadth of medical activity, and points to the intersecting realms of human-equine medicine, and the role of the Imperial Household Department in the history of Qing imperial medicine.

This study briefly introduces the more familiar imperial medical institution, the Imperial Medical Bureau (Taiyiyuan), before focusing on the pluralistic structure reflected by the Imperial Pharmacy (Yuyaofang), and the Ministry of
Imperial Stables, Herds, and Carriages (Shangsiyuan). The evidence reveals broadening responsibilities of the Imperial Pharmacy from early to high Qing (1644–1800), with people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds in its service, as well as an increasing breadth of medical activity overseen by its officers. The following section on equine care discusses the overlapping realms between the human and equine imperial medical worlds with respect to pharmaceuticals, medical posts, and institutions. The organization of animal medicine at the Ministry of Imperial Stables, Herds, and Carriages was restructured in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and one of the posts, named coban (pronounced choh-bahn), played an important role in both human and equine medicine. Furthermore, examining the meanings of the Chinese and Manchu terms for these institutions brings to light another dimension of multiplicity in the linguistic and cultural spheres.

Qing Dynasty records include a wealth of material in Manchu, in addition to sources in Chinese. The importance of studying Manchu documents for Qing history is generally acknowledged, and has been emphasized by Beatrice S. Bartlett, Nicola Di Cosmo, Pamela K. Crossley, Evelyn S. Rawski, and Mark C. Elliott. Moreover, various studies support the understanding that there is much we can learn from Manchu scientific and medical texts. For example, Nicola Di Cosmo (1989) has shown the value of reading Manchu medical sources of the Jesuits. Marta Hanson (2006) and Catherine Jami (2010) have discussed the significance of Manchu materials for science and medicine. Beatriz Puente-Ballesteros (2011) has differentiated between printed Chinese memorials and the Chinese translations of memorials that were originally in Manchu, and shown that documents that were originally in Manchu contained significantly more information related to medicine, including Jesuit drugs.

The fact that a particular medical term can have varying linguistic and cultural contexts in two languages is a point that has been raised within the history of Chinese medicine in the twentieth century. In his study of contemporary Chinese medicine, Volker Scheid has drawn attention to how a single concept can have very different representations in Chinese and English. For example, the English term “Traditional Chinese Medicine,” which was coined for foreign-language publications in the 1950s, suggested an unchanging order. However, within China, “Chinese medicine” (Zhongyi) was projected as a more scientific field. The tension between the divergent ways in which Chinese medicine was portrayed in Chinese and English raises the question of whether Manchu and Chinese medical terminology may have had differing linguistic contexts. This article examines pluralities within the medical realm, and emphasizes the value of using Manchu to study Qing medicine by including discussions of Chinese and Manchu terms that exhibit divergence.

**Imperial Medical Bureau**

In the early Qing, the Imperial Medical Bureau was defined as an organization of doctors that had the official duty of examining diseases and compounding drugs for the emperor. However, its functions reflect a much wider range of responsibilities, including treating officials from afar, sending doctors to the military front and examination compounds, officiating at rituals, providing
medical treatment to military and civilians in Beijing, and engaging in matters of medical education and examination. The history of the Imperial Medical Bureau can be found in Chang Che-chia’s dissertation on the medical care of the late-Qing Empress Dowager Cixi and the physician-patient relationship, and in Marta Hanson’s article on the compilation of the imperially commissioned *Golden Mirror from the Orthodox Lineage of Medicine* (*Yizong jinjian*).  

This familiar institution, the Imperial Medical Bureau, constitutes a section of its own in the *Collected Statutes*. One could, therefore, easily assume that all other organizations and posts of medicine in the imperial world would be described, or at least mentioned, within this part of the text. In fact, the information on medical formations is found in many different sections of the *Collected Statutes*.

Through the early to high Qing, the functions of the Imperial Medical Bureau were reconfigured with respect to the Pharmacy and the Ministry of Imperial Stables, Herds, and Carriages. While the normative organization of the Imperial Medical Bureau during this time was not defined along ethnic lines, various posts with banner designations in the Imperial Pharmacy and the Ministry of Imperial Stables, Herds, and Carriages indicate that there was social, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity within imperial medicine.

Multiplicity in medicine was also found on the linguistic level. While the multilingual nature of Qing Dynasty administration has been clearly accepted, the English translations of terminology related to bureaucratic organization often incorporate neither the meanings of the Chinese or Manchu terms, nor the functions of the institution. This particular state of affairs is further complicated by the fact that some terms have divergent meanings in the two languages. For example, the Imperial Medical Bureau is called *Taiyiyuan* in Chinese, meaning an office staffed by imperial doctors. The Manchu title *Oktosi be kadalara yamun* (fig. 1), however, is an office in charge of doctors. While the name of the institution has traditionally been translated into English as the Imperial Academy of Medicine, the term “academy” suggests a place of learning or scholarship, and does not reflect the wide variety of medical activities carried out by the institution. Therefore, here, the term Imperial Medical Bureau will be used. The Imperial Pharmacy, on the other hand, provides an example where the Chinese *Yuyaofang* and the Manchu *Dergi oktoi boo* (fig. 2) are in resonance, both meaning Imperial Pharmacy.

**Imperial Pharmacy: Coexistence and Cooperation with the Medical Bureau**

In a simplified story of the imperial medical world, the doctors of the Imperial Medical Bureau would take care of the emperor, while the Pharmacy produced the medicine. Asaf Goldschmidt’s study of the changing role of the Song Imperial Pharmacy from an economic institution to one with a focus on public health has brought attention to changes in the dynamics between doctors and
pharmacists. While the Qing Imperial Pharmacy was defined as an institution that produced drugs in the early to high Qing, its functions greatly expanded as its responsibilities vis-à-vis the Medical Bureau were also reconfigured.

The following story illustrating the dynamics between the Imperial Medical Bureau and the Imperial Pharmacy in the early Qing sets the scene for shifts in the roles of these institutions during the eighteenth century. In 1653 (Shunzhi 10), it was proclaimed that the Imperial Pharmacy was administratively to be under the Imperial Medical Bureau. However, this very act resulted in some tension. In the 9th month of the 10th year, a member of the Ministry of Rites (Libu), Guo Yikun, wrote a memorial expressing his concern that the emperor would focus undue attention on medicine. He stated that medicine was limited in its scope, and therefore should not be an area to which the emperor devotes his energy when he had so many important matters to attend to. Understandably, the emperor, who was rather displeased with Guo's remarks, stated that Guo had submitted a memorial with a false pretense, and ordered that he be punished. After this shaky start to the Qing Pharmacy, it closed, opened again, and gradually moved from being an institution largely managed by the Medical Bureau to one that was part of the Imperial Household Department.

The Imperial Pharmacy and Medical Bureau had a number of overlapping areas of operation. These included Pharmacy officers accompanying Bureau doctors who were going into the palace to provide medical treatment. Moreover, all pharmaceuticals were to be first inspected by Medical Bureau officials before the ones of good quality were sent to the Pharmacy. In 1739, it was memorialized that when drugs such as pills (wan), powdered medicine (san), ointments (gao), and mineral drugs (dan) were being prepared, a Medical Bureau doctor must meet together with a Pharmacy official and inspect the making of the medicine. Therefore, the drug-compounding doctors and the folk doctors recruited for producing drugs at the Pharmacy had to work together with Medical Bureau officials.

Decothing the medicine for the emperor and empress was also an area where the Medical Bureau and Pharmacy had to cooperate. In this case, a Medical Bureau official and a eunuch (taijian) from the Pharmacy oversaw the process. Two doses of each prescription were prepared, put on the stove, and later poured into two different containers. The medicine in one was first tasted by the Medical Bureau official and then by the member of the Pharmacy staff, and the second vessel was taken to the emperor.

New parameters for the operation of the Pharmacy were outlined in a memorial submitted on July 6, 1740 (Qianlong 5), by the Qianlong Emperor’s brother Hongzhou (1712–70), titled Prince He of the First Degree (He Qinwang). Financial accounts of medicinals had been settled annually, from the 21st day of the 7th month of one year, to the 20th day of the 7th month of the following year. On November of 1739 (Qianlong 4, 10th month), it had already been proposed that they should be examined every three months. The prince’s memorial also had such a recommendation and put forth other suggestions such as making an inventory of the silver and gold utensils, organizing the drugs stored at the storehouse, and selecting the medicinals. It also stated that the Pharmacy officials should work with those members of the Medical Bureau holding the rank of...
medical secretary (limu) while producing compound medicines, decocting, calculating the amount that would be lost by the preparation of each medicine, and selecting quality pharmaceuticals. These memorials reflect the kinds of reorganization that was taking place in the Imperial Pharmacy toward the mid-eighteenth century.

**Pharmacy: A Wider Representation of People and Broadening Responsibilities**

The Imperial Pharmacy, managed by the Imperial Household Department, was part of an institution made of banner bondservants with eunuchs under their command. In 1653 (Shunzhi 10), a senior chief eunuch (zongguan shouling taijian) headed the Pharmacy, which included a clerical sub-official (shubian) from the Imperial Household Department who wrote in Chinese, four corporals (lingcui), thirty medicine-grinding sula (tingshi nianyao sula), and twenty drug-compounding doctors from the Imperial Medical Bureau (Taiyiyuan heyao yisheng). The Imperial Pharmacy also employed many bitieshi (scribes), baitangga (servant/errand boys), and sula (idlers). Other posts at the Qing Pharmacy included banner doctors of the Imperial Pharmacy (Yuyaofang qiyisheng), and those coming from outside of the bureaucratic structure such as the enlisted drug-compounding doctors (zhao mu heyao yisheng). This list of posts is not to suggest that the institution had a static structure. In addition to changes in the number of people occupying various positions, in the early Qing there was also a larger shift taking place with respect to the high-level eunuchs and chancery overseers (neiguanling). The Imperial Pharmacy was clearly staffed by people whose backgrounds were very different from the doctors of the Imperial Medical Bureau. While this resulted in the representation of a more diverse set of people within imperial medicine, however, it also implied that as the Imperial Pharmacy cooperated in many respects with the Bureau, it also contended with it for power within the imperial medical realm.

During the early to high Qing, the Imperial Pharmacy’s responsibilities greatly expanded. In addition to providing material for religious activities, Pharmacy officials also distributed medicines for combating the heat, studied the Western technique of distillation, and established commercial ties with outside pharmacies (such as Tongren Tang). Financial control over the Pharmacy was tightened, and part of the fiscal bureaucracy related to pharmaceuticals shifted from the Ministry of Finance (Hubu) to the Storage Office (Guangchusi). Another medical activity that Pharmacy officials participated in was the production of medicines at the Palace Workshop (Zaobanchu). This Workshop crafted a wide variety of items such as jade objects, statues for shrines, etc. As it did not employ doctors or those knowledgeable in making medicines, officials from the Imperial Pharmacy were sent to the Workshop to oversee the production of highly ornate medicinals by the name of dingziyao (ingot medicines). Manufacturing dingziyao was an important undertaking, as reflected in the human and spatial resources allocated for its production. In addition to people from the Pharmacy, craftsmen with various specializations participated in making them. Moreover, in the early nineteenth century, there were two rooms at the Palace Workshop that were used for preparing these specialty medicines.
as preventative medicine, be used as lucky charms to ward off pernicious influences, or be taken to relieve particular medical symptoms. These medicinals were used by those at court, in gift-giving, and as part of bureaucratic and military affairs. By broadening the range of medical activities that it coordinated, the Imperial Pharmacy increased its sphere of influence within imperial medicine.

**Overlapping Realms of Human and Equine Medical Care**

Equine medicine constituted a very important aspect of imperial medicine. Paul D. Buell has done pioneering work in the history of Chinese equine medicine, especially with respect to the textual tradition. This study shows what can be seen (such as institutional restructuring, and the rise of the coban) by examining the history of equine medicine through the lens of institutions and posts in the Qing. In a world where horses were of great significance to the imperial order, equine medicine treated not only animals, but also people. In fact, human and equine medical worlds overlapped in many ways at this time with respect to medicines, practitioners, as well as institutions. The shared medicinals between human and equine realms were not limited to individual drugs, but also included compound forms. The human-equine pacifying powder (renma ping’an san) treated all kinds of heat-related disorders in humans and horses. In the *Complete Collection of Secret Formulas from the Qing Palace* (*Qinggong mifang daquan*) the human-equine pacifying powder is described as a drug used to treat symptoms such as losing consciousness, cold hands and feet, headache and stomachache, sore throat, vomiting, and toothache. Its ingredients, according to this text, were 0.1 liang cattle bezoar (niuhuang), 0.1 liang musk (shexiang), 1.2 liang realgar (xionghuang), 1.2 liang nitratine (luoxiao), 1.2 liang borax (pengsha), 4 liang cinnabar (zhusha), and 3 liang borneol (bingpian) ground up into a fine powder. These are all ingredients that are also found in medical formulas for humans. Individual pharmaceuticals such as black pepper, sulphur, and alum were also used across the human and equine medicinal realms. For example, 160 jin 10 liang of each of these ingredients were included in the treatment of skin diseases (lai) in horses. In 1767 (Qianlong 32), it was memorialized that perilla oil (suyou) should be used to treat this kind of equine skin ailment. Using the same medicines across human and equine medical realms suggests an understanding that the bodies of people and horses functioned in similar ways. The name of the compound medicine, human-equine pacifying powder, also reflects such an outlook by placing the human and equine patients on equal ground.

**Institutional Context of Equine Care**

The institutional context for the medical care of the emperor’s horses was the Ministry of Imperial Stables, Herds, and Carriages, a non-medical organization that included posts for equine care. Horses certainly occupied a very special space here, and institutionally within the Qing state. Moreover, Qing emperors also had a great interest in managing animals, especially horses, because of their semi-nomadic background. This institution oversaw a range of matters related to the pastures and stables for the emperor’s horses (and other animals), such as supervising herds and inspecting stables. The animal and livestock organization
of the Qing palace was very broad in scope, and included the care of horses at stables inside and outside the palace grounds, as well as those at distant pastures.³⁰

Both the Chinese and Manchu names for this institution that managed imperial horses changed over time. In the early Qing it continued under its Ming name, Directorate of Imperial Horses (Yumajian).³¹ In 1661 (Shunzhi 18), the name was changed to Adun yamen. Adun means herd in Manchu and can be used to refer to herds of horses as well as other animals. In October of 1677 (Kangxi 16, 10th month), the name was changed to Shangsiyuan, referring to an office for a team of four horses that are tied to the front of an imperial carriage. In very broad terms, Shangsiyuan may reflect a Chinese notion of horses as animals that were part of the ceremonial sphere. This term focuses on one particular aspect of the organization of imperial horses, and underestimates the wide range of equine (and non-equine) related matters that the Qing institution attended to such as choosing and raising horses, managing herds, treating animals medically, and allocating feed for horses and camels, etc.³²

In Manchu, the name of the institution was Dergi adun i jurgan (fig. 3) meaning ‘Ministry of Imperial Herds.’ However, this term simply focuses on herds without mentioning the organization’s responsibilities with respect to stables and carriages. Moreover, the English term, Palace Stud, reflects neither the significant place that the institution occupied within the administrative hierarchy, nor its divergent meanings in Chinese and Manchu.³³ Therefore, as all these terms fall short of expressing the breadth of its activities, here, the name of the institution is translated as the Ministry of Imperial Stables, Herds, and Carriages.

One of the new actors in equine care in the seventeenth century was a post in the Ministry of Imperial Stables, Herds, and Carriages called Menggu yisheng (Mongolian doctor) in Chinese. The Manchu term for this position, coban (fig. 4),³⁴ is defined as a stick or rod that can be used to pry things open, and is a term that has resonances to herding across a larger Asian context.³⁵ The word coban embodies a range of meanings, including the act of lifting and prying something open, a long stick, a shepherd, horse keeper, and a Mongolian doctor. More specifically, the treatment methods of the coban involved lifting and moving bones that were stuck and getting them back in the right position. A stick or staff, a tool carried by shepherds and horse keepers could be used for such a purpose. Manchu terms for herder such as aduci, kuteci, and kutule also suggest connections between herding, caring for horses in stables, and bannermen.³⁶ The Chinese term, literally translated as ‘Mongolian doctor,’ is unreflective of their wide range of practices. The Manchu word coban is looser and more flexible than the Chinese term, and is therefore more reflective of a position that crossed many boundaries between the military, bureaucratic, equine, and human worlds.
Looking at the Chinese term for *coban*, one could ask what being Mongolian had to do with this medical post. The Mongols were discriminating in their care for horses, and the Qing did, at some points, turn to the Mongols with respect to matters related to equine care. For example, the Yongzheng Emperor’s decree and instructions in 1727 stated that because soldiers as a class no longer knew how to put their horses and camels into proper condition [...] it was the Mongol way, not Manchu methods, that were presented along with the decree, instructing officers to teach the soldiers how to care for their animals in the various seasons of the year.37

Some present-day secondary sources on the history of Qing medicine regard the Chinese term “Mongolian doctor” to be an adjective-noun pair, however it was a title of a position in the Ministry of Imperial Stables, Herds, and Carriages.38 While “Mongolian doctor” may have had some bureaucratic and ethnic designations, it most likely referred to a person who was skilled in medically caring for people and horses using Mongolian methods of treatment. The *cobans*’ techniques were reputed to be different from those of Qibo and Huangdi, referring to the medicine of the Yellow Emperor and one of his most famous interlocutors outlined in the famous canonical classic of Chinese medicine, *The Yellow Emperor’s Classic of Internal Medicine* (*Huangdi neijing*).39 Sources often attest to the *cobans*’ skills in bonesetting, such as the case of the famous *coban* Jueluo Yisang’a, mentioned in the *Draft of the Official Qing History* (*Qing shigao*). In addition to bonesetting, there are also examples of *cobans*’ use of animal parts in medical care. A famous account concerns the treatment of a serious head injury by using the bladder of a cow to cover the wounded part of the head.40 The *coban*, therefore, used materials such as animal parts that would be easily available within a nomadic herding environment. Horses are easily prone to sprains, and humans could also get injured by falling off a horse, getting kicked, or trampled by one. The skills of the *coban* would be highly valued, and practically useful, within a context where horses played a significant role as part of the imperial and military apparatus.

**Changing Structure of Medical Care at the Ministry of Imperial Stables, Herds, and Carriages**

Animal doctors (*shouyi*) who had represented the status quo in the early Qing, later became a minority within the organization of equine medical care.41 Not only did their numbers decrease, but they were also at the lower end of a hierarchy that was led by *coban*. While animal doctors were earlier just referred to as *shouyi*, increased representation by *coban* and other non-Han practitioners may have led to their being labeled as “animal doctors who were Han” by the middle of the eighteenth century.

The reorganization of equine medical care can be clearly seen in the Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong Emperors’ editions of the *Collected Statutes*. Changes in the normative structure can be observed by considering the time frames in which the materials for each of the editions were collected. In the early Qing (1636–86), there were twenty-five animal doctors.42 Between 1687 and 1727, *coban* entered the picture, with twenty-two animal doctors and twenty *coban*.43 By the middle
of the eighteenth century (1728–58), coban were at the top of the hierarchy. The highest positions were two chief coban (yizhang Menggu), followed by eighteen coban (yishi Menggu), six doctors of skin diseases (laiyi), and sixteen Han-Chinese animal doctors (shouyi Han shiyouturen).44

The changes in the organization of equine medicine suggest that the normative framework of horse medicine in the imperial realm was greatly restructured during this time, with a broadening of categories and an increasing representation of doctors who came from various places within the bureaucratic and military structure. The coban were from the banners, the doctors of skin disorders (lai) from the stables and pastures, and animal doctors were those who had passed through posts at the Ministry of Rites and Five Boroughs.45

In 1801 (Jiaqing 6), an institutional connection was forged between the Medical Bureau and Ministry of Imperial Stables, Herds, and Carriages. The bonesetting department (zhengguke) at the Imperial Medical Bureau was put under the management of the chief coban at the Ministry of Imperial Stables, Herds, and Carriages so that he concurrently held both positions.46 Therefore, by the nineteenth century, while the structure of equine care within the Ministry of Imperial Stables, Herds, and Carriages had been greatly reorganized, the Imperial Medical Bureau had also lost some of its functions to the Ministry.

**Practice of the Coban**

Coban were employed at the Ministry of Imperial Stables, Herds, and Carriages for the medical treatment of horses as well as other animals. As examples of equine care are rare, below are descriptions of treatments that coban gave people, illustrating some of their techniques. In his memoirs, the Italian missionary Matteo Ripa (1682–1746) wrote of his thirteen years at the Chinese court (1711–23) and described his encounter with a coban. He explained that in order to escape the heat, the Kangxi Emperor went to Rehe from the beginning of the fifth month to the end of the ninth month, and that there were more than 30,000 people who accompanied him. On the way there, and before they had left the city, Ripa’s horse slipped and the missionary severely hurt his head as well as many parts of his body. Those accompanying him did not dare to stop and left him in a semi-conscious state, with two others to look after him. When he woke up, he found himself in a room, and everything was blurry. He said that it felt as if he had fallen off the horse two months ago. Ripa continued that the Kangxi Emperor deputed a Manchu bonesetting doctor (Manzu guke daifu) who was better than those in Europe to treat him. He said that although some of this doctor’s treatment methods seemed rough, and others useless, he recovered in a very short time from his serious injuries.

According to the account, first the coban stripped the top half of Ripa’s body, and then poured ice-cold water onto his neck. The doctor explained that this would stop the bleeding and help him recover full consciousness. Ripa also noted that his sense of sight became clearer, and that he regained his memory. Then, two people wrapped a bandage tightly around his head and pulled at both ends. The doctor took a piece of wood and beat the middle portion
of the bandage furiously, giving Ripa unbearable pain. Ripa stated that if he remembered correctly, the doctor said that this helped one’s brain, or marrow of the cranial cavity, return to the correct position (zhengnao). (While the word nao technically means brain, it also refers to marrow in the cranial cavity.) After two such treatments, Ripa could move his head more freely. Two people supported him and helped him walk outdoors. While he was taking a stroll with the aid of others, all of a sudden, the doctor threw ice water at his bare chest, making Ripa take a sudden breath. The doctor said that if the ribs have moved out of position or became dislocated (tuowei), this sudden strong breath would make them return to their natural position.

Ripa explained that the painful and violent nature of the therapy did not decrease with the next treatment. The doctor made Ripa sit down and, with the help of two others, used a piece of cloth to cover Ripa’s nose and mouth so that he couldn’t breathe and almost suffocated. According to Ripa, the Chinese Asclepius (God of medicine and healing as characterized in the Greek tradition) said that this treatment aimed to make the chest move in such a way that if any ribs had twisted in or out when he fell down, they would go back to their original position. Finally, the doctor put a piece of burned cotton on the sore on his head. The coban told Ripa that he had to keep on walking with the help of two others, and that he should not sit for long periods. Moreover, Ripa was instructed not to sleep before 10 p.m. and to just eat rice porridge until he was completely well. Ripa fainted a few times when he was taking a walk. The doctor had expected this and told him that he should not be afraid of such occurrences. The coban explained that it is important to walk outside with an empty stomach, as this would prevent blood from accumulating, settling, and festering in the chest. Ripa said that even though these treatment methods were very rough and caused a lot of pain, he must truthfully say that within seven days he was completely well and continued on his journey.

In addition to external and internal injuries, cobans also treated other kinds of medical problems, such as the Kangxi Emperor’s headaches. In this case, an official explained that he had diagnosed the condition as being due to the upward movement of blood and qi in the outer yang meridians, and had suggested the external application of fennel (xiaohuixiang) on the fengchi acupuncture points. The cobans responded that elderly people’s headaches are often related to the outer yang meridians contacting “wind-cold” (fenghan) and proceeded to suggest placing other medicinals, such as salt, on the fengchi points. The cobans concluded by stating that if they could check the pulse themselves, they would be able to ascertain whether the headache was due to the outer yang meridians. The cobans’ response utilized the language of classical textual medicine, thereby reflecting an example of how they framed their practices according to the familiar categories of Chinese medicine.

An excerpt from an oral history about a late-Qing coban suggests the continuation of their practices into later times. A disciple of one of the last coban at the Ministry of Imperial Stables, Herds, and Carriages, Wu Dinghuan, said that these medical figures worked in the Forbidden City, went to the princely palaces, and also treated commoners. Wu explained that his teacher, Xia Lao, had risen to the level of assistant chief coban (fu Menggu yishengzhang) at the Ministry of Imperial Stables, Herds, and Carriages, Plurality in Qing Imperial Medicine / Aricanli
Imperial Stables, Herds, and Carriages. After the Qing came to an end, he set up shop outside the palace and continued to see human patients. According to Wu, a summary of all manual techniques for bonesetting, medicines, and instruments could be found in the imperially commissioned "Golden Mirror from the Orthodox Lineage of Medicine (Yizong jinjian)." The art of bonesetting, he explained, was all about the hand techniques, which were passed down orally from master to disciple, and rarely documented with the exception of the Golden Mirror. Wu said, “the hand moves with the heart, and the method comes from the hand.”

Moreover, when treating patients in the palace, one has to have a very light touch and cannot let them feel pain. Manual techniques are divided into two kinds, those based on manipulating the bones, and another set which is similar to qigong (physical and mental exercise through controlled breathing techniques). Wu Dinghuan’s description of the medical activities at the Ministry of Imperial Stables, Herds, and Carriages suggests that cobans continued to treat humans into the late Qing, and that these medical practitioners and their institutional context constitute integral parts of imperial medical history.

**Conclusion**

Within today’s biomedical framework, medicine is organized in a largely unicentric structure with strict professional and disciplinary boundaries. Alternative medicines find their respective places at the periphery. Qing Dynasty administrators, however, do not seem to have found it necessary to define all medical knowledge as part of a single system. Practitioners were, in effect, individuals adept at solving particular medical problems. As long as the power to depute these medical figures rested with the emperor, he may not have seen a need to create a cohesive system in institutional terms.

Qing Dynasty rulers were also concerned with institutional and historiographic continuity. Conquest dynasties have had to proceed confidently and delicately in the process of legitimizing their rule. Therefore, maintaining the institutions of the inherited structure, while constructing a medical system with no apparent center save the emperor, may have been a strategy to strengthen their own position. Such an approach could serve the dual purposes of maintaining continuity with tradition, while also providing the emperor with a range of medical expertise that could be utilized at any time.

Recognizing the multiplicity of actors in the fluid field of imperial medicine calls attention to the different ethnicities and languages in the organization of medicine. Moreover, such a context also shows boundary crossings between cultural, linguistic, bureaucratic, and military realms, as well as the human and veterinary spheres. In the mid-eighteenth century, both the Imperial Pharmacy and the Ministry of Imperial Stables, Herds, and Carriages were organizations that played key roles in imperial medicine, and which were part of the Imperial Household Department. Therefore, this study also leads to questions regarding the dynamics between medical institutions and posts within a distinctively Qing institution such as the Imperial Household Department. Finally, these pluralities suggest that limiting our understanding of imperial medicine to the Imperial Medical Bureau greatly underestimates the diversity of institutions, positions,
ethnicities, and languages within the eighteenth-century Chinese imperial medical world.
### Glossary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Pinyin</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adun yamen</td>
<td>Adun yamen</td>
<td>阿敦衙門</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animal doctor</td>
<td>shouyi</td>
<td>獸醫</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant chief coban</td>
<td>fu Menggu yishengzhang</td>
<td>副蒙古醫生長</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banner doctors of the Imperial Pharmacy</td>
<td>Yuyaofang qiyisheng</td>
<td>御藥房旗醫生</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonesetting department</td>
<td>zhengguke</td>
<td>正骨科</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borax</td>
<td>pengsha</td>
<td>鎖砂</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borneol</td>
<td>bingpian</td>
<td>冰片</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cattle bezooar</td>
<td>niuhuang</td>
<td>牛黃</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chancery overseers</td>
<td>neiguanling</td>
<td>內管領</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chief coban</td>
<td>yizhang Menggu</td>
<td>醫長蒙古</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese medicine</td>
<td>Zhongyi</td>
<td>中醫</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cinnabar</td>
<td>zhusha</td>
<td>硯砂</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical sub-official</td>
<td>shubian</td>
<td>書辨</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collected Statutes of the Qing</td>
<td>Qing huidian</td>
<td>清會典</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete Collection of Secret Formulas from the Qing Palace</td>
<td>Qinggong mifang daquan</td>
<td>清宮秘方大全</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporals</td>
<td>lingcui</td>
<td>領催</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directorate of Imperial Horses</td>
<td>Yumajian</td>
<td>御馬監</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(To become) dislocated</td>
<td>tuowei</td>
<td>脄位</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctor of skin diseases (in horses)</td>
<td>laiyi</td>
<td>瘡醫</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draft of the Official Qing History</td>
<td>Qing shigao</td>
<td>清史稿</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug-compounding doctors from the Imperial Medical Bureau</td>
<td>Taiyiyuan heyao yisheng</td>
<td>太醫院合藥醫生</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enlisted drug-compounding doctors</td>
<td>zhaomu heyao yisheng</td>
<td>招募合藥醫生</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eunuch</td>
<td>taijian</td>
<td>太監</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fengchi (name of acupuncture point)</td>
<td>fengchi</td>
<td>風池</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fennel</td>
<td>xiaohuixiang</td>
<td>小茴香</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foot lesser-yang gallbladder meridian</td>
<td>zushaoyang danjing</td>
<td>足少陽膽經</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Golden Mirror from the Orthodox Lineage of Medicine</td>
<td>Yizong jinjian</td>
<td>醫宗金鑒</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guo Yikun</td>
<td>Guo Yikun</td>
<td>郭一鵰</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human-equine pacifying powder</td>
<td>renma ping’an san</td>
<td>人馬平安散</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hongzhou</td>
<td>Hongzhou</td>
<td>定州</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imperial Medical Bureau</td>
<td>Taiyiyuan</td>
<td>太醫院</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imperial Pharmacy</td>
<td>Yuyaofang</td>
<td>御藥房</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ingot medicines</td>
<td>dingziyao</td>
<td>銅子藥</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jueluo Yisang’a</td>
<td>Jueluo Yisang’a</td>
<td>覺羅伊桑阿</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kangxi</td>
<td>Kangxi</td>
<td>康熙</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>Pinyin</td>
<td>English Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manchu bonesetting doctor</td>
<td>Manzu guke daifu</td>
<td>滿族骨科大夫</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matteo Ripa</td>
<td>Ma Guoxian</td>
<td>馬國賢</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical secretary</td>
<td>linu</td>
<td>吏目</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicine-grinding sula</td>
<td>tingoshi niyao sula</td>
<td>聽事碾藥蘇拉</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mineral drugs</td>
<td>dan</td>
<td>丹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Finance</td>
<td>Hubu</td>
<td>戶部</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Imperial Stables, Herds, and Carriages</td>
<td>Shangsiyuan</td>
<td>上駟院</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Rites</td>
<td>Libu</td>
<td>禮部</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mongolian doctor (coban in Manchu)</td>
<td>Menggu yisheng (also yishi</td>
<td>蒙古醫生 (also 醫師蒙古)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicine-grinding sula</td>
<td></td>
<td>聽事碾藥蘇拉</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mineral drugs</td>
<td>dan</td>
<td>丹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Finance</td>
<td>Hubu</td>
<td>戶部</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Imperial Stables, Herds, and Carriages</td>
<td>Shangsiyuan</td>
<td>上駟院</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Rites</td>
<td>Libu</td>
<td>禮部</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mongolian doctor (coban in Manchu)</td>
<td>Menggu yisheng (also yishi</td>
<td>蒙古醫生 (also 醫師蒙古)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muscle</td>
<td>shexiang</td>
<td>麝香</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nitratine</td>
<td>huoxiao</td>
<td>火硝</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ointments</td>
<td>gao</td>
<td>膏</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palace Workshop</td>
<td>Zaobanchu</td>
<td>造辦處</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perilla oil</td>
<td>suyou</td>
<td>蘇油</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pills</td>
<td>wan</td>
<td>丸</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Powdered medicine</td>
<td>san</td>
<td>散</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prince He of the first degree</td>
<td>He Qinwang</td>
<td>和親王</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qi</td>
<td>qi</td>
<td>氣</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qianlong</td>
<td>Qianlong</td>
<td>乾隆</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qigong</td>
<td>qigong</td>
<td>氣功</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realgar</td>
<td>xionghuang</td>
<td>雄黃</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rehe</td>
<td>Rehe</td>
<td>熱河</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Returning the brain (or marrow in cranial cavity)</td>
<td>zhenguo</td>
<td>正腦</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior chief eunuch</td>
<td>zongguan shouling taijian</td>
<td>總管首领太監</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shunzhi</td>
<td>Shunzhi</td>
<td>順治</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sixteen Han Chinese animal doctors</td>
<td>shouyi Han shiyouliuren</td>
<td>獸醫漢十有六人</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skin diseases (in this case horses)</td>
<td>lai</td>
<td>懷</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storage Office</td>
<td>Guangchusi</td>
<td>廣儲司</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tongren Tang</td>
<td>Tongren Tang</td>
<td>同仁堂</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wind-cold</td>
<td>fenghan</td>
<td>風寒</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wu Dinghuan</td>
<td>Wu Dinghuan</td>
<td>呂定寰</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xia Lao</td>
<td>Xia Lao</td>
<td>夏老</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yang</td>
<td>yang</td>
<td>陽</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow Emperor’s Classic of Internal Medicine</td>
<td>Huangdi neijing</td>
<td>黃帝內經</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Plurality in Qing Imperial Medicine / Aricanli 74
Notes

1 I would like to thank Melissa S. Dale, the two anonymous reviewers of this article, and participants in The Imperial Court in China, Japan, and Korea: Women, Servants, and the Emperor’s Household (1600 to early 1900s) symposium at the University of San Francisco Center for the Pacific Rim (April 18–19, 2013) for their comments and suggestions. I would also like to thank Ding Yizhuang, Dagmar Schaefer, and Paul Buell for sharing with me unpublished material on equine medicine. Finally, I would like to express sincere gratitude to my professors and colleagues for asking questions that helped me further develop these ideas. Any oversights are, of course, solely my responsibility. There is no term or category called “imperial medicine” in Chinese. Imperial medicine, here, broadly refers to medical institutions, posts, and practices within an imperial setting. Practitioners of medicine include people employed as medical figures within an imperial institution, as well as those who were deputed to offer medical assistance. Examples of the wide range of patients are the emperor, members of the imperial family, officials, dignitaries, and missionaries. The terms “imperial medical realm” and “imperial medical world” are interchangeably used to refer to the larger context within which the activities outlined above were taking place. (The word doctor in this study refers to a caregiver or medical practitioner, and patient to those who received medical treatment. These terms should be differentiated from the meanings of doctor and patient that are more strictly defined by the medical profession today.) Modern-day Chinese scholars have used the term gongting yixue 宮廷醫學, which can be translated into English as “court medicine,” to collectively refer to medicine in the imperial realm. Court medicine in English suggests a limited number of doctors medically caring for the emperor and his close family. The term imperial medicine, here, shows that medical organizations in the imperial realm primarily concerned with the care of the emperor and imperial family were also involved in a range of activities that moved far beyond the palace(s) and spaces where the emperor was present. Therefore, it is used as a term that is inclusive of a wide variety of institutions, posts, practitioners, and patients. While present-day terminology for medicinals carry various implications, here, the words drug, pharmaceutical, medicinal, and medicine are used interchangeably to refer to something which is ingested or applied to treat a particular external or internal condition. (The word “medicine” is also used within a different context to refer to the field of medicine.) For medicine as a category in collections of texts, see early-eighteenth century (1728) Gujin tushu jicheng [Synthesis of Books and Illustrations, Past and Present], and late-eighteenth century (1782) Siku quanshu [Complete Compilation of the Four Treasuries]. Gujin tushu jicheng, digital resource; Siku quanshu, digital resource. In this article, single quotes are used to signify translating the meaning of a term/title into English, and double quotes to refer to a particular term.

2 See Beatrice S. Bartlett 1979; 1985; and 1990; see also Nicola Di Cosmo 1989; 2006; and 2009; Pamela Kyle Crossley 1990; 1997; and 1999; Pamela Kyle Crossley and Evelyn S. Rawski 1993; Evelyn S. Rawski 1998; Mark C. Elliott 2000; 2001a; and 2001b. For discussions of this approach, see Rawski 1996. For Sinicization, see Ho Ping Ti 1998. Also see Joanna Waley-Cohen 2004 for a more general synopsis of this larger outlook.

3 Marta Hanson’s bibliography of Manchu medical manuscripts is a valuable source for scholars studying Qing medicine using Manchu sources; Hanson 2003b.


5 Kangxi huidian 1689, p. 2051.

6 Hanson 2003a; Chang Che-chia 1998. For Chinese studies on court medicine in the Qing, see Chen Keji and Li Chunsheng 2009; and Chen Keji 2006. For Chinese sources that enumerate some new posts, see Guan Xueling 2008. Also see Liao Yuqun 2012.

7 For a more detailed discussion of the social and cultural history of Qing imperial medicine, including imperial medical institutions, their structure, shared medicinals between human and equine medical worlds, cobans’ practices and patients, etc., see Sare Aricanli (forthcoming) Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton University.

8 For the most detailed and extensive historical study on the banner system, see Elliot 2001a.
9 Kangxi huidian, p. 1940.
10 Shizu shilu 1672, pp. 615–16.
11 Kangxi huidian, p. 1940.
12 Qianlong huidian 1763, p. 857.
13 Qianlong huidian zeli 1763.
14 Sometimes the Medical Bureau officials would not directly participate in the preparation of the medicine, but would memorialize the formula that was prepared by the Imperial Pharmacy. Kangxi huidian, p. 2051.
15 Yuyaofang late Qing, p. 1443.
16 Zhongguo di yi lishi dang’anguan 1740.
17 Yuyaofang, pp. 1442–44.
18 Da Qing huidian shili 1899.
19 Tongren Tang was a commercial pharmacy that was established in 1669. The Imperial Pharmacy started having commercial ties with Tongren Tang after 1723 (Yongzheng 1). For more on the history of this institution, see Sherman Cochran 2006, especially ch. 2. Also see Zhongguo Beijing Tongren Tang jituan gongsi 1993, pp. 1 and 12.
20 Qianlong huidian, p. 857; Qianlong huidian zeli; Yuyaofang, pp. 1444–46.
21 Ding is a term that can be used to refer to an ingot of gold or silver, or to a substance (such as ink or cosmetics) that has been molded into a small shape. See Zhongguo di yi lishi dang’anguan 2005, vol. 29, p. 230. Also see Guan, p. 182.
22 These craftsmen included people who painted the medicines, put strings through them, printed pamphlets, as well as those who made cases. Zhongguo di yi lishi dang’anguan 2005, vol. 29, p. 230. Also see Guan, p. 186.
23 Zhongguo di yi lishi dang’anguan September 22, 1819. The dimensions of one of the rooms was one zhang two chi, and the other was one zhang one chi. (One zhang is equal to ten Chinese feet, and one chi is one foot or 0.3581 m.)
24 As dingziyao could be worn on the body to ward off evil influences, it raises the question of whether they could be considered to be medicinal drugs. (I would like to thank Professor Mark C. Elliott for bringing this point to my attention.) Before the era of biomedicine, germ theory, and institutionalization of a more formal structure to the medical profession, medicine as a field had a wider range of practitioners, practices, and pathogenic factors. Some of these unfavorable influences were less tangible in nature, such as evil or pernicious effects. Others were more tangible, including climatic effects and poisonous substances. Even though the conception of medicine as a field included a range of practices and external factors during the premodern period, it is important to note that dingziyao were manufactured using pharmaceutical ingredients. For example, zijinjinsi 千金錠 were made with 2 jin (斤) clams (wenge 文蛤), 1 jin Peking spurge root or euphorbia (daji 大戟), 1 jin 6 liang (兩) bulbs of Chinese tulip (tulipa) or cremastra (shancigu 山茨菇), 10 liang seeds of capper euphorbia (qianjinzi 千金子) without oil, 7 liang cinnabar (zhusha 朱砂), 5 liang 5 qian (銖) realgar (xionghuang 雄黃), and 3 liang naval-gland secretions of the musk deer (shexiang 麝香). See Guan, pp. 181, 201. One jin is equal to sixteen Chinese ounces, one liang is a Chinese ounce, and a qian is one tenth of a Chinese ounce.
25 For more on horses, equestrianism, horsebackriding, etc., especially within the context of tours, see Michael Chang 2007. For animal medicine and more specifically equine medicine, see Dagmar Schaefer 2013; see also Paul D. Buell with Timothy May and Dave Ramey (forthcoming); Paul D. Buell, Timothy May, and David Ramey 2010; and Paul D. Buell with David Ramey 2001.
26 Individual drugs and their compound forms are referred to by Asaf Goldschmidt as “simples” and “readymade prescriptions/prepackaged prescriptions,” respectively. See Asaf Goldschmidt 2008.
Extant records including formulas of imperial prescriptions generally date from the late Qing. While there are references to the drug in the eighteenth century, this text compiled in 1900 (printed in the mid-twentieth century) using sources from the late-nineteenth to early-twentieth centuries, provides a list of its ingredients.

Qinggong mifang daquan 1900, pp. 130–31.


For more information on how animals (such as horses and camels) were organized, the number of animals in each herd, practices of rotating horses through stables and pastures, the organization of horses as well as other animals at stables and pastures in and near the palace, in local settings, and across the empire, etc. see Li Qun 1998.

Yumajian, earlier Yumasi, was a eunuch agency in charge of imperial horses in the Ming.

See H. S. Brunnert and V. V. Hagelstrom 1912, no. 88; see also Charles O. Hucker 1985, no. 5064.

Coban are also referred to as yishi Menggu. Moreover, there was also another term for this post, chuoban, which is a Chinese character transliteration of the Manchu term coban.

There is also a verb, cobalambi, meaning to pry open or lift. According to Gerhard Doerfer, the word coban comes from Persian, and originally meant herder. See Doerfer 1963–75, vol. 3, no. 1130. Francis Joseph Steingass provides an explanation of chub/chob (vowel could be o or u as it was written with the letter vaw) as a log, wood, tree, staff, rod, stick. Coban means shepherd or horsekeeper. See Steingass, p. 401.

The words for herder in Manchu also suggest the value of further exploring connections between bannermen and caring for horses in herds and at stables. The Manchu word for herder is aduci, coming from adun (herd). The word kuteci means both horse herder and stable boy/groom. Furthermore, the word kutule means both a banner slave and a horse herder/groom. These examples suggest that in Manchu there may have been a larger conceptual overlap between the positions of those who herded horses in the field and those who were responsible for their care in the stables.

Ruth Meserve 1987, p. 141. In addition to the word for herd (adun in Manchu and adughun in Mongolian), there are other similarities between Manchu and Mongol vocabulary related to horses in the eighteenth century. For example, according to the Yuzhi wuti Qingwen jian, horse (ma 馬) is mori in Mongolian and morin in Manchu, breeding horses (majiao 马交) is ajirgalamui in Mongolian and ajirgalambi in Manchu, gelding (shan 騏) is akta in both languages, red horse (hong ma 紅馬) is jerde in both languages, and a backward kick (liejue 劣蹶) is doksin in both languages. In illustrating these examples, I have used the transcription in the following Manchu-Mongolian-Chinese dictionary of phonetic comparisons, rather than the Cleaves transcription. See Jiang Qiao 2009, p. 141.

See, for example, Teng Shaozhen 1995.

Guan, p. 69. Qibo was one of the interlocutors of Huangdi in the classical Chinese treatise Huangdi neijing.

See Wang Zhenguo 2006, p. 403. While Wang uses the word pungguang 膀胱 for bladder, the Qing shigao uses the word pao 膀 for bladder. See Qing shigao, liezhan 289, yishuyi, duan 24277 (Hanji wenxian ziliaoku database). Cow, in this context, is a gender-neutral way of referring to the animal. For a discussion of using parts of animals (such as cows) in medical treatment among thirteenth-century Mongols, see Francis Woodman Cleaves 1954.

The present-day translation of shouqi is veterinarian, however, in this article “animal doctor” is used to refer to this position as it is more descriptive, and does not suggest an association with the modern-day profession.

Kangxi huidian, p. 1957.
43 Yongzheng huidian 1731, p. 3803.
44 Qianlong huidian, p. 973. Han, here, is used to designate those who were ethnically Chinese.
46 Ren Xigeng 1863, p. 385. According to the oral history of Wu Dinghuan, as well as Lan Ruo’s article on Wu Dinghuan’s teacher Xia Lao, this change took place in Daoguang’s 2nd year. However, the Qing Taiyiyuan zhi states that as the year acupuncture separated from the Imperial Medical Bureau. See Lan 1998.
48 Matteo Ripa 1723, pp. 57–60. Also see Guan, p. 70.
49 Wind-cold here refers to a particular pathogen that results in symptoms such as a headache, slight fever, aversion to cold, pain all over the body, runny nose, as well as a thin white coating on the tongue, and a tense pulse. See Yuan Yixiang et al. 1996, pp. 207–8.
50 Zhongguo di yi lishi dang’anguan 1996, p. 1686, no. 4203. The modern notation for this acupuncture point is GB20 (on the foot lesser-yang gallbladder meridian zushaoyang danjing), and it is now used for treating dizziness, headache, tired red eyes, and stiff neck. Also see Guan, p. 71.
51 This treatise was compiled in 1742. See Hanson 2003a for the history of its compilation.
52 Wu Dinghuan 2003.
53 This institution has traditionally been defined as a bureaucratic and administrative organization dealing with the emperor’s personal needs, as well as accounts, storage offices, pastures, etc. See Preston M. Torbert 1977; and Zhang Deze 2001.
References


Chen Keji 陈可冀 (ed.). 2006. *Qinggong yi'an yanjiu 清宫医案研究 [Examination of Medical Records of the Qing Court]*. Beijing: Beijing guji chubanshe.


Da Qing huidian shili. 1899, Jiaqing 11, Bingbu, chuan 645, Mazheng 3, duan 55307 (*Hanji wenxian ziliaoku* database).

Da Qing huiyuan shili. 1899, Jiaqing 11, Bingbu, chuan 645, Mazheng 3, duan 55307 (*Hanji wenxian ziliaoku* database).


Hanji dianzi wenxian ziliaoku 漢籍電子文獻資料庫 [Electronic Database of Chinese Texts]. Academia Sinica.


Qi Meiqin 祁美琴. 2008. Qingdai Neiwufu 清代內務府 [Qing Dynasty Imperial Household Department]. Shenyang: Liaoning minzu chubanshe.


Qing shigao. Qing. Liezhuan 289, yishuyi duan 24277 (Hanji wenxian ziliaoku database).


Siku quanshu 四庫全書 [Complete Compilation of the Four Treasuries]. 1782. Digital resource, Chinese University of Hong Kong and Digital Heritage Publishing Ltd.


Zhongguo Tongren Tang Corporation 清代國家機關考略 [An Investigation and Outline of Offices in the Qing Dynasty]. Beijing: Xueyuan chubanshe.


——. 1740. Memorial. 05 0038, no. 023-6.

——. September 22, 1819 (Jiaqing 24, 8th month, 4th day), changbian 67478.
Sare Aricanli is a Ph.D. candidate in Chinese History at Princeton University focusing on the social and cultural history of imperial medicine in China (16th–18th centuries), and has an M.A. from Beijing University of Chinese Medicine.
Fertility and Childbirth among Royal Women in Nineteenth-Century Korea

Kim Jiyoung, Seoul National University

Abstract
This study offers a look into the daily life of royal women in nineteenth-century Korea through an examination of fertility and childbirth. From the beginning of the Joseon Dynasty, the royal family identified fertility with the state’s prosperity. In spite of the emphasis placed on fertility, there was a crisis of declining royal childbirth from the seventeenth century on. As Joseon kings were official figures, royal childbirth was an event of public importance. Though the primary responsibility for childbirth was on the royal women, the process of childbirth therefore became part of the institutional system. Unlike wedding ceremonies and rites of death, the rites of childbirth in Joseon Korea remained unchanged by the Confucian system. Because human beings cannot control all the risks in the process of delivery, divine assistance was invoked for safe delivery, bringing Daoist elements into the rites of childbirth. Nonetheless, Confucian discrimination between a wife and a concubine, an eldest son and the other sons and daughters were projected into the birthing process.

Key Words: fertility, childbirth, nineteenth century, Korea, royal women, royal family, daily life

Introduction
Childbirth is a universal event. In most societies, giving birth and childcare belong to the realm of women’s responsibilities. Brigitte Jordan, medical anthropologist and pioneer in the field of the Anthropology of Birth, states that if we consider the ethnographic record, no known society treats birth merely as a physiological function. Around the world, childbirth is socially marked and shaped.\(^1\) However, in Joseon Korea (1392–1910), the theme of childbirth has been ignored in the ethnographic record. This can be attributed in part to Confucianism’s focus on patriarchy and the simple fact that the primary actor in childbirth is female.

The adoption of Confucianism during the Joseon period greatly transformed the role of women in Korean society.\(^2\) By the late seventeenth century, the patriarchal family system including its clan rules had begun to take root in people’s daily lives. As a result, women’s lives were dominated by men: in childhood a woman followed her father, once married, she followed her husband, and later in life, she followed her son. Over the course of a woman’s life, her social identity shifted from being defined as someone’s daughter to someone’s wife and finally as someone’s mother. By the late Joseon, since only the eldest son could carry on the family name, women felt the heavy burden of the need to give birth to a son. Women who gave birth to many sons could establish their identities more firmly than women who failed to do so. In sum, a woman’s identity was primarily determined by her ability to give birth to a son.

Women during the Joseon period could not avoid the burden of childbirth and childcare. As Confucian ideology spread over the whole of Joseon society, distinctions between males and females were becoming increasingly rigid.
while the sphere of women’s activities was narrowing to focus on the family.\textsuperscript{3}
In the epitaphs of ruling aristocrats of the time, males were described as having
official careers in the public sphere, while their wives as females were defined
by their duties in the private sphere, namely childbirth, childcare, and domestic
management. Even though this new social climate highlighted the importance
of childbirth, it became an event that occurred in invisible, private, and silent
spaces.

Whereas Western society includes childbirth in the rites of passage, Joseon
society excluded it from such rites. People’s daily lives in Korea were organized
around Confucian family rites as established by the Chinese Confucian
philosopher Zhu Xi (1130–1200). These rites included the coming-of-age
ceremony, marriage, death, and ancestor worship. With lives centered around the
activities of men, childbirth was noticeably absent from official rites.

Confucianism’s promotion of patriarchy and continuance of the family
line led to an increased interest at the time in the fertility of women. Despite
the importance of women’s fertility and childbirth for Joseon society, and
royal society in particular, the study of childbirth has received little attention
from Korean scholars. Some data has been collected in the name of sansok (folk
knowledge of childbirth).\textsuperscript{4} However, the materials that the folklorists have
gathered, have focused primarily on traditional practices of delivery in modern
rural areas. Since the arrival of Western medicine in the late-nineteenth century,
these birthing traditions have undergone tremendous change.

Since 2000, female anthropologists in Korea have begun to pay attention to
childbirth among the middle class in modern cities.\textsuperscript{5} The studies focusing on
childbirth among royal women in the palace have dealt primarily with court
customs and court medicine.\textsuperscript{6} As a result of this research, we can now visualize
the scenery of the delivery room in detail. However, it is important not only to
describe the setting but to understand the meanings of fertility and delivery
in the context of Korea’s gender history. So the examination of fertility and
childbirth in Joseon society can give us a chance to understand the cultural
meanings of the behaviors of female agents in nineteenth-century Korea.

In order to understand the culture of childbirth among royal women in
Joseon society, we must answer questions such as: Who were these women
giving birth in the palace? What were their social positions? How did the fertility
of royal women change during the nineteenth century? What was the process of
childbirth? Where in the process did women’s social positions become distinct
from one another?

This paper will first explore the idea of fertility among the Yi royal family
and the institution through which the idea came into reality. The differences in
status among women in the palace were usually determined by their relations,
whether in private or in public, with the king, and whether or not they gave birth
to a royal baby. Focusing on some characteristics of their fertility in nineteenth-
century Korea, I will also expand the coverage of the study into the late Joseon
Dynasty. Next, this paper will examine the process of childbirth among royal
women by comparing Queen MyeongSeong (1851–95), who gave birth to the last
emperor, SunJong (r. 1907–10), with the royal concubine Eom-ssi (1854–1911),
whose son was Young Chin-Wang (1897–1970). This comparison will reveal in
detail how the process of delivery differed according to a woman’s social status.

As might be expected, there are very few documents which record childbirth
in Joseon Korea, whether it occurred inside or outside the palace.7 As a result,
there are limits to understanding childbirth among royal women in the context
of the everyday life of the royal family. This paper relies on general sources of
court history such as the code of law known as the National Code, the Annals of
the Joseon Dynasty, and the Daily Records of the Secretariat. Other sources which
are especially related to delivery have also been consulted; these documents,
primarily from the nineteenth century, include the Manual for a Queen’s Childbirth,
the Diary about Royal Concubine’s Delivery, and Inner Palace Registries. Among
the Inner Palace Registries, one finds informal stories about royal women giving
birth as recorded by court ladies; these record events and details that the more
formal histories of the court would not cover. Additional historical sources
related to the prosperity of the royal family have also been referenced as well as
the Book of Genealogical Lineage of the Joseon Royal Family.8 Last but not least, this
paper will also examine a painting that appeared in royal wedding ceremonies
in nineteenth-century Korea. Though the painting is very important for us to
understand childbirth in the Joseon Dynasty, it has not received any attention
from scholars until now. As will be seen, all of these materials give context to
childbirth among royal women in nineteenth-century Korea.

The Royal Family’s Desire for Fertility

The royal family during the Joseon period referred to having many children as
JongSa-Ji-Kyeung. JongSa is a kind of grasshopper that lays about ninety-nine eggs
at a time. So the phrase may be translated into “a cause for congratulations for
having numerous children like a large swarm of grasshoppers.” The term first
appeared in the Chinese classic the Book of Odes. It symbolically reveals the royal
family’s desire for fertility.

From the beginning of the Joseon Dynasty, its founder King Taejo (r. 1392–
98) hoped that the royal family would follow the model of the Zhou Dynasty
in ancient China by having many offspring and prosperity, generation after
generation.9

During the Joseon Dynasty, the phrase JongSa-Ji-Kyeung appeared in at least
two different contexts. First, we can find it in references to the wedding ceremony
of the royal family. It appears in documents called Ok-ChackMun, which were a
kind of formal letter of appointment to a queen.10 In addition, we can also find
the phrase in documents which were used to select and install a concubine for
obtaining an heir to the throne.11 The most important obligation of women who
came into the royal palace through marriage was to give birth to royal children.
Women who fulfilled this obligation could retain and oftentimes even improve
their social standing.

We also find the phrase in congratulatory messages offered to royal
newlyweds. The following is a congratulatory message from some ministers to
newlyweds King Gojong (r. 1863–1907) and Queen MyeongSeong on March 22,
1866:

Fertility and Childbirth among Royal Women / Kim 86
The rite of marriage went smoothly on the perfect day and at the perfect time. Your highness came in person to the venue and accepted many other people’s congratulations. The marriage in which a king gains a queen is a cause for congratulations and a source of all blessings. We are singing the song which congratulates people for having numerous children like a large swarm of grasshoppers [emphasis added]. For the following thousands of millions of years, there will be a beautiful story about this. We, [your] subjects, desperately hope that your highness will have the cause for congratulations for having a lot of children.\(^\text{12}\)

Second, the term appeared when the elderly in the royal family and the king’s men expressed their concerns about a king or a crown prince not having children, especially when there was no heir to the throne. In the following example, the queen’s grandmother expresses her concerns about the lack of an heir apparent:

The queen’s grandmother Sunwon [1789–1857], said to the ministers, “The fate of the Kingdom only depends on the king. But even though he is in the prime of his life, we have not been able to see the happy event of having babies. Unfortunately, the queen has been sick but the medicine has not worked for her, which has deeply distressed the queen’s mother and myself. All the people in the country are expecting the happy event to take place, not to mention the king’s ancestral spirits. It is urgent that the king have an heir to the throne.

If we, following the royal family’s precedent, choose one daughter among the aristocratic class as the king’s concubine, we will secure an heir to the throne. I am sorry that I am giving you this instruction in Korean instead of classical Chinese. But as this matter is very crucial to the fate of the kingdom, I have had no choice except to give such an instruction. You should make sure that we can see a cause for congratulations for having children like a large swarm of grasshoppers [emphasis added].”\(^\text{13}\)

The birth of royal children was one of the primary concerns of elders of the royal family, including the king and queen, because it determined the perpetuity of their dynasty and the prosperity of the royal family. When a king took over the throne after his father passed away, the royal family was looking forward in earnest to having an heir for him. So if the birth of the king’s eldest son was delayed, like in the case of King Heonjong (r. 1834–49) above, the delay was considered as a kind of crisis for the kingdom.

In the royal family, fertility meant prosperity of the state itself as well as the royal family. So JongSa-Ji-Kyeung was considered to be identical to “a cause for congratulations for the kingdom,” which was also called JongSa-Ji-Kyeung. Here, Jong, an abbreviation for Jongmyo, means “the royal ancestor’s shrine.” Sa stands for SaJik, or “the gods of soil and grain.”

The royal wedding ceremony also shows that the royal family eagerly desired fertility. The desire for fertility appeared, for example, in the process of choosing the officials in charge of the wedding ceremony. They were selected among the “entirely blessed,” people who had shared years happily together with their spouses, led a healthy life without illness, had long lives, and had many “sons.”\(^\text{14}\) Joseon society became a patrilineal one due to Confucian clan rules. The essence of the patrilineal society was the success brought to a man’s family through his sons. Thus, in late Joseon, people eagerly wanted to have sons, not daughters.

In the nineteenth century, a new painting appeared in the royal wedding ceremony. The painting supports the argument that fertility became a very important obligation for royal women in late Joseon. Just prior to marriage, the
bride would spend time in the detached palace, Byeolgung. This palace was a temporary place, where the bride would stay and receive an education during the period between being selected as the future queen until she entered the main palace, Jounggung, along with the king. Once selected, she could no longer visit her home outside the palace.

Within the detached palace there was a special folding screen on which was painted the Painting of the Luxurious Life of Guo Ziyi. The painting first appeared in the 1802 royal wedding ceremony and offered well-wishes for fertility and continued to appear in the detached palace through 1882.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>The Wedding Ceremony (King/Queen)</th>
<th>Folding Screen Placed in the Detached Palace</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1802</td>
<td>King Sunjo/Queen Sunwon, Andong Kim-ssi</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1819</td>
<td>King Ikjong/Queen Sinjeong, Pungyang Cho-ssi</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1837</td>
<td>King Heonjong/Queen Hyohyeon, Andong Kim-ssi</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1844</td>
<td>King Heonjong/Queen Hyeojong, Namyang Hong-ssi</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1851</td>
<td>King Cheoljong/Queen Cheolin, Andong Kim-ssi</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1866</td>
<td>King Gojong/Queen Myeongseng, Yeoheung Min-ssi</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1882</td>
<td>King Sunjong/Queen Sunmyeong, Yeoheung Min-ssi</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Table 1. Royal Weddings in the Nineteenth Century and Making Folding Screens)

G: Luxurious Life of Guo Ziyi
B: Bird and Animal
H: Hundreds of Children

The main subject of the painting was a general-turned-king named Guo Ziyi (697–781) from the Tang Dynasty in China, who had suppressed the revolt of An Lushan (703–57) in the year 755. As a result of his distinguished service to the imperial court, he was made a prince. Guo had many children—fifteen in total, eight sons and seven daughters—and lived a long life, reaching the age of almost eighty-five. He symbolized a person who had been blessed by heaven. So Painting of the Luxurious Life of Guo Ziyi was called Guo Ziyi Palja-Chilso-Do, which can be translated as “Painting of Guo Ziyi Who Has Eight Sons (Palja) and Seven Sons-in-Law (Chilso).” There was also a novel, Guobunyang-Jeon, which described the life of Guo. Both the novel and the painting were popular among the upper class in nineteenth-century Korea.

Why did the Painting of the Luxurious Life of Guo Ziyi suddenly appear in royal weddings in nineteenth-century Korea? According to an analysis from art history, the painting did not appear anywhere in China. It is said that the
The painting was created during the late Joseon by combining several features from other paintings which had different themes. The first reference to the painting appears in *Eoje-si*, a poem written by King Sukjong (r. 1674–1720). There are actually two poems written by the king that contain references to the painting. King Sukjong bestowed both the poems and the painting on his successor who later would become King Kyeongjong (r. 1720–24):

Giving the painting *Painting of the Luxurious Life of Guo Ziyi* to my son.

Traditionally, it is said that Guo Ziyi was a very blessed man
There are sons, sons-in-laws, and grandchildren together in the painting
It is not an accident that the painting was drawn on canvas
Do put the picture next to you and appreciate it at all times
Receive every happiness in the world and longevity

King Kyeongjong, who in 1696 married the daughter of Sim ho, later Queen Danui Sim-ssi (1686–1718), had suffered from diseases after his birthmother Huibin Jang-ssi (d. 1701) passed away. So King Sukjong gave the painting to his son, hoping that his son, who was weak and had no children, would be like the main character, Guo Ziyi, who lived a long life free from disease and blessed by many children.

Prior to the sudden appearance of the painting in 1802, there had been a continuous decrease in the number of royal children, especially after the reign of
King InJo (r. 1623–49). The decrease in the number of royal children from the seventeenth century caused a variety of political problems related to succession to the throne in the eighteenth century. Finally, in the nineteenth century, as the power of the royal family weakened, its authority fell as well. For example, in the nineteenth century, King Heonjong (r. 1834–49) had no children to take over his throne and was forced to adopt a son from a collateral line. This son, who became King Cheoljong (r. 1849–63), had no successor either. As a result, King Gojong, the heir of King Cheoljong, also came from a collateral line. The more the royal family desired fertility, the more “eight sons and seven daughters” became the goal of the royal family. The placement of the folding screen with the painting Painting of the Luxurious Life of Guo Zizi in the detached palace, where the women were educated, reveals that for women the duty of delivering children became more important than ever.

**Royal Women in the Nae-Myeongbu**

Before examining childbirth among royal women during the nineteenth century, one must first examine how the hierarchy among royal women was solidified through a system of royal concubinage put in place to ensure numerous offspring for the royal family. The system of royal concubines started being discussed during the early Joseon Dynasty. By the reign of King Seongjong (r. 1469–94), regulations concerning concubines had an achieved statutory form. A statute called for the creation of a governmental department known as Nae-Myeongbu. It consisted of all the women in the palace and was controlled by the queen. Within the Nae-Myeongbu were two groups: the Nae-gwan and the Gung-gwan. The Nae-gwan included royal concubines who were given a title corresponding to “one of the eight ranks of Nae-Myeongbu.” The Gung-gwan was comprised of court ladies who had a chance to become the king’s concubine and were conferred a title corresponding to “one of the ten ranks of Nae-Myeongbu.”

However, the statute was not fully realized, and in practice varied depending upon the situation of the royal family. During the reign of Emperor Sunjong, a couple of senior court ladies once said that the titles listed in the statute were not really given to court ladies, except during special events such as weddings and banquets of the royal family. Court ladies were usually called just Nain, which means “a women in the palace,” and their ordinary tasks determined their real titles.

Court ladies served the members of the royal family. They were forbidden to marry and were not permitted to leave the palace. In general, they were nothing but “women of the king.” Their duties included washing, cooking, cleaning, sewing, making beds, etc. Those who worked as personal maids and waited on the king in his bedroom were called Jimil-Nain and had the chance to receive Seungeun, the king’s blessing. In this case, Seungeun means to go to bed with the king. Jimil-Nain were only three to four years old when they entered service as court ladies, much younger than the age of twelve when other court ladies usually entered the palace. If they had the king’s blessing they had the chance, albeit rare, of being promoted to royal concubine.
Table 2. Age of Court Ladies According to Department (late 19th–early 20th centuries)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Office of</th>
<th>Age at Entrance</th>
<th>Age at Capping Ceremony (15 years after entrance)</th>
<th>Age at Promotion to Palace Matron</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Secretariat</td>
<td>3–4</td>
<td>18–19</td>
<td>43–44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sewing and Stitching</td>
<td>6–7</td>
<td>21–22</td>
<td>56–57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embroidery and Decoration</td>
<td>6–7</td>
<td>21–22</td>
<td>56–57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bath and Toilet</td>
<td>around 12</td>
<td>around 27</td>
<td>around 62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food and Meals</td>
<td>around 12</td>
<td>around 27</td>
<td>around 62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snacks</td>
<td>around 12</td>
<td>around 27</td>
<td>around 62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laundry</td>
<td>around 12</td>
<td>around 27</td>
<td>around 62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There were two kinds of royal concubines: Gantaek-Hugung and Seungeun-Hugung. Gantaek-Hugung were selected from among the daughters of aristocratic families. King Taejong (r. 1400–18) made a statement that there should be three Gantaek-Hugung. This differed from China, where a king could choose nine women.23 Gantaek-Hugung started climbing up a ladder of titles from a higher level than Seungeun-Hugung, who are discussed below. Nevertheless, as the social distinction between wife and concubine was very strict in the late Joseon Dynasty, aristocratic families were reluctant to give their daughters away to the king to be a concubine as opposed to his queen.24

Before King Seonjo (r. 1568–1608), there were some cases of a concubine giving birth to a son being elevated to the position of queen. But during later reigns, even if there was a concubine who delivered a son, the royal family preferred selecting a new queen rather than promoting a concubine. Towards the late Joseon, as clan rules became more concretized, the distinction between wife and concubine became stricter than earlier.

On the other hand, the Seungeun-Hugung was a court lady who was blessed with the king’s grace and given the title of king’s concubine. In general, Seungeun-Hugung were from the lower class. If she bore a king’s child, she was given a title. But this title was no higher than that of a Gantaek-Hugung. King Gojong had no women of the rank of Gantaek-Hugung, only those at the level of Seungeun-Hugung, eight of whom gave birth to his children.25 One of his concubines, Eom-ssi, had simply been a court lady until 1897, when she gave birth to the prince who would later become Youngchin-Wang. Just three days after his delivery, she was given the title of royal concubine.26

According to the Book of Genealogical Lineage of the Joseon Royal Family, during the entire Joseon Dynasty there were a total of 273 children in the royal family. Of these, 93 children had been delivered by queens and 180 were from royal concubines, some two thirds of the total. Of the 273 royal children, 151 were sons and 122 were daughters, namely there were more sons than daughters.27 The statistics show that the practice of having concubines actually helped the royal family produce more offspring.
Declining Fertility among Queens

How fertile were queens in nineteenth-century Korea? How was fertility defined during this period? In order to answer these questions, I will compare Queen MyeongSeong with other Joseon-period queens, in terms of age at the time of marriage, age at the time of first delivery, the interval between deliveries, and number of the children.

In late-Joseon Korea, queens got married earlier than in previous years. In the early years of the Joseon Dynasty, the age of queens at the time of marriage was usually thirteen–fifteen years old. In the mid-seventeenth century, starting from Queen MyeongSeong, who was the wife of King Hyeonjong (r. 1659–74), the age at the time of marriage was lowered to ten–eleven years old. In the late-Joseon period, however, when the first queen happened to pass away, the king had to remarry a new queen. In this case, they called the new queen Gye-Bi, which means “a successor to the first queen.” The age at the time of marriage for the Gye-Bi was relatively high at around fifteen years old.

While age at the time of royal marriage decreased toward the late Joseon, the average age of first delivery for queens remained consistent at about twenty years old throughout the period. The interval between deliveries varied from one year to three years. Queens tended to start giving birth to children at around age twenty and stopped in their early thirties. It is clear that queens did not give birth to children throughout the normal childbearing period from age fifteen to forty-nine. There are many reasons that queens stopped giving birth, but most likely this was due to the fact that it was dangerous to give birth to children later in life, and many queens suffered from postnatal diseases.

The most fertile queen of the Joseon Dynasty was Queen Soheon, wife of King Sejong (r. 1418–50), the well-known creator of the Korean alphabet, Hangul. She had eight sons and two daughters. Looking at her pregnancies, one finds an interesting fact about the fertility of the queens during the Joseon period.

Queen Soheon married King Sejong at the age of fourteen and gave birth to their first child at the age of eighteen. In the beginning, she gave birth almost every one or two years, producing a total of six children in a row. About seven years later, she started giving birth again and delivered four more children until she reached the age of forty. It would not have been possible for the queen to raise all the children without the help of wet nurses selected from the lower class from outside the palace and babysitters who were selected among the court ladies. These women lessened the queen’s burden in raising her children so that she could give birth to several children in a row.

Due to the support of the royal family, there were no financial difficulties for raising children. But giving birth to children in quick succession could potentially cause health problems for the queen, so she needed some time to rest and regain her strength. In addition, the queen had to officially play a role in controlling the Nae-Myeongbu.

In the nineteenth century, the fertility of queens rose slightly except in the case of King Heunjong’s queen. Most royal babies died early, except for those of King Sunjo. After King Injo, the fertility of the royal family dropped notably and the death rate of royal children rose sharply. As a result, the number of living children in the royal family decreased. The death rate of royal children
peaked during the nineteenth century. For example, among the offspring of King Cheoljong, namely one son and ten daughters, only one daughter, Princess Yeonghye, daughter of Seungeun-Hugung Sukui Beom-ssi, survived.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>King</th>
<th>Queen</th>
<th>Year of Birth</th>
<th>Age at Marriage</th>
<th>Age at Delivery</th>
<th>Birth Order</th>
<th>Name of Child</th>
<th>Child's Birth Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sunjo</td>
<td>Sunwon</td>
<td>1789</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1\textsuperscript{st}</td>
<td>Munjo</td>
<td>1809</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2\textsuperscript{nd}</td>
<td>Princess Meongon</td>
<td>1810</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3\textsuperscript{rd}</td>
<td>Princess Bonkon</td>
<td>1818</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>32</td>
<td>4\textsuperscript{th}</td>
<td>Died shortly after birth</td>
<td>1820</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>34</td>
<td>5\textsuperscript{th}</td>
<td>Princess Dukon</td>
<td>1822</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Munjo</td>
<td>Sinjeong</td>
<td>1808</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1\textsuperscript{st}</td>
<td>Heonjong</td>
<td>1827</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heonjong</td>
<td>Hyohecyon</td>
<td>1828</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hyojeong</td>
<td>1831</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheoljong</td>
<td>Cheolin</td>
<td>1837</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1\textsuperscript{st}</td>
<td>Died shortly after birth</td>
<td>1858</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gojong</td>
<td>Myeong-seong</td>
<td>1851</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1\textsuperscript{st}</td>
<td>Died shortly after birth</td>
<td>1871</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>23</td>
<td>2\textsuperscript{nd}</td>
<td>Died shortly after birth</td>
<td>1873</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3\textsuperscript{rd}</td>
<td>Sunjong</td>
<td>1874</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>25</td>
<td>4\textsuperscript{th}</td>
<td>Died shortly after birth</td>
<td>1875</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>28</td>
<td>5\textsuperscript{th}</td>
<td>Died shortly after birth</td>
<td>1878</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunjong</td>
<td>Sun-myeong</td>
<td>1872</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunjeong</td>
<td>1894</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Table 3. Fertility of Queens in Nineteenth-Century Korea)

In the late-nineteenth century, Queen MyeongSeong had four sons and one daughter in total. She married King Gojong at the age of sixteen, which was considered slightly late. From the age of twenty-one to twenty-eight, she gave birth every one to two years and had five children. The age at which she stopped giving birth appears to be somewhat early when compared with the cases of other queens. Why was this? In the nineteenth century, children of the royal family usually died soon after birth. Queen MyeongSeong\'s children were not exempt from such a harsh fate. Four of her five children died shortly after birth. Also, the political situation in the late-nineteenth century was notably unstable. The royal couple was married in 1866, when a skirmish with France occurred. This period was followed by armed conflicts with other Western countries. In
1876, after the Treaty of Ganghwa was signed with Japan, Joseon was forced to open its doors to Western cultures. During this process, King Gojong did not get along with his father Heungseon-Daewongun (1820–98). In the middle of the antagonism of her husband against his father, she received death threats from her father-in-law during a military uprising in 1882. In an 1884 coup led by a third force, the Progressive Party, many relatives, including her mother, were murdered. The queen was always exposed to some kind of danger. In this situation, though her babies had died shortly after birth and only one son had survived, she could not afford to have more babies.

In sum, from the late-seventeenth century until the eighteenth century, the fertility of Joseon Dynasty queens declined. Queens who were unable to give birth to viable children all appeared during this period. As a result, the legitimate eldest son of the queen did not succeed his father to the throne. Instead, the sons of concubines had the privilege of rising to the throne. In the case of King Jeongjo (r. 1776–1800), when his Gantaek-Hugung concubine Subin Pak-ssi gave birth to King Sunjo (1790–1834), the royal family referred to the event as “A Great Cause for Congratulations” in 1790.

**The Birthing Process among Royal Women: Sansil-cheong vs. Hosan-cheong**

The birthing process in late-Joseon Korea began with preparations for delivery within the palace. At the time a royal woman became pregnant, the king usually ordered the establishment of one of two temporary organizations: the Sansil-cheong (Delivery Office for the Queen) and the Hosan-cheong (Delivery Office for Concubines). These organizations belonged to the medical center for the royal family during the Joseon Dynasty. The most notable difference between these organizations was the social status of the pregnant women.

In preparation for a birth, regulations were followed that dictated when the organizations should be set up, how they should be staffed, and what level of prenatal care the woman should receive. The major responsibility of the Sansil-cheong was to help a pregnant queen safely deliver the child. Three managerial officials, several male doctors, and two female nurses were charged with frequently checking on her health, determining what medication she should take, and preparing for emergencies. These officials were assigned to a location set up near the delivery room, where they could attend to and care for her.

Examining the case of preparations made for the delivery of Queen MyeongSeong’s third child provides one with an understanding of the process of setting up the Sansil-cheong. The Sansil-cheong for MyeongSeong was organized on January 03, 1874 (by the lunar calendar), after the doctor examined her and predicted the due-month. Though regulations stipulated that the Sansil-cheong should be set up three months in advance of the due-month, it was generally organized only one month prior. The *Daily Records of the Secretariat* reveals what was discussed at the time: for example, the date when the pregnant Queen MyeongSeong would be examined and the date when the Sansil-cheong should be set up. Despite being near her delivery date, preparations for the delivery were delayed, whatever the reason might be. In addition, due to a fire engulfing Gyeongbok Palace on December 10, 1873, the royal family, including the
pregnant queen, were forced to move to another palace, Changduk Palace, ten
days later on the 20th of December. The date noted for her medical examination
was scheduled for the 28th, eight days after the move.

The establishment of the Sansil-cheong signaled the beginning of the official
preparations for the delivery. This would enact strict regulations related to
childbirth to be followed not only by people inside the palace, but by those
outside the palace as well. For example, executions were postponed for 100 days,
and the imprisonment of criminals and slaughtering of animals were forbidden
for twenty-one days from the day of setting up the Sansil-cheong until twenty-one
to 100 days after delivery. In Joseon Korea, there was a widespread belief that
because everything in the world is related to one another, at least when a king’s
baby is about to be born, whatever could, even indirectly, have bad effects on it
must not be allowed to happen.

Twenty-four staff members were assigned to the Sansil-cheong. If necessary,
additional doctors and attendees could be added to the staff. First of all, there
were three high officials, including a minister, who served as administrators. The
Sansil-cheong had a Gwoncho-gwan (special high official), who was blessed with a
long life free from disease and was the father of many children. It was believed
that his merits would have positive effects on the delivery, bestowing the baby
with good health and good fortune.

The Gwoncho-gwan was in charge of the Gwoncho-je, the ritual which was
held for a newborn on the seventh day after birth. At the time of delivery, a straw
mat was spread out on the bed. Immediately after childbirth, the Gwoncho-gwan
would order his men or women to remove this mat from the delivery room and
to hang it on the top of a special door near the room for a period of seven days.
On the seventh day, when the ritual began, the Gwoncho-gwan would roll the mat
up and put it into a chest or a precious box. The chest and other items related to
“long life without diseases” were placed on a table for worship. The Gwoncho-
gwan then burned incense and made a low bow twice.

Until the late-sixteenth century, palace rules governing the delivery of
concubines were very strict, dictating that concubines give birth outside of
the palace in private homes. Only queens were allowed to give birth within
the palace. However, during the reign of King Seonjo (r. 1568–1608), two
concubines, Kim-ssi and Jeong-ssi, lost their lives after deliveries outside the
palace. Thereafter, the king permitted concubines to deliver their babies within
the palace. According to the Annals of the Joseon Dynasty, sometime between
the early-seventeenth century (1619) and the late-seventeenth century (1688),
the special organizations for delivery, Sansil-cheong and Hosan-cheong, were
institutionalized. The Sansil-cheong had some staff members that did not exist in
the Hosan-cheong, which were set up for deliveries by royal concubines. In the
Hosan-cheong, a medical doctor substituted for the Gwoncho-gwan in performing
the ritual Gwoncho-je. For instance, in 1897, the Gwoncho-je for the newborn baby
of the concubine Eom-ssi (who later became YoungChin-Wang), was officiated by
a medical doctor.

There was another difference between the Sansil-cheong and the Hosan-
cheong. The number of doctors in the Sansil-cheong was larger than that in the
Hosan-cheong. In the case of the delivery for Queen MyeongSeong, there were
sixteen medical staff on duty: eleven doctors specially assigned to the king, an acupuncturist, two pharmacists, and two female nurses.\textsuperscript{35}

On the other hand, the medical staff assigned to the concubine Eom-ssi numbered only six in total: two lower-level medical doctors, two staff for making decoctions of medicinal herbs, and two female nurses.\textsuperscript{36} Without the special order of the king, the royal physicians assigned to the king did not assist in deliveries by royal concubines.

Despite these official regulations, in reality, the staff assigned to the Hosancheong could be quite different. In the late Joseon, if a queen was unable to produce an heir, the king would select a Gantaek-Hugung to provide him with an heir. If she became pregnant, even though she was a concubine, a Sansil-cheong (usually only allowed for birth by a queen) was organized for the concubine’s delivery.

However, Seungeun-Hugung from among court ladies still had no benefits as such. There was a court lady named Eom-ssi, who was the object of King Gojong’s love. On September 25, 1897, she gave birth to a baby, but did not receive the official title of royal concubine until then. On the day she successfully delivered a boy, King Gojong ordered the organization of a Hosancheong for postnatal care and following rituals. Three days after delivery, she received the second highest title, gwiin, and rose to become a royal concubine.\textsuperscript{37}

\textbf{The Delivery Room}

When preparing for the birth of a royal baby, many rooms were set aside. Among these, the most important was the delivery room. Prior to giving birth, the queen would live in a building called Gyotae-jeon when she was at the Gyeongbok Palace, and in a building called Daejo-jeon when at the Changduk Palace. The meaning of both Gyotae-jeon and Daejo-jeon here is “wishing for queens to have many children.” For example, the first delivery room for Queen MyeongSeong was in the Gyotae-jeon at Gyeongbok Palace. Of course, there were exceptions. For example, for her third delivery, she lived in the Gwanmul-heon at Changduk Palace, where the crown prince usually resided. This change in residence was most likely due to the damage caused by the big fire at Gyeongbok Palace.

In cases of delivery by concubines, especially by a king’s favorite concubine, the concubine’s living quarters prior to giving birth were usually located near the king’s office. Eomssi, concubine of King Gojong, gave birth to her baby at the Sukong-jae at Gyeongun Palace, where King Gojong was in residence during that period.

Once the location of the delivery room was determined, it then needed to be decorated to ensure a safe delivery and future fertility. The decorating process, known as sansil-baeseol, transformed the space from one for daily use into a sacred space. This was a very complicated process that required many types of materials and people.

According to the \textit{Manual for a Queen’s Childbirth}, the delivery room was decorated with auspicious charms. A “hasten-birth talisman” was attached to the north wall of the delivery room to speed up the delivery process. A “tenant talisman” was attached to the same place as a request to the Daoist gods for permission to use the room. Both of these charms were drawn in red.
Fig. 2. Sansil-Baeseol

Sansil-Baeseol (産室排設)
Decorating the delivery room for safe delivery and fertility

North
West
East
South

Hasten birth talisman (催生符)
Lucky Charms
Tenant talisman (借地法)

Doors

Reins (馬魖)
Hide of a white horse

The Delivery Mat

hides of flying squirrels
Hide of a white horse

Two sheets of oilpaper (油紙)
Two sheets of wool (羊毛絨)
Made of six straw mats (草席)
Made of six straw bags (草石)
A stack of dry yellow grasses (黃草)
A special mat was placed in the delivery room, upon which the pregnant woman would lie down to give birth. The special mat consisted of several layers of different materials. At the very bottom of the mat would be placed a stack of dry yellow grass. The next layer was made of six straw bags. This was followed by a sheet of six straw mats, then two sheets of wool, upon which were layered two sheets of oilpaper, designed to collect the various secretions from the delivery. On the very top was placed the hide from a white horse. The hide would be placed so that the horse’s head faced in the direction most auspicious for a safe delivery. The horse’s tail corresponded to the direction where the placenta would be placed after delivery. The hides of two flying squirrels were then placed on either side of the horse’s head. Last, under the horse’s head was spread a type of ramie.

There were also reins made out of deerskin which served as a sort of handle. This was installed on the wall behind the delivery bed for the woman to grab onto while in labor. If the delivery did not occur during the planned month, the direction deemed auspicious for a safe delivery was changed resulting in all the materials having to be rearranged to face the new direction. These materials, including the charms, special mat, and white horse’s hide were believed to help the woman giving birth to have a safe delivery and to protect her life as well as that of her newborn baby.

The Role of Women in Assisting with Delivery and Childcare

There were four groups assigned to assist royal woman with the delivery and childcare. The first group consisted of male doctors in the Sansil-cheong. The second group consisted of women who were directly involved in the birth and subsequent childcare. The third group belonged to the organization that provided a variety of delivery supplies. The last group was responsible for miscellaneous tasks. The following discussion will focus on women involved in the second group, namely in the delivery process and childcare.

There were two “female nurses” assigned to the Sansil-cheong. Their responsibilities included attending to the pregnant woman, keeping a close eye on her condition and reporting it to the male doctors, bringing to the delivery room the prescriptions that the male doctors gave them, and administering those prescriptions. These female nurses, among the best of the nurses, belonged to the medical center for the royal family. They were trained in checking the pulse, acupuncture, and gynecology.

There were also three to four women assigned to the delivery room. According to the handbook Useful Tips for Delivery and Childcare, which was written in the nineteenth century, these women had been “selected among those old, knowledgeable, docile, and careful women outside [the palace]” to assist with the delivery by “... hold[ing] her on the bed to help delivery.” It is possible that one of them played the role of midwife.

The rest of the women taking part in delivery were the Bongbo-Buin, the Aji, the woman’s mother, a wet nurse, and court ladies. The Bongbo-Buin was the king’s former nanny and held a high position at court. She was qualified to take part in every event of the royal family. The Aji was the queen’s lady-in-waiting and came to the palace with the queen after her wedding ceremony. She was the closest woman to the queen in the palace. The queen’s mother also entered the
palace in advance to assist her daughter during delivery. A wet nurse served as the nanny for the newborn baby, and a babysitter was selected among the court ladies in the palace.

Royal newborns were breastfed by a wet nurse. The wet nurse was carefully selected to ensure the good health of the royal child. She was required to be both healthy and have a good disposition. The wet nurse would serve the royal child for their whole life, following them even after they became married. She was often a slave attached to one of the government offices.

The Gungjung-balgi records the third delivery by Queen MyeongSeong, which assessed the contribution of the women participating in delivery and nursing. For example, some parts of the Gungjung-balgi explain how court ladies were paid for being part of the queen’s delivery. On the seventh day after Queen MyeongSeong gave birth, the women who had assisted in the delivery all received money. The amount of money given to each differed according to the roles they played during the delivery. The funds were provided by the pregnant woman’s family and relatives. In this instance, those who received money were court ladies, a wet nurse, a Bongbo-Buin, and an Aji. The highest ranks of the court ladies were given 50 nyang (Joseon unit of money) respectively. The maid attending the queen was given 30 nyang and the former wet nurse for the king 20 nyang, the wet nurse was given the least amount, 15 nyang. Other lower-ranking court ladies in attendance to the queen were given a little money as well.

Another Gungjung-balgi notes that on the hundredth day after her childbirth, those who helped raise the child were given cloth and firewood. These recipients belonged to the palace where the eldest son of the king lived. The cloth and firewood were provided by the woman’s mother-in-law. The senior court lady among those babysitting the king’s eldest son received the largest amount among them.

According to another Gungjung-balgi, on the same day her family gave some money to women who were court ladies, the Aji, the Bongbo-Buin, and the wet nurse. The amount of money given to each differed slightly from that given to them on the seventh day. The money given to the maid attending the queen and the former wet nurse of the king decreased slightly, while the money given to the wet nurse increased slightly. This reveals that the role of a wet nurse caring for the child grew more important with time.

**Conclusion**

Until recently, childbirth has been recognized not as a social and cultural event, but as a merely physiological function. As the history of women has gained importance since the late-twentieth century, pregnancy and childbirth have now begun to receive the attention they are due.

The ruling aristocrats ran the Joseon Dynasty with the goal of establishing a Confucian utopia. To achieve this, they adopted the Confucian patrilineal system. As a result, it became more and more important for Joseon women to carry out their duties of keeping house, especially giving birth and taking care of children. Only women who fulfilled these duties exercised power in the family.

The fertility of royal women meant not only prosperity for the royal family, but also for Joseon Korea. As a result, fertility among royal woman received
more attention than that of women of other classes. As members of the upper privileged social classes in Joseon society, royal women could deliver the king’s babies. As we have seen, there were two groups of royal women: queens and royal concubines. Royal concubines were further divided according to social status: Gantaek-Hugung and Seungeun-Hugung. While Gantaek-Hugung were selected from yangban (ruling aristocratic) families to become the king’s concubines, Seungeun-Hugung were usually selected from court ladies of a lower class.

The desire for fertility was conspicuously revealed in royal weddings. In the nineteenth century, in particular, folding screens upon which were painted the Painting of the Luxurious Life of Guo Ziyi were set up in the detached palace. Here, a woman from a private house outside the palace received education in preparation prior to her transformation through marriage into a royal woman. The placement of the painting sent a clear message to the young bride that having many children like Guo Ziyi was the goal of royal women.

The concubine system for the royal family’s fertility was arranged from the beginning of the Joseon Dynasty. However, the system operated differently in the early and late Joseon. As Joseon society became more Confucian, the differences between wife and concubine became more distinct and discrimination between legitimate and illegitimate children became more serious. Though this trend affected all of Joseon society, the discrimination against illegitimate children in the royal family was not as serious because they were, in the end, the king’s offspring. However, by the late Joseon, the number of concubines steadily decreased. When it comes to Gantaek-Hugung, for example, they were selected only when the queen at that time was infertile and another concubine, on behalf of her, had to give birth to a royal baby who would succeed to the throne. If the concubine gave birth to the crown prince, she earned a good position in the royal family.

Infertility among queens was quite common in seventeenth- to eighteenth-century Korea, however, fertility among queens slightly increased in the nineteenth century. However, because infant mortality was also high, the number of royal children actually did not increase.

When a royal woman got pregnant or gave birth, in order to help her deliver a baby, the king would order the establishment of one of two temporary organizations that belonged to the medical center for the royal family. The scale of these temporary organizations and the status of the people in charge were determined by the social status of the pregnant or delivering women.

In the case of a queen’s delivery, they set up a Sansil-cheong directed by three managerial officials. To prepare for an actual emergency in delivery, it had male medical doctors including a doctor for the king, and two female nurses. It was supplied by each government department with medication and necessities for delivery.

In the case of a royal concubine’s delivery, they set up the Hosan-cheong. However, unlike with Sansil-cheong, there were not three managerial officials in charge. The male doctors replaced them instead. The social status of male doctors also was not higher than those in Sansil-cheong and their number was less than
those in Sansil-cheong. Nonetheless, the medication and necessities for delivery were supplied with the same amount as in the Sansil-cheong.

After the eighteenth century, with several queens in succession being infertile, the royal family began to bring in Gantaek-Hugung in order to ensure a successor to the throne. When the selected Gantaek-Hugung got pregnant, though she was only a concubine, the king ordered the establishment of a Sansil-cheong that was similar to that of queens.

For the history of women in Joseon Korea, the theme of childbirth and childcare can show us their lives in detail. As stated above, however, the theme has been neglected and there have been few studies on the subject. This has been due in part to lack of understanding about the importance of the topic, scarce data available, and lack of an established research methodology.

By examining the deliveries of royal women’s children and the cultural system related to it, this article widens the horizon of understanding about the hierarchical system among royal women, the importance of delivery, and how the distinctions of social status were revealed in the delivery process.

Toward the nineteenth century, royal women’s deliveries began to become a political issue, as declining royal fertility diminished the royal family’s authority and the king’s power. The meaning of delivery varied between social groups, notably the royal family and the common people. To the women of the royal family, delivery was of public importance. It was state-controlled, institutionalized, and ritualized. In the process, childbirth became closely related to the Confucianism that the royal family had adopted as their political ideology, which eventually created a new culture for royal women.
Figures

Fig. 1. Painting of the Luxurious Life of Guo Ziyi. Accession Number: Deoksu 3153. Each 143.9 x 52.7cm. Panels 3 to 6 out of 8 panels. Source: http://www.museum.go.kr.

Fig. 2. Sansil-Baeseol.
## Glossary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Korean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Great Cause for Congratulations</td>
<td>GyeongsulDaegyeong (庚戌大慶)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acupuncturist</td>
<td>Chimui (鍼醫)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annals of the Joseon Dynasty</td>
<td>Joseon wangjo sillok (朝鮮王朝實錄)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Babysitter</td>
<td>Bomo (保姆)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book of Genealogical Lineage of the Joseon Royal Family</td>
<td>Seomoon-gyebo-giryak (增源系譜記略)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book of Odes</td>
<td>Sigyeong (詩經)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cause for congratulations for having numerous children like swarm of grasshoppers</td>
<td>JongSa-Ji-Kyeung (螽斯之慶)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cause for congratulations for the kingdom</td>
<td>JongSa-Ji-Kyeung (宗社之慶)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clan rules</td>
<td>Jongbeop (宗法)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concubine receiving king’s grace</td>
<td>Seungeun-Hugung (承恩後宮)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Court ladies</td>
<td>Gungnyeo (宮女)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily Records of the Secretariat</td>
<td>Seungeojeongwon ilgi (承政院日記)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detached palace</td>
<td>Byeolgung (別宮)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diary about a Royal Concubine’s Delivery</td>
<td>Hosan-cheong ilgi (護產廳日記)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fertility</td>
<td>Dasan (多産)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal letter of appointment made of jade</td>
<td>Ok-ChaeKmun (玉冊文)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gods of soil and grain</td>
<td>SaJik (社稷)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Hasten-birth talisman”</td>
<td>Choesaengbu (催生符)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner Palace Registries</td>
<td>Gungjiung-balgi (宮中件記)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King’s eldest son</td>
<td>WonJa (元子)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King’s nanny</td>
<td>Borgbo-Buin (奉保夫人)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King’s poetry</td>
<td>Eoeje-si (御製詩)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main palace</td>
<td>Jounggung (正宮)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manual for a Queen’s Childbirth</td>
<td>Sansilcheongchongggyo (産室產總規)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Code</td>
<td>Gyeongggukdaejeon (經國大典)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Officer in charge of the Gwoncho-je</td>
<td>Gwoncho-gwan (捫草官)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Painting of the Luxurious Life of Guo Ziyi</td>
<td>Gwakbunyanghaengnakdo (郭汾陽行樂圖)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palace Matron</td>
<td>SangGang (尚宮)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queen’s lady-in-waiting</td>
<td>Aji (阿之)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receive the king’s grace</td>
<td>Seungeun (承恩)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ritual held on seventh day after birth</td>
<td>Gwoncho-je (捫草祭)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Royal ancestral temple</td>
<td>Jongmyo (宗廟)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Royal physicians assigned to the king</td>
<td>Eoui (御醫)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Successor to first queen</td>
<td>Gye-Bi (繼妃)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Tenant talisman”</td>
<td>Chajibub (借地法)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three high officials</td>
<td>Samjeo (三院調)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useful Tips for Delivery and Childcare</td>
<td>Limsanyejibub (臨產藥知法)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wet nurse</td>
<td>Yumo (乳母)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fertility and Childbirth among Royal Women / Kim 103
Notes
1  Brigitte Jordan 1993.
3  Kim Jisoo 2010.
4  Han Yang Myung 1999. He pointed out that the previous “folk knowledge of childbirth” has limits and advised for the studies to be more systematic.
7  Ju Youngha et al. 2005, p. 18.
8  This important source is often overlooked.
9  *Taejong Sillok* [Veritable Records of King Taejong], vol. 27, January 16, 1414 (the 14th year of King Taejong’s reign).
10  *Danjong Sillok* [Veritable Records of King Danjong], vol. 10, January 22, 1454 (the 2nd year of King Danjong’s reign). *Ok-Chaek* 玉冊 is a kind of book in which letters were inscribed in honor of kings’ or queens’ virtues. When a lady was installed queen, the *Ok-ChaekMun* 玉冊 is made with the installing document. *Ok-ChaekMun* were made of jade into which the letters were inscribed.
12  *Gojong Sillok* 高宗實錄 [Veritable Records of King Gojong], vol. 3, March 22, 1866 (the 3rd year of King Gojong’s reign).
13  *Heonjong Sillok* 憲宗實錄 [Veritable Records of King Heonjong], vol. 14, July 18, 1847 (the 13th year of King Heonjong’s reign).
14  A hanging board in 1730, 22.5 × 62 cm., National Palace Museum of Korea, Seoul.
15  *Sukjong Sillok* 肅宗實錄 [Veritable Records of King Sukjong], vol. 30, April 27, 1696 (the 22nd year of King Gojong’s reign); and vol. 37, September 14, 1696 (the 28th year of King Gojong’s reign).
16  Yi Seong-mi 1994, p. 87; see also Park Eunkyeong 2012, p. 93.
19  Kim Jiyoung 2011.
20  Lee Mi Sun 2012.
21  Kim Yongsuk, pp. 4–87.
23  *Taejong Sillok* 太宗實錄 [Veritable Records of King Taejong], vol. 3, January 08, 1402 (the 2nd year of King Taejong’s reign).
27  Kim Yongsuk, p. 256.
28  *Diary of the Royal Secretariat*, vol. 50, December 01, 1873 (the 10th year of King Gojong’s reign).
30 Ibid., vol. 50, December 24, 1873 (the 10th year of King Gojong’s reign).
31 Ibid., vol. 50, December 25, 1873 (the 10th year of King Gojong’s reign).
32 Ibid., vol. 50, December 30, 1873 (the 10th year of King Gojong’s reign).
34 Jongyu-nyeon Hosan-cheong-So-Ilgi (K2-3618).
35 Diary of the Royal Secretariat, vol. 50, February 14, 1874 (the 11th year of King Gojong’s reign).
36 Jongyu-nyeon Hosan-cheong-So-Ilgi (K2-3618).
37 Kim Jiyoung 2010a.
38 Limsan-Yeji-Bup 臨産豫知法 (K6-4861). Seongnam: Jangseo-gak Library, Academy of Korean Studies.
39 Sunjo Sillok 純祖實錄 [Veritable Records of King Sunjo], vol. 12, August 11, 1809 (the 9th year of King Sunjo’s reign). The selection process for wet nurses was also described in Donguibo-gan [Principles and Practices of Eastern Medicine], which is an encyclopedic bible of medical knowledge and treatment techniques, compiled in Korea in 1613. It was edited by Heo Jun with the collective support of medical experts and literati according to royal instructions.
References

Primary Sources

Danjong Sillok 端宗實錄 [Veritable Records of King Danjong], vol. 10, January 22, 1454 (the 2nd year of King Danjong’s reign).

Gojong Sillok 高宗實錄 [Veritable Records of King Gojong], vol. 3, March 22, 1866 (the 3rd year of King Gojong’s reign).

Heonjong Sillok 憲宗實錄 [Veritable Records of King Heonjong], vol. 14, July 18, 1847 (the 13th year of King Heonjong’s reign).


Kimsan-Yeji-Bup 临沂豫知法 (K6-4861). Seongnam: Jangseo-gak Library, Academy of Korean Studies.


Secondary Sources


Kim Jiyoung studies cultural and gender history of Korea. She received her Ph.D. from the AKS Graduate School of Korean Studies in Korea. She was a researcher at the Jangseogak Archives in Korea from 2003 to 2010, and held a postdoctoral fellowship at Seoul National University in Korea from 2011 to 2012. She is a researcher at the Institute of Cultural Studies at Seoul National University. She has taught “Korean History and Culture,” “Introduction to Cultural Anthropology,” and “Cross-Cultural Studies” at Hansung University and the Academy of Korean Studies. She is participating in publishing a series of books called “A Library of the Royal Family’s Culture.”
Domestic Diplomacy: Empress Dowager Cixi, Sarah Pike Conger, and the Chinese Butler Who Brought Them Together

Grant Hayter-Menzies

Keynote Address presented at The Imperial Court in China, Japan, and Korea: Women, Servants, and the Emperor’s Household (1600 to early 1900s), University of San Francisco, Center for the Pacific Rim, April 18, 2013.

While researching the life of Sarah Pike Conger, wife of the United States minister to China from 1898–1905, as she experienced and recorded it while living in Beijing’s diplomatic quarter, I discovered that it was largely through the influence of Wang, the Number One Boy, or butler, at the American Legation, that one of the most unique cross-cultural relationships in East-West diplomacy had its genesis. Thanks to Wang, a friendship blossomed between the Buddhist and xenophobic Empress Dowager Cixi and Mrs. Conger, whose love of America and depth of Christian devotion were her two mainstays until she met China and fell in love with it too.

Sarah came to Beijing in 1898, a middle-aged woman from Iowa knowing absolutely nothing of China or the Chinese people. Yet she left seven years later one of China’s most passionate defenders. A survivor of the Boxer Uprising, that mob effort in summer 1900 to rid China of foreign exploitation, Sarah was the first foreigner to stretch a hand to Cixi, the one person who disproportionately bore the most blame for the disaster.

The daughter of a low-ranking Manchu official, Cixi was several years Sarah’s senior, born in 1835, and at sixteen was selected as concubine to the Xianfeng Emperor. Bearing the emperor’s only son, Cixi rose in rank after Xianfeng’s death in 1861, becoming Empress Dowager when their son, the Tongzhi Emperor,
ascended the throne. She served as regent for him and, after his early death, for her nephew, the Guangxu Emperor. This charmed life as young and beautiful imperial consort had gone up in flames in 1860 with the looting and destruction of the Old Summer Palace in Beijing by foreign troops during the Second Opium War; Cixi spent the rest of her life watching helplessly as China was then fought over by foreign powers jostling for precedence like irate customers at an understaffed Chinese-takeout counter. The Dowager had no reason to love any foreigner. However, when Sarah’s hand was offered, Cixi accepted it. This was something new and strange in East-West relations. Yet neither woman could have reached out to the other without help. And as unconventional as their own friendship was, especially so were the means by which it was effected.

Throughout her seven years in Beijing, Sarah came to depend on her butler Wang to teach her not just ordinary Chinese customs but how to enjoy and participate in ceremonies and festivals by responding gracefully to the complex demands of Chinese etiquette. Cixi also looked to someone seemingly just as unlikely—a teenaged lady-in-waiting named Der Ling. Though born in China, Der Ling—whose Christian name was Elisabeth Antoinette and whose title of princess is a matter of debate—had rarely lived there. But as a young woman of European education and American upbringing she was able to convey to the Dowager the meaning behind Mrs. Conger’s strange foreign gestures and requests. Together, Wang and Der Ling are reminders that behind every performance are stagehands who actually pull the production together. Theirs was domestic diplomacy at its finest.

Sarah’s first frustrated impression of Beijing was that it was a place of walls and locked gates. To understand the people with whom she would be living, Sarah wanted to meet them—especially Chinese women, who she knew were restricted to their courtyards by Confucian rules. Thus, though the Chinese language was beyond her, Sarah became an avid student of Chinese symbols. Around basic themes of long life and happiness—the character for which could be found on everything from roof tiles to lanterns, porcelain, and paving stones—circled a constellation of other symbolic prayers to the infinite: prayers for many sons, for wealth and health, for the benevolence of Guanyin (goddess of mercy) or for the special blessings of a pantheon of other deities or ancestors it suited a family or clan to worship. Sarah became interested in the deeper meanings of Chinese art and architecture at a time when English art critic John Ruskin had already primed the sensibilities of the public: “All great art is the work of the whole living creature, body and soul, and chiefly of the soul.”

Sarah came to believe that in order to understand the Chinese, she had to understand their art first. Historian James Hevia underscored this when he observed that “Her interest in finding meaning in Oriental splendor foreshadowed later reactions to the Forbidden City, ones that would re-imagine the palace and the city of Beijing as sophisticated works of art.”

Before his death in 1901, William Pethick, the American-born secretary of statesman Li Hongzhang, was Sarah’s advisor in Chinese culture, instructing her in what she called its “language.” Wang took the American’s place and became, like Pethick, a teacher. Not only did he advise Sarah on what colors of clothing and which flowers were appropriate for which season, and for which kind of ceremonial and informal occasions across the spectrum, but he drew her attention to Chinese traditional festivals which, in most foreign households
in Beijing, tended to remain in the servants’ quarters, set apart by race and class. Sarah’s other Chinese servants had also seen that she respected and was interested in their religious customs. On her first Christmas in Beijing, they responded in kind with two little trees decorated with auspicious Chinese symbols. Sarah moved what she called her Chinese Christmas trees into her inner sanctum, the Legation library, where she also kept a statue of the Buddha. There was a reason for this concealment. Sarah’s residence in Beijing’s diplomatic quarter had exposed her to too many examples of foreign distrust or open disapproval of the Chinese and their culture, criticism which was to extend to herself in time. It was usually a dialog that began with the premise that everything Chinese was strange, bizarre, and above all heathen, and ended with the snickering assessment that Mrs. Conger had “gone native.” In fact, Sarah embraced the Chinese with a compassion and deep emotion too precious to her to be exposed to unthinking comment, much as the Chinese Christmas trees and the Buddha in the library needed not display but protection.

It is clear that Wang understood this even as he understood instinctively when the time was right to welcome Sarah more deeply into his culture. By Autumn Moon Festival of his first year as butler, Wang was confident enough to ask Sarah if she was interested in joining him and the other male servants for their celebration of the festival, which was incidentally a favorite holiday of the Empress Dowager. Happy to be asked, Sarah followed Wang to an outer courtyard that only the servants used—an area many foreign memsahibs in Beijing would never have ventured to, from class prejudice or fear or both. There, Sarah joined and photographed all of her houseboys sitting at a round table, its top crowded with bright dishes and teacups, all enjoying themselves under the light of the full moon.

The Buddha said, “He who forgets self, be he the humblest of earthly creatures, will reach the Ocean of Eternal Peace.”3 Before coming to China, at a time of deep spiritual crisis, Sarah had made a vow to forget herself in order to learn about the people around her. Her enjoyment of the Moon Feast in the servants’ courtyard, the young men smiling as they drank their tea, perhaps offering Sarah a moon cake, was all the proof she or the Buddha might need that she had come very close to her desired goal: to fill her life with China and the Chinese, and to be ready to meet and, she hoped, befriend the Empress Dowager. First, though, she would have to pick her way to her through a thorny hedge of tabloid journalism which had sprung up around the Forbidden City even before the Boxer Uprising cast the Dowager and all Chinese as scoundrels.

Cixi’s bad press in the West began in 1898, when during the Guangxu Emperor’s Hundred Days of Reform, fomented by advisors like Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, she discovered that his platform included plans to depose her. She placed the emperor under house arrest and captured some but not all of his advisors. Kang escaped and from exile filled newspaper columns with fulminations against Cixi, charging her with every sin of depravity and misrule, including the murder of her own son, adding her to the list every Chinese had in his mind of imperial female tyrants of dynasties past. And later, Cixi’s alleged connivance in the Boxer Uprising, in which she was popularly believed to have urged on the mob like some supernatural heroine from Beijing Opera, put the final nail in her public-relations coffin.
After the Empress Dowager’s return from exile in winter 1902, when Sarah and other diplomatic wives came to the Forbidden City at her invitation, the Uprising was still fresh in the minds of their husbands, who saw Cixi and the Chinese as backward xenophobes willing to commit mass murder. These women, encouraged by Sarah, bravely disobeyed their husbands by accepting Cixi’s invitation, opening themselves to international criticism. Unlike these women, however, Sarah had lived through the bullets and bombs. It was easy to blame Cixi for the Uprising, but the truth of her involvement is far more complicated, a fact Sarah appreciated to a degree extraordinary for the times. “My sympathy is with China,” she wrote defiantly when such sentiment was tantamount to treason.

It was at this juncture that Wang, from the American Legation, and Princess Der Ling, from the imperial palace, played their crucial roles.

We don’t know much about Wang. He may have been Han Chinese—as can be seen in this portrait photo, his wife and daughter had the bound feet of Han women. Perhaps in his late twenties or early thirties when he worked for the Congers, though he had a family, he was supremely loyal to his employers. During the Boxer Uprising, when other servants ran away, rather than abandon the Congers to rescue his own family, Wang remained with them, keeping them and other refugees alive with food he caught or stole in the no-man’s land outside the Legation’s walls, often under deadly crossfire. Like Sarah, Wang helped fill sandbags, he took on all the American refugees’ laundry and assisted in the makeshift siege hospital, saving the lives of wounded and sick men, women, and children. Yet Wang also broke that cardinal siege rule of share and share alike by sparing from the collective dinner table a pony that was loved by the Congers’ daughter, Laura. His tender heart extended to Laura’s parents. When Laura returned to America after the siege, and the Congers had to spend Christmas in ruined Beijing without her, Wang set up a photograph of their daughter on a table in the library. He placed around it flowers and Christmas presents, as a Chinese family might offer incense, fruit, or rice on the altar before their ancestral portraits.

Wang had to push through some boundaries that were not easy for him to traverse. Though he was not what we would today term a dog lover, when a Shih Tzu puppy named Sherza, given to Sarah by the Empress Dowager, suddenly sickened and died, Wang stood quietly by and commiserated respectfully while Sarah wept over the lifeless body. He then wrapped Sherza in silk and laid her in a grave he had dug in the Legation garden, and planted flowers on the spot because, as he told Sarah, “I thought Madame would like to see them there.” With Wang, Sarah also tested her own cultural limits. Accustomed to American
household servants, often women with strong characters, Sarah at first was puzzled when confronted by her Chinese houseboys’ solicitous and selfless care for her home and family. “They are so quiet, attentive, careful, tasteful and exact about their work,” she wrote, “that they seem more like well-bred girls than men”—a less harmless form of the racialized regendering of Chinese males in America, where the braided queues and colorful silk robes of visiting dignitaries invariably led to Chinese men being seen as somehow womanly or effeminate to American men. Perhaps this is what moved Sarah to ask one of her servants to unplait his queue, as seen in a photograph she took of the occasion. Was this her way of proving that a man could have hair longer than most women did, could be careful, attentive, and tasteful, yet remain very much a man? For a Chinese male to show his unbraided hair in front of a woman not his wife, especially a foreign one, was not common in the China of that day; just unbraiding one’s queue publicly could be interpreted as disobedience to the Qing regime. Clearly this man trusted Sarah or he likely would not have assented to her request. And perhaps he did so in shared amusement with Sarah at the prejudices of “foreign devils.”

Before Wang, Sarah had made some serious missteps in her dealings with Chinese people. On one occasion, to help a female servant who had shared with Sarah her worries about her childlessness, Sarah overcame her scruples regarding the selling of children and made inquiries at a mission for orphans in Beijing about buying a child for her servant. The tough, no-nonsense missionary ladies didn’t judge, but they did bring Sarah back to reality: suppose they let her buy a child for this woman, and the woman’s husband then took the girl as his concubine? Suppose the woman herself wanted to employ the girl as a prostitute? This kind of thing never happened after Wang became butler of the Legation. Far from being the cringing and pliant Chinese male of Western stereotyping, he took the upper hand in helping Sarah inch her way into Chinese society. “[Wang] watches me very closely,” Sarah observed, “and I encourage him to do so.” Her encouragement brought with it incidents which in the typical master-servant relationship—especially between a foreign woman and a Chinese man—would have been unthinkable. On the occasion of preparing for an audience with Cixi, Sarah had carefully selected a pearl and coral ornament the Dowager had given her, thinking it might please Cixi to see her wearing it. But Wang stopped Sarah before she reached the door. “No proper time wear that summer ornament,” he told her. Sarah put the ornament back in its box, in exchange for another that passed Wang’s approval. On another evening, just as Sarah was leaving for a dinner with Chinese officials wearing a long, fur-lined, black satin coat, Wang approached her with that look. “More better,” he advised, “you wear light, long, foreign coat.” “Off it went,” Sarah wrote, “and my own ‘lady’s coat’ was donned.”

Far from being the sort of pretentious expat one finds in the stories of Pearl S. Buck, Sarah appreciated Wang’s advice, not just because she valued every opportunity to learn but also because, like the Chinese, she shared a sense of everything being in its rightful place, as foreordained as the motions of the stars. Through Wang and his faultless sense of propriety and proportion, his choice of flowers and his lessons in the encoding and decoding of auspicious and gracious messages in everything Sarah gave to or did for her friends, even to his help in decorating the Legation in a mix of Chinese and Western styles, Sarah learned...
to make her aristocratic Manchu and Chinese women friends comfortable, and from there it was not much of a step to requesting a personal audience with the Empress Dowager Cixi who, as Sarah acknowledged, had every reason to distrust a foreign woman like herself.

This is where Princess Der Ling enters the scene, or rather leaps onto the stage.

Seventeen at the time she was summoned from France in 1903 to serve at the Empress Dowager’s court, Der Ling went from the broad boulevards of Paris, where her father served as Chinese ambassador, and from her beloved mentors Isadora Duncan and Sarah Bernhardt, to the narrow hutong of Qing Beijing, and to the fearsome presence of Cixi, post-Uprising she-dragon of China. Such a cultural shift would have scared off most young girls, but Der Ling was adept at making adventure work in her favor.

She spoke and wrote Chinese, French, and English, but her preferred language was always American English larded with slang; and her amusement toward Chinese customs was that of the foreigners, not the natives, in China. As she said of herself, “At heart, I was a foreigner.” She was, and she was also a feminist when such was radical even for a Western-bred woman, let alone an Asian one, and in the 1920s she would shock Chinese society and the more prim expats with her flapper antics. She was a snob and a romantic, and she later exploited American gullibility through her lectures and books by claiming to belong to the deposed imperial family of China. Yet if Der Ling had any fixed point within her it was a sense that her life was one of high purpose, one meant to build bridges between East and West, to make China, and Cixi, understandable to the outside world. She was determined to take on the job singlehanded and make it a success.

Der Ling’s 1911 memoir of her service at court is the first eyewitness account of life with the Empress Dowager by a woman of Cixi’s own race, and it remains the classic tale of a Western-educated Asian woman’s experiences in an exotic atmosphere that, as Der Ling wrote, made her feel like Mark Twain’s Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur’s court. It features Der Ling in one of her many roles, that of roving reporter at the Qing imperial court, always in the right place at the right time to explain to her American readers the 150 dishes offered to Cixi at a single sitting, or candid details of the Dowager being bathed, or her outbursts of joy or rage. At court, Der Ling soon proved a very different young woman from the pliable maidens Cixi was accustomed to. She flouted convention and risked Cixi’s rage by refusing to
consider a Manchu prince to whom the Dowager wished to marry her off. (She later wedded an American soldier of fortune, who helped her market herself to the exotica-mad U.S. of the Depression era.) Unlike many Chinese women, brought up to be meek, Der Ling had been encouraged by her father to consider herself the equal of any man. Most interestingly, this girl who worshipped her own father came to see Cixi not so much as mother figure as a kind of exalted dad—calling her *qin baba* or, as Der Ling translates this term, “dear father,” an ironic reverse of Sarah Conger’s early impression of her Chinese male servants being like well-bred girls. In certain ways, Der Ling would have made a model servant to the Dowager. She memorized Cixi’s likes and dislikes, was respectful (except when Cixi spoke of marriage), and learned to deftly interpret and anticipate her moods and needs. Yet when faced with having to make Cixi’s bed, or carry food trays, tasks that were considered an honor by others, Der Ling was as aghast as most teenaged American girls would be today. Even after Cixi assured her that she was not to do any real work (thereby incurring the resentment of court ladies who overheard), Der Ling made sure she was always somewhere else when domestic tasks needed doing. In fact, Der Ling didn’t see herself as lady-in-waiting material at all, but as an educator. She ended up being something of a life coach to the tired and jaded Dowager, her aim to introduce Western ways to the imperial court and to China itself.

Shortly after arriving at court, Der Ling arranged to have European and American newspapers and magazines delivered to the palace. She translated on the spot all the foreign news for Cixi, especially features about other rulers around the world, proving that if Queen Victoria could allow all her news as well as her photograph to appear before the people, Cixi could do it too, and her subjects would love her the more for it, as was the case with Victoria and her family. Der Ling and her sister Rong Ling entertained the Dowager, demonstrating dances taught them by Isadora Duncan, and Der Ling gave the Guangxu Emperor piano lessons, noting with pride how well he kept time playing waltzes. She modeled French gowns for the Dowager, helped her try on her high-heeled shoes, showed her how to use French perfumes, hair dye, and makeup, and sympathetically sat with Cixi as she wept passionately over past and present losses. She even decorated a French-style palace for the Dowager—who hated it on sight.

As with Wang’s education of Sarah Conger, Der Ling’s most important achievement was to prepare Cixi for the American woman reaching out to her with what seemed an outlandish request: that Cixi sit for her first Western-style portrait, to be painted by an American woman artist, Katharine Carl. The portrait, thought Sarah, would be a way to combat the ugly caricatures of Cixi appearing in the Western press. It would also be a way to memorialize a woman she had grown to admire. She knew from experience the power of a picture to evoke emotion and inspiration. Until her death in 1932 at age eighty-nine, Sarah kept near her a portrait of her son Lorentus, in which the seven-year-old boy is shown as he was the year of his death, gazing out at a future he would never know. The death of an only son was a tragedy in which both Sarah and Cixi shared.

Cixi had already posed for formal and informal photographic portraits in 1903, when Xunling, a brother of Der Ling who was trained in European techniques, began taking photos of the Dowager at the Summer Palace and...
at her Beijing retreat near the Forbidden City (fig. 2 & 4). These images, some in costumed settings with Cixi in the role of Guanyin, are intensely revealing, particularly in that they often show Cixi more or less as her real self—wandering her snowy gardens, or gazing at her aging face in a hand mirror in what David Hogge suggests is less vanity than emulation of a scene from her favorite opera, *The Peony Pavilion.* But most of these photos were not released to the public view for a century (some of them were first seen in my biography of Princess Der Ling, *Imperial Masquerade: The Legend of Princess Der Ling*, in 2008; the rest in the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery’s 2011–2012 exhibition, “Power Play: China’s Empress Dowager”). For Der Ling, the first hurdle was convincing Cixi to agree to the portrait at all. For most traditional Chinese, portraits were only painted after death for display at the family altar. When Der Ling offered by example a portrait of herself painted in Paris by Katharine Carl, Cixi was up in arms at the sight of so much décolletage. A gifted amateur painter, she then criticized the shading produced by Western-style perspective. There were to be no shadows, she told Der Ling, and repeated often to Katharine Carl and throughout the period of the project. Der Ling eventually obtained Cixi’s consent, but her next challenge was to keep the Dowager to the artist’s schedule. Cixi was busy and restless, and soon tired of the sittings, so that Der Ling and her sister had to don her robes and jewels and sit in her place.

In the meantime, for Sarah, the portrait project opened a door. Primed by Wang on the symbolic utterances, gestures, and gifts that would be most appreciated by a woman like Cixi, Sarah was a hit from her first private audience. She and Cixi became simply two women of a certain age and similar experiences, who had been through tragedies and triumphs, who loved what was beautiful, and who shared a keen interest in the rights and education of women. Cixi paid Sarah the rare compliment of acting on her advice, issuing a decree to permit overseas education of promising Chinese and Manchu boys, and supporting schools for women in China. As a result of these meetings, Sarah was demonized by the American press for “taking a hand washed in the blood of Christian martyrs,” accused of excusing the trauma of the Boxer Uprising. Sarah forgot nothing of those fifty-five days of misery. But as she told a reporter, “Nothing was said between us of forgiving or forgetting.”

The important thing was not to blindly cling to these past events, like hugging thorns to one’s bosom, she said, but to sit down face to face with one’s perceived enemy and speak as one person to another. Sarah’s parents had reminded her in childhood, when faced with unfamiliar people or places, to remember that she was just as far from other people as they seemed to be from her. “If you look deeply enough in anyone,” Sarah told her granddaughter, who repeated the words to me, “you will find the good that is there,” a concept that is as Buddhist as it is Christian.

That it was Cixi’s humanity, not her splendor or exoticism, that appealed to Sarah can be seen in the latter’s account of a day spent with the Dowager at the Summer Palace. After a luncheon with Cixi, Sarah and ladies of the foreign legations took a launch out to the small island in Lake Kunming where there stood a temple to the Dragon King. On reaching the double staircase below the temple, Sarah climbed to the top, where a broad verandah and wide-angle-view of the Summer Palace unfolded. There Cixi stood waiting for her. “The Empress Dowager stepped to the marble balustrade,” Sarah recalled, “and looking out...
upon the wonderful scene stretched out before her, spoke my name. I went to
her and she took my hand in both of hers. Looking at the scenes about us
and beyond us, she said in a tender, thoughtful way, “Is it not beautiful?” As they
stood holding hands, quietly looking across the lake to the golden roofs and
crimson pillars among the trees on the opposite shore, both women clearly felt, if
they did not speak it, that they were sisters in appreciation.

With the portrait completed and Edwin Conger’s term as minister about
to expire, the Congers prepared to return to the United States in spring 1905.
Shortly before the departure date, the Dowager and Sarah had a final visit. We do
not know what they discussed. Sarah by this time had learned to be very discreet
about all her dealings with the Dowager. But she does tell us that after she had
left the palace and was climbing into her sedan chair, Cixi sent Der Ling running
after her. She explained to Sarah that Cixi had wanted her to have an amulet,
a “good-luck stone,” which dated back to the Tang Dynasty. The amulet was
carved from a piece of blood-jade, pale pink veined with darker red, which Sarah
describes as being in the shape of a hand. Cixi had removed the amulet from her
person, and “wishes to give it to you to wear during your long journey across
the great waters,” Sarah was told, “that you may safely arrive in your honorable
country.” The amulet had been worn by Cixi on her own great trek into the
unknown when she fled Beijing on August 14, 1900, surviving to return to the
capital in triumph two years later—one could call it a lucky charm indeed.

When Sarah reached the American Legation afterward, she first showed the
amulet not to Edwin or to any of her friends, but to Wang, who assured her that
the stone was “a very great thing” and that with it, the Dowager had blessed her.
Cixi gave presents to many foreign guests, including samples of her painting,
but only to Sarah Conger did she give such a gift as this. The Dowager and
Sarah would keep in contact until the former’s death in 1908, through letters,
photographs, gifts for Sarah’s young granddaughter Sarah Buchan Jewell (gifts
I saw when I visited the 105-year-old Sarah), even a small fortune donated to
the city of San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake, clearly prompted as much
by Sarah’s presence in California as by the disaster the quake wreaked on the
Chinese community there.

Xunling’s photographs convey more of the humanity of the Dowager than
either of Katharine Carl’s portraits. But when Cixi’s portrait was finally unveiled
in the United States, Sarah believed it supplied the missing key to the mystery of
who the Dowager was. As she wrote in her book, Letters From China:

True to the Chinese idea there were characters, symbols, seals and decorations. All spoke a
silent, but positive language…. But that which was far more to me was the Imperial woman
sitting there in her strength of character. As I gazed at the portrait I could recall a sweet tone of
voice, a gentle clasp of hand, a cordial smile…. There is a chord in human nature when played
upon by woman, that woman alone can hear and appreciate.

But without Wang’s invaluable guidance through these characters, symbols, and
seals, or Der Ling’s patient coaxing of Cixi, Sarah might never have witnessed
the portrait-project’s beginning, let alone seen the finished article that was
presented to President Theodore Roosevelt in the White House Blue Room. More
importantly, nor could she have journeyed into the mystery of herself, which
she realized she had come to China to discover. Even as author Isak Dinesen’s
manservant Farah Aden helped her, a Danish baroness, become a Somali in spirit
if not flesh, so Wang helped Sarah recognize her own Chinese soul, even as Der Ling helped Cixi see herself as a monarch after the motherly mold of Queen Victoria, a far cry from the image created of her in the West as the incarnation of Asian female evil. Sarah was to stay in touch with Der Ling but she would never meet Wang again, and we know nothing of what effect, if any, Sarah had had on his and his family’s lives. But we do know she was forever grateful to him. He was, she said, “The very best of the best.”

Thanks to this gallant, heroic, and cultivated Chinese servant, a Midwestern congressman’s wife who reverenced the American flag, Independence Day, and Abraham Lincoln, discovered that in her breast also beat a poetic, patriotic Chinese heart.
Notes
5 Ibid., p. 46.
8 David Hogge 2011.
12 Ibid., pp. 258–59.
13 Ibid., pp. 242–43.
14 Ibid., p. 89.
References


Grant Hayter-Menzies is an author who has specialized in writing biographies of extraordinary but under-appreciated women, particularly women for whom Asia served as a catalyst for personal transformation—women like Sarah Pike Conger, wife of the American minister to China (The Empress and Mrs. Conger: The Uncommon Friendship of Two Women and Two Worlds), Princess Der Ling (Imperial Masquerade: The Legend of Princess Der Ling), Pauline Benton, the pioneer of Chinese shadow theater in the West (Shadow Woman: The Extraordinary Career of Pauline Benton, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2013), or his newest subject, Lillian Carter, mother of President Jimmy Carter, whose Peace Corps service in the slums of 1960s India was the summation of a life devoted to compassionate care for those nobody else cared about.