

Wanton Women in Late-Imperial Chinese Literature

Models, Genres, Subversions and Traditions

Edited by

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The Polyandrous Empress: Imperial Women and their Male Favorites

Keith McMahon

After the death of her husband, Emperor Gaozong 高宗, the seventh-century Wu Zetian 武則天 called herself emperor, created her own dynasty, and, if the sources can be believed, had a series of at least four male favorites. After the death of her husband, Emperor Jingzong 景宗, the tenth-century Liao Empress Chengtian 承天 ruled as regent in place of her son and, again if the sources can be believed, took a male favorite and had a child by him. She appears to be the only empress in Chinese history to do such a thing. Wu Zetian, Chengtian, and others I will cite are examples of the ‘polyandrous empress,’ an imaginary category that I will define shortly but that for now simply means imperial women who had sexual relations with more than one man. It is an imaginary category because it does not exist except as a hypothetical counterpoint to the polygynous emperor, who was standard throughout history. But there were at least eleven empresses and one princess between the third and tenth centuries who fit this category; two were said to have had male concubines. All appear in what are conventionally read as historical sources, though that does not mean the reports are necessarily acceptable as fact. One can add cases such as Han Empress Zhao Feiyan 趙飛燕 and Wu Zetian in Ming pornography and the Queen Mother of the West (Xiwangmu 西王母) in early myth and other texts, all of whom were portrayed as taking multiple lovers. The world of rumor and slander plays a further role, including accounts from the end of dynastic history when Qing Dowager Cixi 慈禧 was said to have taken fake eunuchs as lovers and to have smuggled young men into the palace for sex, then murdered them.

From the above cases, the suggestion is that something like the polyandrous empress existed in China until around the time of Wu Zetian and Empress Chengtian. To be able to say this necessitates examining the notion of the polyandrous empress in terms of what polyandry actually meant in historical reality and in terms of the shadowy existence of polyandry as an imaginary phenomenon. The relation between the historical accounts and fictional treatments, including rumor and slander, is key in examining the formation of a repertoire of themes and images defining the political status of imperial women.

The repertoire was something to which people could turn to warn about and prevent crisis, especially when the situation arose in which ruling men were weak or unavailable and the empress was the person with the highest royal authority. Fictional treatments magnified the logic that informed the historical accounts by exaggerating the image of the wanton, polyandrous woman. That logic said that the authority, will, and pleasure that were the privilege of monarchy culminated in the sexual prerogatives that would also be assumed by the polyandrous empress. The woman in power was inevitably the sexually voracious woman. A further theme of this logic was the equation between the polyandrous empress and the impotence of men, which in historical reality most often took place when women regents appeared, that is, empresses who ruled when emperors died and heirs apparent were too young. The woman regent took command when men were weak and she threatened to keep men weak as long as she ruled—hence the need to eliminate and prevent her at all costs.¹

Such considerations take me to the margin between historical fact and fictional imagination and consider the boundary between the two as both porous but also meaningful in terms of what both share as representations of the fantasy of the polyandrous empress, which is a significant sub-category for what this volume otherwise identifies as the wanton woman. While trying when possible to distinguish between historical fact and fiction, my goal is to examine their common assumptions and expectations about who this woman is, and even about what we do not know about the woman and what people fantasize about her. Unfortunately, there is no consistent easy-to-use term for what I am talking about: ‘imperial women who had sexual affairs with men other than their husbands’ is too wordy. Other ways of referring to them include women who had male favorites, which does not apply to every case I will cite; extra-marital affair is possible, but sounds anachronistic and does not apply in all cases; illicit affair likewise fails to apply in all cases, but I will use both terms along with male favorite, which mirrors its common counterpart, the female favorite of the male emperor. The polyandrous empress is in part a term of convenience, although the etymological roots of the word, ‘poly-’ for

1 Thanks to two anonymous readers and to Mark Stevenson and Wu Cuncun for ideas in this paragraph (especially “magnified the logic” and “sexual prerogatives”) and for constructive comments throughout. In the treatment of Zhao Feiyan to Wu Zetian, I borrow material and sometimes wording from my previously published *Women Shall Not Rule: Imperial Wives and Concubines in China from Han to Liao* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013) and forthcoming *Celestial Woman: Imperial Wives and Concubines in China from Song to Qing* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016).

multiple, and ‘-androus’ for men, happen to suit my purpose well if we avoid too narrow an interpretation limited to multiple *husbands*. Finally, I will also use the term ‘women rulers’ to refer to imperial women, whether they exerted power as a regent or simply a person with royal privilege. In other words, the word ruler comprises the person who exerts power—or threatens to do so—even if not head of state.²

What the accounts of the figures listed above—at least eleven empresses and one princess between the third and tenth centuries—can tell us about real historical women is always tenuous because of the unreliability of sources. Women rulers around the world were commonly rumored to have illicit or secret lovers. The phenomenon is so widespread that one can hardly read any report without caution; some historians would dismiss nearly every instance I cite below. Nevertheless, dynastic histories and other sources record these cases, while few do from the tenth to the nineteenth centuries, although rumors still spread. We lack the conditions to verify our sources to the same extent that we have with women elsewhere, such as Elizabeth I of England or Catherine the Great of Russia. Reliable records tell us that the former had suitors, liked having them, and even openly kissed one on the mouth, but was probably a virgin all her life; the latter had a series of lovers, both before and after her husband died, and had children by more than one of them. In Byzantium, widowed empresses could remarry, sometimes raising their new husbands to be co-rulers, sometimes taking a secondary role, and sometimes bearing children. Queen Tamar in twelfth century Georgia, who inherited the throne from her father, divorced her first husband, married a second, had children, and maintained the dominant role with both.³

In China, remarriage for an empress was out of the question, even before the elevation of the value of widow chastity beginning in the Song (960–1278) and Yuan (1271–1368) dynasties. As sketchy as it may be, the evidence suggests that pre-Song women were powerful enough that they were able to get away with their sexual liberties and that opposition to such relationships was not as strong as it was later. The decrease in cases of imperial women taking male favorites paralleled the development of a stricter code of widow chastity, which, as scholars have recently shown, developed as a result of the combination of both Han and Mongol values.⁴ In addition, imperial women after

² See Keith McMahon, *Women Shall Not Rule*, 132–34 and 273–74.

³ On Elizabeth, see Carole Levin, *“The Heart and Stomach of a King”: Elizabeth I and the Politics of Sex and Power* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994); and for Tamar, Donald Rayfield, *Edge of Empires: A History of Georgia* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012).

⁴ For the scholarship, see note 40 below.

Wu Zetian had Wu's terrible image to contend with. Having male favorites in the alleged manner of Wu Zetian was a worse transgression than it had been before. Finally, the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) stand out for their starkly lower number of female regents compared to earlier dynasties, which, as I discuss elsewhere, coincided with the neutralization of the position of empress that occurred in those times.⁵

The power of the empress or queen is a key factor in considering the possibility of her being polyandrous. The weight of judging the reliability of evidence lies mainly on the quality of the individual sources and on their social and temporal context. I want to say that particular empresses had particular lovers, and that the recurrence of reports in a particular span of time suggests a pattern. But it is possible that the particularity of detail was a ruse by the historians and that other historians followed suit. The best that can be done is trace how historians and others created an image, how the image was extended, and how it can be examined and questioned based on cross-referencing between sources, including non-Chinese sources. The polyandrous empress was more likely to have existed before the Song than after. That is something solid that can be said. What follows is in part the history of an image, in part the history of actual change over time, in spite of the difficulty of verifying sources.

From Queen Xuan to Wu Zetian

A detailed account of imperial women and their alleged extra-marital affairs would take too much time and space, but a broad-brush group portrait is valuable, in particular because I do not think anyone has yet put such a group together to see what kind of picture emerges. To the imperial women between the third and tenth centuries can be added three earlier examples who contributed strongly to the image of the 'polyandrous queen.' The eleven empresses plus one princess were Empress Jia Nanfeng 賈南風 of the Jin, Empresses Feng 馮, Feng Run 馮潤, and Ling 靈 of the Northern Wei, Princess Shanyin 山陰 (Liu Chuyu 劉楚玉) of the Liu Song, Empress Dowager Wang Baoming 王寶明 and Empress He Jingying 何婧英 of the Southern Qi, Empress Hu 胡 (wife of Gao Zhan 高湛) of the Northern Qi, Empresses Wu Zetian and Wei 韋 of the Tang, Empress Chen Jinfeng 陳金鳳 of the Min, and Liao Empress Chengtian. All appear in dynastic histories. The three earlier ones are Queen Xuan 宣 of the Warring States period, the first recorded female regent in Chinese history; the queen-mother of the First Emperor of the Qin, former concubine of

⁵ McMahan, *Celestial Women*, Chapter 6.

Lü Buwei 呂不韋; and Empress Zhao Feiyan 趙飛燕 of the Han, the last of whom along with Wu Zetian constitute the core prototypes of the Chinese wanton woman.

Queen Dowager Xuan (died 265 BC) ruled the kingdom of Qin 秦 after the deaths of both her husband and his successor, who was a son by another of his wives. With the help of her younger brother, Queen Xuan had her own son take the throne and ruled in his place for forty-one years until her death. During that time she reportedly had two lovers, the second of whom, King Yiqu 義渠, gave her two sons. Their affair lasted thirty years before she trapped and killed the king and their two sons in order to occupy his territory. When near death, she requested that another lover, Wei Choufu 魏丑夫 (whose name means 'ugly man') be sacrificed and buried with her, but others persuaded her to abandon her wish. She once had a ribald conversation with a foreign envoy in which she stated that she used to object if her husband, the now deceased king, put his leg across her body. It was too heavy. But she was pleased if he lay on top of her with his whole body. The passage appears in the late-Zhou text *Strategies of the Warring States* (*Zhanguo ce* 戰國策), her point being to distinguish between actions that were beneficial and ones that were not. The envoy sought her help in his battle against another kingdom and she wished to be convinced that helping him would benefit her kingdom, hence her use of the example of her and her husband.⁶

Regardless of the degree of truth in the reports about Queen Xuan, which we may never be able to determine, let us read her affair with King Yiqu as evidence of a practical effort to gain political alliance. She saw no reason to remain a widow. The combination of intimacy and political alliance will be seen in future cases. A second example is the reputed relationship between the concubine of the Qin statesman Lü Buwei 呂不韋 (died 235 BC) and the king of Qin. As Sima Qian 司馬遷 (died 86 BCE) wrote, but many think unreliably, the king coveted the concubine; Lü gave her to him, knowing that she was already pregnant; and she gave birth to a son who eventually succeeded the king and became First Emperor of China, Qin Shi Huang 秦始皇. She continued her

6 Her husband was King Hui 惠, who died in 311 and whose consort she was. His son and first successor, born of another mother, was King Wu 武, who left no son. See Sima Qian 司馬遷, *Shiji* 史記 [Records of the Historian] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1989), 72.2323, 110.2885 (death of King Yiqu); He Jianzhang 何建章, *Zhanguo ce zhushi* 戰國策注釋 [Strategies of the Warring States with Annotations] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1996), 148 (her death, Qince 2.16 秦策), 1009 (dialogue with the envoy and reference to leg, Hance 韓策 2.1); and James Crump, trans., *Chan-kuo Ts'e* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1996), 129 (death), 448–49 (leg).

relationship with Lü Buwei, who, fearing the consequences, found a replacement for himself, a man named Lao Ai 嫪毐, who had an unusually large penis. The concubine, now queen, had the man's facial hair plucked to make him look like a eunuch, but not undergo the operation, and thereby enabled him to move about freely in the palace so that they could continue their secret relationship.⁷ The stories of both Queen Xuan and Lü Buwei's concubine involved situations of political strategy and intrigue. In Queen Xuan's case, the *Strategies of the Warring States* has her speaking outlandish words as a part of a clever strategy—or was it putting those words into the mouth of a woman who was thought to have grabbed power and held on to it too long? In the other case, it is possible that Sima Qian inserted the story to assert that the hated First Emperor was a bastard. What is clear is that the image of the wanton queen was already forming by these times, though the venom and vilification of later stories was not yet as strong. The image still needed more proof, so to speak, and lacked enough examples, whether real or fictional.

The third example provides a more essentialized version of the wanton woman. An early source says that Han Empress Zhao Feiyan 趙飛燕 (32 BC–1 BC) tried to get pregnant by having orgies with men whom she smuggled into the palace. The source is a semi-fictional chronicle, *Miscellaneous Records from the Western Capital* (*Xijing zaji* 西京雜記), from perhaps 500 AD. The official dynastic history, the *History of the Former Han* (*Hanshu* 漢書), mentions nothing about the affairs, but refers to Zhao Feiyan's jealousy and plotting against other consorts, especially pregnant ones.⁸ *Miscellaneous Records from the Western Capital* portrays Zhao Feiyan in a way that became a permanent part of her legend for centuries to come. A fifteen-year-old boy named Qing Anshi 慶安世 was a court gentleman for Emperor Cheng 成 and a favorite of Zhao Feiyan. As *Miscellaneous Records* recounts, "He slept with the empress, who wanted to have children but never could." She used to invite young men dressed in women's clothing to her quarters and have sex with them, one after the other. "When one got tired, she'd replace him with the next. Still, she died childless."⁹ The episode later became part of Song and Ming tales, including *The Sensational History of Flying Swallow* (*Zhaoyang qushi* 昭陽趣史), a short pornographic novel possibly written around 1621. In this version, when the

7 Sima Qian, *Shiji*, 85.2505–14.

8 Ban Gu 班固, *Hanshu* 漢書 [History of the Former Han] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 97b.3974 and 3993–94.

9 Cheng Lin 成林 and Cheng Zhangshan 程章燦 ed. and trans., *Xijing zaji quanyi* 西京雜記全譯 [Complete Translation of the Miscellaneous Records of the Western Capital] (Guiyang: Guizhou renmin chubanshe, 1993), 60–61.

emperor began to prefer Feiyan's sister, Feiyan had a male palace slave named Yan Chifeng 燕赤鳳 smuggle another man she once knew into her quarters. Then follows the episode lifted from *Miscellaneous Records* about Qing Anshi and the young men disguised as women. In a climactic episode that first appeared in a Song dynasty version of the story, *The Unofficial Biography of Flying Swallow* (*Feiyan waizhuan* 飛燕外傳), the emperor dies because Feiyan's voracious sister gives him an overdose of aphrodisiac. The main difference between the Ming novel and all previous versions is the extent of detail in the descriptions of the woman's sexual strength. Few men can meet her needs, and certainly not the emperor, who can only look on as she takes one man after another. Although history and fiction agree about Zhao Feiyan's rise from government slave to imperial favorite, the *History of the Former Han* never mentions the sexual affairs or anyone resembling Yan Chifeng or Qing Anshi, but instead emphasizes the Zhao sisters' jealousy and conniving.¹⁰

What a story like Zhao Feiyan's verifies is the motif of the woman ruler who is also a wanton woman. The woman ruler, in other words, must necessarily be wanton and promiscuous. The eleven cases that come from the dynastic histories begin with Jia Nanfeng 賈南風 (257–300), wife and empress of Emperor Hui 惠 (reigned 290–306) of the Jin 晉. A key feature of her account as composed in the *Jin History* (*Jinshu* 晉書) is that the emperor was mentally unfit, so much so that his father, Emperor Wu 武, once sent one of his own concubines to initiate his son in sex. As for Jia Nanfeng, she was said to have smuggled men into the palace to have sex, after which she had them murdered. After a coup in 291, she and her family took control of the government, but she was deposed and forced to commit suicide in 300. In a continuation of the theme of Emperor Hui's lack of virility, the history reports that when his second empress became consort to another emperor, she claimed to have discovered what a real man was like.¹¹

Next are two women from the Northern Wei (Bei Wei 北魏), first Empress Dowager Feng (442–490), who served as regent twice. In contrast to Jia Nanfeng, but recalling Queen Xuan, Empress Feng's favorites were both lovers and advisors.¹² The other case was Empress Dowager Ling 靈, surnamed Hu 胡

10 Ban Gu, *Hanshu*, 97b.3995.

11 Fang Xuanling 房玄齡, *Jinshu* 晉書 [Jin History] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 31.963–965 (Jia Nanfeng); 31.968 (initiation of son); and 31.967 (real man, 始知天下有丈夫耳).

12 Li Yanshou 李延壽, *Beishi* 北史 [History of the Northern Dynasties] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 13.495–97. The first lover, referred to as her “secret” or “inner favorite” (*neichong* 內寵), a standard term for imperial favorites, usually female, was Li Yi 李奕, whom the empress's son, Emperor Xianwen (獻文, 454–476), executed when he

(died 528), who likewise served as regent twice and who allegedly had affairs with four men, one of whom was a prince she supposedly forced herself upon and two of whom rose to high rank and, as the dynastic history reports, “were openly licentious at court” (*xuan yin yu chao* 宣淫於朝), where *xuan yin* 宣淫, to spread licentiousness openly, was a standard expression in the moralizer’s vocabulary and a sign of outrage at the dowager’s alleged immorality.¹³

One of the most famous stories of wanton imperial women tells of the sister of the Liu Song 劉宋 dynasty Emperor Liu Ziyue 劉子業 (449–466), who ruled for two years, was murdered, and posthumously deposed. His sister, the Princess of Shanyin 山陰 (Liu Chuyu 劉楚玉, died 465), once lamented that it was unfair that men could have multiple spouses, but not women. The emperor responded by giving her thirty male concubines (*mianshou zuoyou sanshi ren* 面首左右三十人).¹⁴ In what seems like a continuation of granting women male concubines, a Southern Qi 齊 emperor gave his mother, Dowager Wang Baoming 王寶明 (455–512), “thirty male attendants, something that no other dynasty had ever done” (*nan zuoyou sanshi ren, qiandai suo meiyou ye* 男左右三十人, 前代所沒有也). There are no details about what either woman did with their concubines; and their cases produced no tradition of the normalization of the practice. The stories were told as jokes and were seen as signs of the immoral times in which they lived.¹⁵

The accounts from the Period of Disunity suggest a level of permissiveness for women that was unimaginable in later times. The following four cases fall

discovered the affair. The other two favorites, whom she had after killing the emperor and becoming regent again, were Wang Rui 王叡, a non-Han man who, it was said, “had free access to her bedroom” (*churu wonei* 出入臥內) and was a specialist in astronomy and divination, and Lin Chong 林沖, who likewise “received favor within the curtained chambers” (*jian chong weiwu* 見寵幃幄) and was an astute advisor, even to Xianwen’s successor after the dowager died.

- 13 Li Yanshou, *Beishi*, 13.503–505 (the prince, “spreading licentiousness”); Wei Shou 魏收, *Weishu* 魏書 [History of the Wei] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 13.337–340; Sima Guang 司馬光, *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 [Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government] (Taipei: Shijie shuju, 1974), 149.4656 (forcing prince to “favor” her), and 150.4698 (reference to two others); and Jennifer Holmgren, “Empress Dowager Ling of the Northern Wei and the T’o-pa Sinicization Question,” in *Papers on Far Eastern History* 18 (1978): 123–70.
- 14 Shen Yue 沈約, *Songshu* 宋書 [History of the Song] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 7.147–48. She was also said to have tried to seduce a young official, but he refused and she finally released him.
- 15 Li Yanshou 李延壽, *Nanshi* 南史 [History of the Southern Dynasties] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 11.331. Liang 梁 dynasty Xu Zhaopei 徐昭佩 (ca. 500–549), first wife of the third ruler, Emperor Yuan 元 (508–555), died before he became emperor, but was said to have had affairs with handsome young men. See Li Yanshou, *Nanshi*, 12.340–42.

into the category of illicit affairs, none of which appear to involve political alliance. Empress Feng Run 馮潤 (died 499) of the Northern Wei lived between Empresses Feng and Ling and was notorious for her affair with the eunuch Gao Pusa 高菩薩. It is not known whether he was a true eunuch or a monk disguised as one. When the emperor found out, he severed relations with her.¹⁶ Two more cases are of concubines, both belonging to the first great leader of the Northern Qi (Bei Qi 北齊), Gao Huan 高歡 (496–547), and both of whom had affairs with members of his family. The first had an affair with Gao's brother, whom Gao killed; she was sent away and later re-married. His lenient treatment probably had to do with the fact that Gao wanted to maintain good relations with the powerful clan to which she belonged. The other consort, Zheng Dache 鄭大車, was Han and had been previously married to one of Gao Huan's Tabgatch puppet rulers. While Gao was away from court, his oldest son "committed incest with her." Another source reports that Consort Zheng slept with her own son, Gao Huan's fourteenth. Was this a case of a woman involved in two cases of incest, one with the son of another wife and one with her own son? Or have the historians confused one case with another?¹⁷ A final case before arriving at Wu Zetian is Empress Hu 胡 of the Northern Qi, mother of Gao Wei 高緯 (557–577), the last Northern Qi emperor. She was said to have had an affair with a Central Asian merchant, indecent relations with eunuchs, and an affair with a Buddhist monk, whom she invited into the palace where "she lived with him day and night." When Last Ruler Gao discovered the last affair, he had the monk executed and his mother temporarily imprisoned. She allegedly continued her wanton behavior after the fall of the dynasty, dying sometime at the end of the sixth century.¹⁸

The above examples, spanning approximately two-hundred years beginning with Jia Nanfeng, suggest that imperial women in this period enjoyed unusual freedoms, though they were subject to criticism and punishment. Wu Zetian 武則天 (625–705) of the Tang represents the culmination of the story of the polyandrous woman. After her husband died and she became de facto ruler, she is said to have begun an affair in 685 with a man named Feng Xiaobao 馮小寶 (died 694), who made his living selling women's cosmetics. The empress renamed him Xue Huaiyi 薛懷義 and had him shave his head and be ordained

16 Li Yanshou, *Beishi*, 13.498–502.

17 Li Yanshou, *Beishi*, 14.519; Li Baiyao 李百藥, *Beiqi shu* 北齊書 [History of the Northern Qi] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1972), 10.139 (Zheng and son); and Jennifer Holmgren, "Family, Marriage and Political Power in Sixth Century China: A Study of the Kao Family of Northern Ch'i, c. 520–550," *Journal of Asian History* 16.1 (1982): 1–50 (Gao's marriages).

18 Li Yanshou, *Beishi*, 14.522–23 (merchant, He Shikai 和士開, and monk, Tan Xian 曇獻).

as a Buddhist monk in order to have easy access to the palace. The affair lasted ten years until she tired of his excesses, especially his setting fire to a part of the palace in resentment at her taking a new lover, an imperial physician named Shen Nanqiu 沈南璆. In 695 she had Xue murdered.¹⁹ The historians were reserved in reference to her affairs, none of which were with politically talented men like Empress Feng's. The *Old Tang History*, which is more sympathetic to Wu than the *New Tang History* or the *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government*, does not explicitly refer to the affair with Xue, but for her second affair states that the imperial physician "gained her favor" (*de xing* 得幸). These words typically refer to a consort who gains favor and sexual access with the emperor and, although in some contexts the words do not necessarily mean that there were sexual relations, the writers probably meant to insinuate that there were. The *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government* reports that Xue "gained the favor" of the empress, while the *New Tang History* says that she "was intimate with him" (*yu si* 與私), which unmistakably assert a sexual affair. Writers in later centuries, especially the Ming and Qing, liked to picture women over sixty who were still lusty and driven to have affairs with younger men. The only sensation the Song historians add to their reports is that "even though the empress was elderly, she was skillful with her make-up, and even those close to her were unaware of how much she had aged."²⁰ Another notable point about the empress and Xue Huaiyi is the fact that the *Old Tang History* places his biography in the chapter on "In-law Relations," which dynastic histories usually reserve for an emperor's wives and concubines. The imperial physician also appears here. Although one cannot assign too much importance to this categorization, it nevertheless hints at the resemblance the historians saw between Xue Huaiyi and female consorts married into the imperial family. By not placing them in the chapter on imperial in-laws, on the other hand, the *New Tang History* denies them the slightest hint of normalization.²¹

Wu Zetian's next male favorites were two half-brothers in their twenties, Zhang Yizhi 張易之 and Zhang Changzong 張昌宗, who were known for their delicate beauty. Skilled in music and song, they "wore powder on their faces

19 Liu Xu 劉昫, et al., *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書 [Old Tang History] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 183.4741, 4743; Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 and Song Qi 宋祁, *Xin Tangshu* 新唐書 [New Tang History] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 76.3483; and Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, 205.6499. On Wu Zetian, see McMahon, *Women Shall Not Rule*, 187–202.

20 Liu Xu, *Jiu Tangshu*, 183.4743; Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, 203.6436; Ouyang Xiu, *Xin Tangshu*, 76.3480 and 3482 (make-up); and Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, 205.6487 (make-up).

21 Liu Xu, *Jiu Tangshu*, 183.4741–43 (Xue Huaiyi).

and rouge on their lips" (*fu fen shi zhu* 傅粉施朱), a common practice for men in the Period of Disunity and the Tang, and dressed in extravagant clothing. Their time with the empress began in the late 690s when the empress was seventy-two and lasted until she was eighty. The *Old Tang History* never suggests that the relationship was sexual; the *New Tang History* says that they "gained her favor." At first they mainly entertained her, but eventually became involved in politics and were audaciously corrupt. Although officials complained that the brothers were guilty of lewd and shameless behavior and encouraged decadence at court (referring to the young men as 'inner favorites,' *neichong* 內寵), the empress dealt with serious internal and external matters as before. The Zhang's involvement in the issue of imperial succession finally tipped the scale, at which point conspirators dethroned the empress and had the Zhang brothers decapitated.²² Shortly after Wu Zetian, Emperor Zhongzong's 中宗 Empress Wei 韋 (died 710), the ninth of eleven cases, allegedly had an affair with Wu Zetian's nephew, Wu Sansi 武三思.²³

The Period after Wu Zetian

Some say that the bias against Wu Zetian was so strong that the evidence about her sexual intimacies is unreliable. Nevertheless, she was a key turning point in that later women had a much greater example to avoid than they previously had in Empress Lü of the Han. Imperial women began consciously avoiding resemblance to Wu; and officials and other critics cited her when warning about Wu Zetian-like behavior in the palace.²⁴ The remaining two of the eleven cases I have identified as historically significant are from the tenth century, Empress Chen Jinfeng 陳金鳳 of the Min 閩 dynasty and Empress Chengtian 承天 of the Liao. Chen Jinfeng (died 935) was a favorite of the first emperor of the Min (909–945), one of the Ten Kingdoms. When the emperor became ill, she began an illicit relationship with one of his confidants, through whom she had an affair with an official who as a youth had been intimate with the confidant.

22 Liu Xu, *Jiu Tangshu*, 78.2706 (powder and rouge); Ouyang Xiu, *Xin Tangshu*, 76.3484 (gaining favor), 104.4014 (lewdness); and Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, 206.6538, 6546–47.

23 Liu Xu, *Jiu Tangshu*, 51.2172.

24 McMahon, *Women Shall Not Rule*, 227, 233, 244. On the rejection of negative evidence about Wu, see Mark Edward Lewis, *China's Cosmopolitan Empire: the Tang Dynasty* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 36; See also Dora Shu-fang Dien, *Empress Wu Zetian in Fiction and in History: Female Defiance in Confucian China* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, Inc., 2004), 27–57.

She was killed during a coup along with the emperor and her two lovers. She became the subject of a late Ming story containing features common to pornographic tales of the time, including a husband's homoerotic affair leading to intimacy between his lover and the husband's wife or concubine, a man and multiple wives in bed while others watch, and the motif of one dissolute act linking to another until all involved meet a dire end. In Chen Jinfeng's story, fact and fiction are difficult to distinguish, though all sources refer to her affairs with the two men.²⁵

The Liao Empress Chengtian 承天 (954–1009) was famous for having led an army to victory over the armies of the second Song emperor. Her affair appears to have been openly accepted. After her husband died and she became regent, she began a relationship with the Chinese official Han Derang 韓德讓 (941–1011), whose father and grandfather had served the Liao since the founding of the dynasty and who had been awarded the founder's surname. Although the affair does not appear in the *History of the Liao*, it can be found in the writings of two Song dynasty visitors to the Liao court and in the thirteenth-century chronicle known as the *History of the Qidan Kingdom* (*Qidan guozhi* 契丹國志). It was said that the empress and Han were betrothed when young, but that the imperial clan requested her for themselves and forced her to break off the engagement. While serving as regent for her son, however, she asked Han to resume their relationship, after which he had “free entry to her curtained chambers.” Two other remarkable facts were that they had a son, although the *History of the Liao* likewise fails to refer to him, and that they poisoned Han's wife. Han was twelve years older than she and was one of her main advisors, becoming commander-in-chief of the Northern Chancellery, a position normally reserved for Liao nobles. He was later appointed grand counselor. The fact that one of the Song visitors wrote as an official ambassador lends weight to his account, which was not written in a vilifying or sensational way. If the

25 McMahan, *Woman Shall Not Rule*, 251–55; Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, 279.9128, 9132–34 (which says she was “vulgar and lascivious”); Ouyang Xiu, *Xin Wudai shi* 新五代史 [New History of the Five Dynasties] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 68.849–50; Wu Renchen 吳任臣, *Shiguo chunqiu* 十國春秋 [Spring and Autumn of the Ten Kingdoms] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), 94.1360–62; and for the fictional source used by the author of *Shiguo chunqiu*, see Xu Tong 徐燻 (1561–99), *Jinfeng waizhuan* 金鳳外傳 [The Unofficial Biography of Chen Jinfeng], *Xuelin manlu* 學林漫錄 [Casual Notes from the Forest of Learning], 15 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2000): 231–40 (thanks to Liu Yongqiang 劉勇強 of Beijing University for this source).

relationship was real and openly acknowledged, it would be the last of its kind in Chinese dynastic history.²⁶

The remaining cases that I have found, of which there are seven, though there are undoubtedly more, are either clearly false or minor in comparison with the previous ones. As recorded in the dynastic history, the Liao dynasty Empress Xuanyi 宣懿 (late eleventh century) was falsely accused of adultery as part of a plot to depose her; she committed suicide.²⁷ Also reported in the dynastic history, after the Jin 金 dynasty Emperor Hailing 海陵 (1122–1161) spurned one of his wives, she allegedly had an affair with one of her female servants (thus, strictly speaking, not an example of a ‘polyandrous’ woman); another of Hailing’s consorts allegedly smuggled a lover into her chambers in a clothing trunk and disguised him by dressing him as a woman.²⁸ For many centuries, people wrongly believed that the younger sister of Empress Yang 楊 (1162–1232) of Song 宋 Emperor Ningzong 寧宗 had an affair with a court painter. A late Ming story told of Empress Yang having an affair with the inner-court advisor, Shi Miyuan 史彌遠.²⁹ The rumor of an unofficial chronicle

26 See McMahon, *Women Shall Not Rule*, 260–62; Chen Shu 陳述 ed., *Quan Liao wen* 全遼文 [Complete Liao Writings] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), 360–361 (report by Liu Bin 劉斌 about son and murder); Ye Longli 葉隆禮, *Qidan guozhi* 契丹國志 [History of the Qidan Kingdom] (Taipei: Guangwen shuju, 1968), 13.132 (affair with Han); and Lu Zhen 路振, *Chengyao lu* 乘軺錄, in *Songchao shishi leiyan* 宋朝事實類苑 [Collected Song Dynasty Documentation Arranged Categorically], ed. Jiang Shaoyu 江少虞 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1981), 1010–16, especially 1011 and 1013–14 (ambassador’s report). For a translation of *Chengyao lu*, see David Curtis Wright, *The Ambassadors Records: Eleventh-century Reports on Sung Embassies to the Liao*, Papers on Inner Asia no. 29 (Bloomington: Research Institute for Inner Asian Studies, 1998), 30 (free entry and exit, wife killed, birth of son) and 38 (seeing son, description of empress; using Wright’s translation with minor modification). On Han Derang in *Liaoshi*, see Tuotuo 脫脫, et al. *Liaoshi* 遼史 [History of the Liao] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974) 82.1289–91 (sonless). Also see Linda Cooke Johnson, *Women of the Conquest Dynasties: Gender and Identity in Liao and Jin China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011), 154–62 (including reference to recent archaeological discovery that Han was buried in tomb next to hers; I have not been able to relocate this online source).

27 Tuotuo, *Liaoshi*, 23.277–78 and 71.1205–06.

28 Tuotuo, *Jinshi* 金史 [History of the Jin] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 63.1509–10. In addition, the son of a high minister was reported to have had an affair with a Jin imperial concubine; see Johnson, *Women of the Conquest Dynasties*, citing Franke, which I have been unable to further trace.

29 Hui-shu Lee, *Empresses, Art, and Agency in Song Dynasty China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010), 19–20, 187, 192–205. For the late Ming story, see the seventh story of *Xihu erji* 西湖二集.

reported that a Yuan 元 dynasty minister visited Empress Dowager Budashiri 卜答失里 (13th century) secretly at night.³⁰ The *History of the Ming* reports that Consort Zheng 鄭 of Ming Emperor Shenzong 神宗 (1563–1620) had an affair with a co-conspirator in a plot to seize power.³¹ Rumors have long told of the promiscuity of Qing Empress Dowager Xiaozhuang 孝莊 (Bumbutai, 1613–1688), mother of the Shunzhi 順治 emperor and grandmother of the Kangxi 康熙 emperor. She was said to have had an affair with or married Dorgon, one of the early Qing leaders, and in another case to have made advances to a Qing official.³² A final case is that of Dowager Cixi, about whom both Chinese and foreign writers fabricated reports of her affairs with eunuchs and men smuggled into the palace, which I will discuss shortly. Budashiri, Consort Zheng, and Bumbutai are the only ones who resemble the earlier type of ruling woman who was involved with a political ally.

From the sources that we have, it appears that after Wu Zetian and for about the next twelve-hundred years imperial women changed their behavior. Some might say the northern conquest dynasties, from the Northern Wei to the Liao, Jin, and Yuan, should be considered separately since their gender customs differed from the Han-ruled dynasties. Turco-Mongolian regimes of Central Asia granted elite women the right to openly participate in political and military decision-making. When those regimes ruled China with Chinese-style administrations, they retained some of their heritage, which may help explain the reigns of the Northern Wei Empresses Feng and Ling and Liao Empress Chengtian—though it happens that Feng's mother was Han (we do not know about her father) and that Ling was Han by both parents. On the other hand,

30 Quan Heng 權衡, *Gengshen waishi* 庚申外史, cited in John Dardess, *Conquerors and Confucians: Aspects of Political Change in Late Yuan China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), 68. The minister was Baiyan 伯顏.

31 Zhang Tingyu 張廷玉 (1672–1755), *Mingshi* 明史 [History of the Ming] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 114.3539.

32 M. Jean Gates and Fang Chaoying, in Arthur Hummel, ed., *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1943–44), 300–301; Tie Yuqin 鐵玉欽, *Shenyang gugong yiven* 瀋陽故宮逸聞 [Shenyang Imperial Palace Anecdotes] (Shenyang: Chunfeng wenyi chubanshe, 1984), 123–29 (Bumbutai meeting a Ming general); Lü Simian 呂思勉, *Shixue sizhong* 史學四種 [Four Historiographical Monographs] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1980), 61 (Lü's ancestor; thanks to Meng Fanzhi 孟繁之 of Beijing University for this source); and Zhao Erxun 趙爾巽, *Qingshi gao* 清史稿 [Draft History of the Qing] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1976), 238.9496–97 (biography of Lü's ancestor, Lü Gong 呂宮, who in order to resign from office claimed “complete impotence” 人道俱絕, which made Lü Simian speculate that he claimed this in order to fend off the empress).

was Wu Zetian the way she was because the Tang, although ruled by Han, was originally a northern regime influenced by Central Asian values?³³ It is possible, but I think it more useful to examine the records of these women rulers as part of an ongoing full-length drama about women and politics in Chinese dynastic history. The non-Han regimes are an inherent part of the history and would have been widely known about, even if they were thought to contain examples of what women should not do. As for the Qing, the final conquest dynasty, with the exception of Dowager Cixi, the Manchus had no women regents like the ones in earlier conquest dynasties; and as for Cixi, she led no armies and had no male favorites. From early on, Manchu imperial women adhered to Han values of widow chastity and, like Han imperial women from the Song on, avoided Wu Zetian-like appearances or any comparison with her.

Polyandry vs Polygyny

Having considered themes emerging from the stories in historical sources, I am now able to address the notion of the polyandrous empress in terms of the word polyandry in its normal sense. Doing this will clarify polyandry's significance in the history of Chinese imperial marriage and female rulership, as well as its significance in contrast to polygyny, which was the standard type of marriage of Chinese emperors and other elite men. Then I will broaden into zones of male fantasy and anxiety about the multi-partnering and sometimes sexually voracious woman in the forms of the mythical Queen Mother of the West, the wanton woman in Ming and Qing fiction, and the character type known as the 'famous courtesan' (*mingji* 名妓). In its customary sense, polyandry refers to a woman who has more than one husband at the same time. In contrast with polygyny, polyandry commonly occurred in situations of poverty and scarcity of women, while polygyny typically occurred among men of wealth and high status.³⁴ Polyandry and polygyny were symmetrically uneven in the sense that

33 The historian Chen Yinke 陳寅恪 (1890–1969) asserted that the Tang was heavily influenced by the northern dynasties; see Chen, *Sui Tang zhidu yuanyuan luelun gao* 隋唐制度淵源略論稿 [Preliminary Study of the Origins of Sui and Tang Institutions] (Beijing: Sanlian chubanshe, 2001), 3. On the power and privilege of women in Turco-Mongolian regimes, see the Prologue and Chapter 9 of McMahon, *Celestial Women*.

34 This was the case in China and Islamic regions, for example, in which women live in one household. In some societies, for example, sub-Saharan Africa, women live separately and each contributes to the income of the polygamous family.

a woman of high standing usually did not command the privilege of having more than one spouse, while the man of high standing did.

Actually occurring polyandry mainly took two forms, fraternal and non-fraternal, neither being a practice found among royalty. In fraternal polyandry, brothers shared both a wife and the common property inherited from their parents, which they did not divide up as they would if each brother had his own wife. Sharing a wife allowed the brothers to keep the family property whole and thereby pool resources for livelihood; if divided among brothers, property would become too sparse to survive on. Fraternal polyandry occurred in regions where it was crucial to keep property intact, especially areas of poor agriculture or under circumstances in which men were away for long periods, whether as laborers or mercenary soldiers, for example. In non-fraternal polyandry, men shared a wife because of poverty and scarcity of labor, land, and women. Non-fraternal polyandry was the main type occurring in China, where, as Matthew Sommer has shown, it was called 'getting a husband to support a husband' (*zhao fu yang fu* 找夫養夫). People drew up verbal or written contracts specifying the conditions under which a husband and wife might, for example, allow an outside man to join the family, contribute labor and earnings, and stay with them either for a certain period or until death. Polyandry occurred throughout the Old and New Worlds, including Europe, pre-Islamic Arabia and Iran, Tibet and other Himalayan regions, and India. In some cases it was temporary, lasting until one of the husbands could finally afford his own wife. A man who already had children might lend his wife to another man to beget offspring, after which the woman would return to her original husband; or an infertile man might lend his wife to another man to beget offspring and then take her and the offspring back. The term can also refer to a husband and wife agreeing to hire her out to other men for money and sex, thus constituting a form of prostitution. Some engaged in polyandry without a sense of stigma, especially in parts of Tibet where wealthy families also practiced it. But in Persia and China it was typically something that non-practitioners condemned and that those who practiced it kept to themselves. To begin with, polyandrists commonly lived in remote or distressed areas, where they suffered less interference from authorities that viewed the practice as an evil custom, again as was the case in both Persia and China.³⁵

35 See Matthew H. Sommer, "Making Sex Work: Polyandry as a Survival Strategy in Qing Dynasty China," in *Gender in Motion: Divisions of Labor and Cultural Change in Late Imperial and Modern China*, ed. Bryna Goodman and Wendy Larson (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2005), 29–54; and Patricia Crone, *The Nativist Prophets of Early*

Such in brief was polyandry in historical reality. To discuss it in terms of queens and empresses is to treat it as an imaginary construct, though a few women in world history appear to have asserted their power and privilege by taking multiple partners, for the most part serially and rarely at the same time, and by divorcing and remarrying as they saw fit. In only two hazily known cases did imperial Chinese women have what were clearly called male concubines, the Princess of Shanyin and Empress Dowager Wang Baoming. Zhao Feiyan of the Han allegedly had lovers smuggled into the palace, but the report about her affairs is unreliable as history. Of the cases I have examined, some of the male favorites were solely sexual companions, while others were political advisors as well. Of the eleven cases between the third and tenth centuries, only three are clearly known to have died natural deaths, Empress Feng of the Northern Wei, Wang Baoming of the Southern Qi, and Wu Zetian. Nothing is known about the death of He Jingying. Six met violent ends or were ordered to commit suicide: Jia Nanfeng, Feng Run, Empress Ling, the Princess of Shanyin, Empress Wei, and Empress Chen. Except for Wang Baoming, all were in some way punished.³⁶

In contrast to polyandry in historical reality, the form it takes in fictional texts, especially in Ming and Qing pornography, yields sexually voracious women such as Zhao Feiyan and Wu Zetian. Although they can only be negatively portrayed, they enjoy sex to an ultimate degree, at their extremes turning into sexual machines that cannot stop. In the case of a character like Pan Jinlian 潘金蓮 in *Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅, if her husband ignores her, she turns to other men. The sexual passions of the women in the eighteenth-century novel *Guwangyan* 姑妄言 are so huge that they mate with any male they can find, including beggars, dogs, donkeys, and monkeys. Promiscuous imperial women may almost disappear in historical sources after Wu Zetian and Chen Jinfeng, but fictional narrative replaces them with wanton women of both high and low status.

Another polyandrous queen existing from long back appeared in a more tolerable light, though she was not a historical person. She was the Queen Mother of the West (Xiwangmu 西王母), an ancient goddess of immortality who ruled a realm of her own far to the west of China, where she received visits from distant kings and emperors. Men felt privileged to meet her, returning to China with gifts of wisdom and drugs of immortality. She makes an ominous

Islamic Iran: Rural Revolt and Local Zoroastrianism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 391–438 (Persia and elsewhere).

36 For other references to royal women from non-Chinese realms who took non-marital lovers, see McMahon, *Celestial Women*, Chapter 9.

appearance in a Tang source about the art of sex, which reports that she had no husband and used to enhance her vitality by having sex with young men who afterwards suffered depletion and illness. This side of her tradition may have been less widely known than others, but it reflected a fundamental belief in Chinese sexual lore about the mighty sexual powers of women which allowed them to draw vital energy from men, who if they did not master the art of sex would suffer illness and death. But the Queen Mother of the West was not necessarily an object of condemnation. Her mythical status set her apart. She was a woman who ruled her own realm with no need of a husband; men were blessed to receive gifts from her. She was the most important Daoist goddess in the Tang dynasty, during which time she represented a role and a position that appealed to women who did not fit the normative roles of mother, wife, and daughter, in particular, nuns, prostitutes, and artists.³⁷

An historical figure sharing a number of features with the mythical Queen Mother is the 'famous courtesan' (*mingji*), who, though far from being an empress, likewise contributes to the image of the polyandrous woman. Skilled as an artist, writer, and musician, she is exalted by men who value her all the more because other like-minded men vie with one another to become one of her patrons. They hardly care that she slept with other men. She is sometimes an object of pity, thrown into the world of sex work involuntarily and hoping to be rescued by an understanding man, but instead mistreated and unrecognized for her true worth. For men who do recognize her, however, being with her is like entering a heavenly zone in which two people meet in deep monogamous love. They are temporarily and sublimely cushioned from the outside world, which in stories like the nineteenth-century novel, *Traces of the Flowery Moon* (*Huayue hen* 花月痕), finally crashes in when the man runs out of money to support her and the woman's owners demand her back. In other instances, the famous courtesan is a heartless manipulator, whose only goal is to fleece the man until she uses him up, then transfers to another. Only the master of the brothel, like the one in the late Qing novel *Nine-times Cuckold* (*Jiuwei gui* 九尾龜), can tame her by turning her into a concubine instead of a prostitute, thus paralleling the return to order of the empress, like Wu Zetian, who finally yields the throne to the proper male ruler.

37 See *Yufang mijue* 玉房秘訣 [Secret Formulas of the Jade Chamber], in Tamba Yasuyori 丹波康賴, *Ishimpō* 醫心方 [The Essence of Medical Prescriptions] (Tokyo: Edo bunkakusen, 1976), volume 6, 75–76 (men suffering harm); and Suzanne Cahill, *Transcendence and Divine Passion: The Queen Mother of the West in Medieval China* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1993), 3, 33, 38, 45–56, 58, 213, and 215.

Conclusion

It is safe to say that by the Ming and Qing, the promiscuous woman ruler touched particularly strong chords of excitation. From the sources that we have, it appears that after Wu Zetian and for about the next twelve-hundred years imperial women changed their behavior. Even if such a conclusion lacks a statistically large enough sample, there was a repertoire of images and motifs of the wanton, polyandrous woman, from which people as late as the time of Dowager Cixi still drew to create rumors about her sexual affairs in order to malign her. After the failure of the 1898 reform movement, opponents of the dowager began to slander her, Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858–1927) and Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929) among them. Others helped, including the Singaporean Lim Boon-keng (1869–1957), who called for an end to her regency in order that the Guangxu 光緒 (1871–1908) emperor gain sole power. Echoing claims made by Kang Youwei, Lim wrote that, when she was the Xianfeng 咸豐 (1831–1861) emperor's young consort, Cixi already “exhibited her charms to a mighty concourse of eunuchs!” Rumors spread about two of her favorite eunuchs, first An Dehai 安德海 (1844–1869), and second Li Lianying 李蓮英 (1848–1911), who, it was said, had not been castrated. Lim claimed that Cixi recruited handsome young men whom she disguised as eunuchs, had sex with, and then murdered.³⁸ We may surmise that Kang Youwei, Lim Boon-keng, and others drew inspiration from stories long since told about Empresses Zhao Feiyan and Jia Nanfeng, who likewise allegedly had men secretly brought to them for sex and in the latter's case had them killed. The reputed affairs between the mother of Qin Shihuang and eunuch Lao Ai, the Northern Wei Empress Feng Run and eunuch Gao, and Northern Qi Empress Hu and her eunuchs added to the mix.

In Cixi's case, foreign writers also participated, including Englishman Edmund Backhouse, and the Frenchmen Georges Soulié, Victor Segalen, and Charles Pettit. Backhouse wrote of his secret affair with Cixi, Soulié and Pettit of the dowager's affairs with men smuggled into the palace, and Segalen of a young Belgian who had an affair with Empress Dowager Longyu 隆裕 (1868–1913). Traditionally it was the lucky concubine who won the emperor's

38 See Lim Boon-keng 林文慶 (1869–1957), under the pseudonym Wen Ching 文慶, *The Chinese Crisis from Within* (London: Grant Richards, 1901), 75–76, 88–89; Sterling Seagrave, *Dragon Lady: The Life and Legend of the Last Empress of China* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 101, 267–71; and Li Yuhang and Harriet Zurndorfer, “Rethinking Empress Dowager Cixi through the Production of Art,” *Nannü: Men, Women and Gender in Early and Imperial China* 14 (2012): 1–20, especially 5, 8–9.

favor. Now Backhouse felt honored to accept the dowager's summons, though he feared he might not live up to her sexual demands. It was likewise with Segalen's Belgian, who was as if the last man on earth to enjoy such a rare pleasure, given that the Qing was soon to end. Following Lim Boon-keng's lead, Soulié wrote of men who were smuggled into the palace and then murdered by the dowager's chief eunuch. At first the dowager had the eunuch plunge the knife into the victims in the midst of their sexual ecstasy. Later she handled the knife herself: "The blood spurted into her face and made her swoon in a shrill and voluptuous agony."³⁹

However foreign their fantasies were to the Chinese tradition, they were similar in staging the reversal of order that the polyandrous empress's regime signified. Unusual possibilities opened up; strange situations suddenly emerged—hence Princess Shanyin and her male concubines, as if she could be a polygamist like the emperor; the Northern Wei Empresses Feng and Ling and their male intimates and advisors; Wu Zetian and her favorites, whom she entertained with impunity; and Liao Empress Chengtian and her apparent husband and advisor Han Derang. When a woman ruled, it was an abnormal, temporary, and experimental interval. It was an in-between phase, or could only be understood as such. The pornographic imagination reduced the image of the woman ruler to its base sexual logic, the bedrock of proof justifying the rule against female dominance, by demonstrating that the politically ambitious woman was sexually voracious at her core. In the meantime, expectations about widow chastity and female sacrifice had grown firmer and more explicit in the Song and Yuan dynasties.⁴⁰ A turning point occurred in the Ming, when the founder Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 prohibited the position of female

39 See Georges Soulié de Morant (who added de Morant to his name later), *T'seu Hsi: Impératrice des Boxers* (Paris: Éditions You-feng, 1997, reprint of 1911), 157–60, 198; Victor Segalen's novel, *René Leys* (1922); Charles Pettit, who wrote in 1928, cited in Li and Zurndorfer, "Rethinking Empress Dowager Cixi," 8–9; Hugh Trevor-Roper, *A Hidden Life: The Enigma of Sir Edmund Backhouse* (London: Macmillan, 1976), 34, 249–56 (Backhouse); and Sterling Seagrave, *Dragon Lady*, 14–15.

40 See Jennifer Holmgren, "Observations on Marriage and Inheritance Practices in Early Mongol and Yuan Society, with Particular Reference to the Levirate," *Journal of Asian History* 20.2 (1986): 127–92; Bettine Birge, "Levirate Marriage and the Revival of Widow Chastity in Yuan China," *Asia Major*, 3rd series, 8.2 (1995): 107–46; and Beverly Bossler, "Gender and Empire: A View from Yuan China," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 34.1 (2004): 197–223, and *Courtesans, Concubines, and the Cult of Female Fidelity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013).

regent, as he commanded in his *Ancestral Injunctions*.⁴¹ Other dynasties had expressed similar sentiments, but the Ming put them into effect. After Empress Zhang 張 (died 1442), who ruled as unofficial regent for her grandson, Emperor Yingzong 英宗, the two most powerful women in the Ming were nursemaids, not empresses, thus representing even more accidental and abnormal situations.⁴² In the Qing, male rulers remained strong for almost the entire dynasty until the classical condition for a female ruler again emerged, the youth and poor quality of the male successor, the Tongzhi 同治 emperor (1856–1875), at which point China's final empress regent took power, Empress Dowager Cixi.

What does this history of the polyandrous empress tell us? It is clear that female regents needed advice and companionship and that men from their natal families, government officials, and eunuchs were the most convenient for those purposes. In the Qing, natal family members were replaced by male relatives of the emperor.⁴³ Eunuchs like An Dehai and Li Lianying still played prominent, though not paramount, roles. In whatever period, intimate, sexual companionship was risky, both for the woman and the man she favored, but, I believe, was more feasible up to around the time of Wu Zetian and Empress Wei. Liao Empress Chengtian was exceptional and was the last of her kind in Chinese history.

The imaginary polyandrous woman, however, had an enormously real effect. Suppressing her in reality created a large space for her in the imaginary, which became a weapon against the slightest appearance of her in reality. In such an imaginary, the woman ruler was in danger of becoming a wanton woman; both were meddlers in the realm ruled by men. To ensure the wanton woman's non-existence, even the slightest hint of wantonness was all that was needed to suppress and remove her. Ming and Qing pornography took the image of the promiscuous woman to its raw sexual core, as novels such as *Guwangyan* describe. The fictional treatments magnified the logic of the

41 Ming Taizu 明太祖, *Huangming zuxun* 皇明祖訓 [Ancestral Injunctions], vol. 264 of *Siku quanshu cunmu congshu, shibu* 四庫全書存目叢書·史部 [Collectanea of Works Cited in the *Cunmu Catalogue of the Complete Library in Four Sections*, History Section] (Tainan: Zhuangyan wenhua shiye youxian gongsi, 1996), 29b.

42 Dowager Li 李 (1546–1614), who served as strict guardian of her son, the Wanli 萬曆 emperor, was another case, but did not rule in as major a capacity as Dowager Zhang. The two nursemaids were Emperor Xianzong's 憲宗 Honored Consort Wan 萬 (fifteenth century) and the Tianqi 天啟 emperor's Mme Ke 客 (1620s). On changes in the Song and Yuan, see McMahon, *Celestial Women*, Chapters 1 and 2, on Ming Taizu, Chapter 3, and on Dowager Li and others, Chapter 5.

43 See Evelyn Rawski, *The Last Emperors: A Social History of Qing Imperial Institutions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 128, 133 (allying with husband's brothers).

historical accounts, following the workings of that logic to their extreme. The ostensible theme was the link between the sexually unbridled woman and social instability, while within that raw core there was found to reign a level of ecstasy and pleasure that writers portrayed as awesome and magnificent. Such an awesome and tantalizing level of enjoyment ultimately had to be suppressed in favor of an ideological edifice defining the rule of society by men. Rulership was inherent to masculinity; the loss of that role turned gender roles upside-down, as the reigns of Wu Zetian-like women supposedly illustrated.

Who in sum was the wanton, polyandrous empress? First, she was an imaginary construct, and, second, a woman who seems to have appeared in history up to around Wu Zetian. As an imaginary being with real effects, she appeared and prevailed when and because men were weak. She was the sign of male deficiency, an equation that inevitably translated into one between male impotence and female strength, lavishly described and challenged in Ming and Qing pornography. The cult of widow chastity strengthened itself during the Song and Yuan dynasties, after which it became a permanent part of the culture of gender and after which the number of female regents and other powerful imperial women significantly decreased. The cult of widow chastity had as its obverse the cult of the wanton woman. One, the cult of widow chastity, was conservative and served men by controlling women. The other, the cult of the wanton woman, was subversive and haunted the male imagination.⁴⁴ Together, the figures of chaste widow and wanton woman performed as corollaries of the rule against women rulers, which reached ultimate strength during the Ming and Qing. Excluding women rulers, in turn, was a way of defining social harmony as something based on the necessity of male rulership. The ideology of male rulership maintained that as long as men ruled and as long as they were polygamists, social harmony would prevail. When women ruled, they were the sign of a fundamental threat to harmony and they were meddlers and they were wanton.

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44 The wording in the last two sentences was in part suggested by Mark Stevenson and Wu Cuncun.

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