

Keith McMahon. *Women Shall Not Rule: Imperial Wives and Concubines in China from Han to Liao*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013. 248 pp. ISBN 978-1-4422-2289-2 (hardcover).

So far we do not have much serious scholarship on the study of polygamy in ancient China, except for collections of literary compositions. Keith McMahon's newest book, *Women Shall Not Rule: Imperial Wives and Concubines in China from Han to Liao*, fills in this blank in the field of Chinese studies. In this book, written with conscientiousness and compassion, Keith McMahon illustrates early Chinese dynastic history from a very unique perspective. Rather than discussing emperors and heroes as in mainstream historiography, *Woman Shall Not Rule* focuses on imperial ladies – empresses and consorts – in the context of polygamist ancient China with scenes of self-sacrifice, torture and violence, and even mild pornography. The term “polygamy” in this work refers specifically to an institution of royal marriage in early China designed to guarantee a male heir. In addition to presenting an alternative narrative of Chinese history from about 1250 B.C.E. to 1125 C.E., the author also takes imperial polygamy as an approach to the study of sexual politics in China.

In the prologue, entitled *Sexual Politics and State Politics*, McMahon provides a few critical questions when considering imperial polygamy in pre-modern China. For example, how was imperial polygamy established? What were its values and ideals? How did it function in the imperial family and in the ruling elite, etc.? He shifts the readers' attention from the seemingly prevalent practice to its institutional structure and its impact on both male rulers and their women. The author also reexamines the authority of historical narratives. He reminds us that records about imperial families written by either historians or unofficial writers could be biased and based on imagination, particularly in relation to imperial women. The main body of the book is divided into three sections: early China (1250 B.C.E -317 C.E.), the Eastern Jin to the Reign of Wu Zetian (317 C.E. -712 C.E.), and the High Tang to the Liao (712 C.E. -1125 C.E.). Besides following a chronological order, the author offers a further overview of imperial polygamy in the first chapter, entitled “The Institution and Values of Royal Polygamy.” He defines the three key principles needed to understand imperial polygamy in early China as “love and favoritism, women and state politics, and the strict division between main wife and concubines” (p. 9). Each of the three sections consists of 25 to 35 accounts of influential empresses, consorts, servant maids and/or eunuchs in this historical period. The book makes these characters as significant as the male rulers. Some of the accounts, such as those of Empress Dowager Wang Zhengjun and Empress Wu Zetian,

demonstrate how the domestic inner world infused outside politics. Others explore the power struggles within the imperial palace, including the tales of Zhao Feiyan and Yang Yuhuan. The book also includes portraits of a few eunuchs, like Gao Lishi, who both served and controlled their masters and mistresses, as well as emperors who were weak (and sometimes terrible) rulers, such as Liu Ziyue and Li Yu.

McMahon's narratives of palace women in the context of the royal polygamist family offer many insights when rethinking the roles of imperial women in Chinese history. Documenting the lives imperial women in early China could easily fall into the trap of producing clichés, portraying them as merely victims of polygamy and patriarchy, or reproducing negative images of so-called "wanton" women, defined as being driven by jealousy and/or lust. Unlike the stereotypes of them as either submissive or lascivious, the author indicates that as a group, palace women were often far from silent and powerless. Many of them were capable of using their status and position to exert influence on political decisions. The brief vignettes put together in the collection describe both their virtuous qualities and poor behavior, illuminating their rich and complex personalities. The narratives concerning Empress Wu Zetian, Empress Wei and Princess Taiping offer examples of this and can be regarded as the strongest part of the book. Not only does the author relate details of their reigns, but also presents their fears, doubts, and desires. It is indeed valuable that these accounts reveal the following fact: imperial women in early Chinese history, despite being bound within polygamist families, were able to challenge the traditional inner/outer dichotomy of typical gender roles and the division between private sphere and public space.

In addition to the (re)discovery of women's agency in royal polygamist families, this work explores another taboo topic in Chinese culture - female rulers. McMahon fairly points out that female rulers in Chinese history often launched excellent policies and made better appointments. However, while earlier accounts faithfully recorded their contribution, after the Song Dynasty orthodox scholars tended to portray them negatively. The author argues that the motivation for drawing them as wicked female rulers was that they were considered unnatural and represented a threat to male power. Regarding some notorious literature accusing female rulers of sexual crimes, McMahon compares them with similar texts produced in other cultures, and suggests that male authors in particular let their imaginations go wild when writing about historical female rulers. When discussing Empress Lü and Empress Wu Zetian, the book juxtaposes accounts of Catherine the Great in Russia (1729-1796) and Irene (b. 750-755) in Byzantium. Such a cross-cultural perspective not only broadens readers' knowledge of

polygamy in other parts of the globe, but also disproves critics who claim that only the oriental writing tradition shames female rulers.

As a leading scholar of Chinese literature, McMahon could not avoid the question of the authenticity of the accounts. He balances his translations based on official histories with unofficial accounts and argues that determining precise historical accuracy is not essential. Another value of the collection is that it reminds readers how history is made and written between the lines. It is critical for readers to differentiate between “prescriptive” and “descriptive” accounts when facing a variety of historical sources. This book is extremely rich in early classical texts, including the *Shijing* (The Book of Songs) and *Shangshu* (The Book of Documents), as well as late imperial fiction. In addition to scholars in Chinese history, the book could also attract general readers with its vivid accounts of historical women.

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