

Empress' Grove: Ritual and Life in the Ming Palace

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Abstract

This study examines how the Ming court's rituals, the imperial harem system, and Taizu's instructions for consorts determined the status of the empress and regulated her life in the Inner Palace. Several factors illustrate this issue. The recruitment of empresses articulated the social and geographic origins of women, the qualifications of candidates, and the relevant institutions in charge of recruitment. Wedding and investiture ceremonies recognized the empress' status. The imperial harem system defined the empress' responsibilities and benefits compared to other consorts. Each empress's status was defined through the mortuary benefits regarding her burial site, mourning obligations of the people, her right to share a tomb with the emperor, and her ability to be worshipped in imperial ancestral halls. In addition, an empress's promotion, demotion, and deposition influenced the relationship between the Inner Court and the Outer Audience. This article also focuses on how the

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empress' multiple roles were legitimized and how they were, in practice, limited.

Key Word: Ming Empresses

Chinese and Western scholarship on popularly observed family rituals as well as state rituals as performed by the imperial household and court has established the essential basis for the study of this aspect of Chinese culture. Yet there have been relatively few detailed investigations to reveal how family and state rituals legitimated the political and social order through rituals performed in the Inner Palace. A detailed analysis of the symbolic meanings conveyed by the ritual acts in the Inner Palace would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the political and social structures, and explain the philosophy of cosmological schemes of the imperial system. Using the Ming case as an example, the study of the empress institution in ritual discourse is a key to any survey of the ritual system and political history of the Ming period. It is the assumption of this author that the multiple ritual functions of the Ming empresses served as the essential connection between the imperial family and the state. Her political and social role and status were rectified in the imperial ritual system and the harem organization and under Taizu's (r. 1368-1398) regulations for consorts. These reforms and regulations attempted to compromise with individual emperors' interests and the court politics of different reigns.

Considering the necessity of ritual as the foundation of family and state, Taizu dictated *Daming jili* (compiled in 1369 and revised in 1530) as the authoritative source of the Ming family and state ritual system. The specific rites and ceremonial facilities were further defined in *Daming huidian* (first issued in 1501 and revised in 1554 and 1587) and *Xiaocilu* (issued 1374). In these ritual texts, based on Tang (618-907) and Song (960-1279) models, the Ming empress's ritual roles were defined in Auspicious Rites (*Jili*), Felicitous

Rites (*Jiali*), and Funeral Rites (*Xiongli*). In addition, *Zhouli*, *Yili* and *Liji*, the primary sources for the formulation of rituals, were reviewed and annotated by different scholars from time to time. *The Family Rituals* compiled by Zhu Xi (1130-1200),¹ and *Simashi shuyi* written by Sima Guang (1019-1086) became the standard reference for family and state rituals since the Song period. These ritual liturgies provided the guidance for marriage, funeral, and ancestor worship, as well as daily life rituals in the Ming palace. In a vast conceptual framework, these ritual texts conveyed proper etiquette for special occasions, and for the quotidian life of the palace with the regulations on dwellings, food, utensils and cloths, social greetings, coming and going, sitting and rising.

The imperial harem organized in the Former Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.-9 C.E.) was systematized during the Song dynasty. Modeled on the Song system, the Ming imperial consorts were graded in ten ranks, which were divided into four categories as shown in the following descending order: the empress as the principal consort, the secondary consorts (*huangguifei*, 1a(i); *guifei*, 1a(ii), and *fei*, 1a(iii) were included), the third-class consorts (*pin*, 2a), and minor consorts (*cairen* 3a, *jiayu* 4a, *zhaoyi* 5a, *guiren* 6a, *meiren* 7a, *zhaorong* 8a, *xuanshi* 9a, and *shunü* 10a) (see Appendix).² Each imperial consort was honored with an

1 Zhu Xi's text is translated with annotations by Patricia Buckley Ebrey in her *Chu Hsi's Rituals: A Twelfth-Century Chinese Manual for the Performance of Cappings, Weddings, Funerals, and Ancestral Rites*. Also see Ebrey's discussions on the major texts of family ritual from Song to Qing in *Confucianism and Family Rituals in Imperial China: A Social History of Writing about Rites*.

2 The imperial harem systems of major dynasties are recorded in each dynasty's official history. Modern study on the historical developments of the imperial harem systems in different dynasties is shown in Zhu Ziyang, *Hougong zhidu yanjiu*; a specific study on the Tang and Song's system is Wu Yining and Gu Jichen's *Tangsong Houfei zhidu yanjiu*. Major western scholarships on this subject include: Richard W. L. Guisso, "Wu Tse-t'ien and the Politics of Legitimation in T'ang China," Priscilla Ching-Chung, *Palace Women in the Northern Sung*; Ellen Felicia Soulliere, "Palace Women in the Ming Dynasty, 1368-1644;" Hsieh Bao Hua, "From Charwoman to Empress Dowager: Serving Women in the Ming Palace;" Evelyn S. Rawski, "Ch'ing Imperial Marriage and

investiture rite, through which she was recognized with a title and a rank, which accorded her privileges, responsibilities and authorities in the Inner Palace. The empress was the leading consort in the harem system. As the stability of the family and state systems was believed to be predicated on the hierarchical order in the imperial harem, Taizu set strict rules in *Nijie* (issued in 1368) to restrain consorts from acting beyond their station or destroying the ranking order between the superior and the inferior. Furthermore, to secure the patrilineal imperial family from the threat of marital relatives, *Huangming zuxun* (issued in 1371 and 1381) was compiled to prevent senior consorts from involving themselves in court affairs and the world outside the Inner Palace. Palace women were not even allowed to visit temples in the Beijing City; anyone sending a message outside the palace would be punished. In order to prevent the favored consort from promoting her son as the imperial successor, the primogeniture system was emphasized: the empress's eldest son should always succeed to the throne. If the empress produced no son or was too old to have a son, any other consort's eldest son was the eligible heir.³

This study seeks to investigate critically how ritual, harem organization, and Taizu's regulations for consorts legitimized the empress as the wife of the emperor, the daughter-in-law of the imperial family, the principal mistress of the Inner Palace, the mother of the state, and the ancestor of the imperial family and the state. My discussion of the detailed procedure of each ritual demonstrates how rituals defining the roles of the empress served as mechanisms for achieving political and social cohesion and ensuring the continuity of the Ming family and state system. The symbolic meanings of ritual activities are also essential in this study insofar as they reveal the applied political and social significance and the

Problems of Rulership," and her *The Last Emperors: A Social History of Qing Imperial Institutions*.

3 Zhang Tingyu, ed., *Mingshi*, juan 113, p. 3503; Sun Chengze, *Chunming mengyulu*, juan 6, pp. 89-90.

limitations of the Ming ritual system. I examine how the imperial harem organization functioned according to the ritual system and Taizu's regulations for consorts and how those rules were enforced by court bureaucrats to limit the empress as an institution. I review the issue of replacing empress and the factors fostering or opposing promotion and demotion in the consort organization, and how they provoked conflicts between the emperor and consorts, and between the Inner Court (*neiting*) and the Outer Audience (*waichao*).

Certain ritual regulations need to be examined before the detailed ritual is discussed in the text. Before worshipping, the participants of the ceremony were required to have *zaijie*, a process of fasting, meditation, and abstinence from all pleasures for religious purification. It was considered an important rite that the participants of ritual ceremonies were required to undergo before they offered sacrifices. *Zai* was to purify one's inner desires through careful and sincere concentration on the spirit, which would be worshipped. *Jie* was to regulate one's outer behavior: restraining from wine, animal products, sexual intercourse, music or any other kinds of entertainment, including visits to undesirable places or association with ill people or people in mourning. The ritual performer was to have a bath and wear clean clothes the day before worship. *Zaijie* lasted from one to three days: three days for a principal sacrifice, two days for a secondary sacrifice, and one day for a minor sacrifice. A principal performer was required to have his *zaijie* last longer than was the case in respect of assistant performers. During the *zaijie*, the emperor also had to maintain regular court meetings but *koutou* was suspended, and no judicial case was reported to him. The Office of Imperial Sacrifices (*Taichangsi*) was in charge of the process. In the early morning of the first day of *zaijie*, ritual officials presented the copper man (one *chi* tall and five *cun* wide), made early in Taizu's reign, which held an ivory tablet with the characters of *zaijie* on it. The copper man was hung on the front door of the emperor's special chamber for *zaijie*. The empress's *zaijie* had a similar procedure but was guided by the female serving institution. Metropolitan

officials who participated in the ceremony were also required to have *zaijie* in the special rooms. Any misconduct in the room, such as eating meat products or spitting on the floor was punished severely.⁴

Ceremonies and sacrifices were illustrated in various levels to indicate the importance of the event, the occasion for worship, and the status of the presenters and the recipients. Auspicious Rites, Felicitous Rites, and Funeral Rites each involved three categories of ceremonies (primary, secondary, and minor), according to the degree of sacrifice that was offered, the ceremonial hall where the rite was conducted, the ceremonial gown the ritual presenter wore, and the length of the *zaijie* time period that the ritual participants were required to observe. Sacrificial offerings were categorized as *tailao*, *zhonglao*, and *shaolao* (chief, middle, and minor) based on the complexity of ceremonies, the sacrificial food and instruments used, and the ritual music and dances performed. A *tailao* consisted of three slaughtered animals (a calf, a sheep, and a pig). Nine cycles of ritual music and dance were performed. Tea and wine, seasoned fruits and vegetables, cooked food (rice, soup, fish, saffron, etc.) and various kinds of sweets were arranged in numerous dishes and bowls. A *zhonglao* included two kinds of animal meat (a lamb and a pig), and eight cycles of ritual music and dance were performed. A *shaolao* only had one animal meat, and music was performed for six cycles without dance. The number of dishes of other food and sweets were reduced for both middle and minor sacrifices.

The ritual presenter's status was also clearly defined by the ceremonial gown he wore, the direction from which he entered the ceremonial hall, and the different standing positions and number of bows he performed in the hall in accordance with the requirements of a specific rite. In Chinese attribute-values, the diagrams of left and right, east and west, as well as north and south governed the structure of cosmography and human society. In ritual etiquette, the north is

4 *Mingshi*, juan 47, pp. 1239-1241; cf. E Ertai and Zhang Tingyu, eds, *Guochao gongshi*, p. 66.

placed at the bottom and the south at the top. The east, the direction of the rising sun, preserves the essence of *yang*, while the west, the direction of the setting sun, preserves the essence of *yin*. Thus the position facing south was superior to that facing north, while the position facing east was superior to that facing west. As a ritual presenter faced the south, his left side was to the east; therefore, left equals east and right equals west, and the position to the left was superior to the position to the right.⁵

The Recruitment of Principal Consorts

In pre-Ming China, minor imperial consorts were mainly recruited from the general population, whereas the major imperial consorts were usually selected from the noble and official families. With a view to weakening the power of consort lineage which had threatened the preceding dynasties through the imperial marriage system, Taizu realized that imperial in-laws, who had achieved their higher status mainly through their relationships with the consorts, were dependent on imperial favor and thus less capable of endangering the imperial families. In the *Huangming zuxun* of 1371, Taizu made a declaration that the succeeding emperors and princes should acquire their senior consorts from the insignificant families amongst the general population through clearly regulated recruitment procedures. Any activities involving gifts or offers of women as consorts for the imperial household were prohibited. Such a careful designation was also made with the hope that the Ming emperors would have virtuous consorts as private assistants. Because of his own humble background, Taizu believed that women from humble families would be more understanding and concerned with the daily livelihood of the common people. Yet *Huangming*

5 Marcel Granet, "Right and Left in China," pp. 43-58. Cf. Steven J. Bennett, "Pattern of the Sky and Earth: A Chinese Science of Applied Cosmology," and Angela Rose Zito, *Of Body and Brush: Grand Sacrifice as Text/Performance in Eighteenth-Century China*.

zuxun was not always followed to the letter. Taizu himself took consorts from the daughters of his most valuable military commanders in order to cement additional military alliances. Furthermore, bypassing the regular recruitment procedures for the purpose of consolidating the dynasty, he selected senior consorts for Huidi (r. 1399-1402) and Chengzu (r. 1403-1424) from the daughters of meritorious officials. Many minor consorts of these three emperors, however, were indeed selected from the general population through formal recruitment. From the reign of Renzong (r. 1424-1425) onward, most subsequent emperors recruited their senior consorts according to Taizu's instructions.

The Ming process for the recruitment of consorts for emperors or princes was based on the model established by the Tang and Song dynasties. The entire recruiting procedure was managed by the local governments and two central institutions: the Bureau of Rites (*Libu*) and the Bureau of Rites and Etiquette (*Liyifang*). Recruitment usually began with the specific imperial announcement of selecting "pure ladies" (*shunü*), the lowest rank of imperial consort, by the Bureau of Rites. The candidate quotas did not usually involve the whole country; geographic limitations were carefully followed to avoid transportation expenses and difficulties, and in particular, to avoid discontent or conflicts in distant regions. Most candidates were taken from the areas in or around the two capitals—Nanjing and Beijing. In the early Ming period, many imperial consorts were selected from the Jiangnan areas which contained Nanjing, but most of the others came from the northern areas around Beijing after the seat of government was moved there by Chengzu. The selected local areas were notified that comely girls between the ages of thirteen and eighteen were eligible. Yet there was a strong indication that prostitutes and women with theatrical backgrounds were specifically excluded from recruitment; a good but not necessarily powerful family background was required. The qualifications of candidates for the crown prince's or young emperor's principal consort were specified: noble and dignified beauty, and more specifically, feminine virtues

and education. They were expected to represent a mother figure for all the people and to be an example for all women. The following decree, issued in 1441, in which Grand Empress Dowager, Lady Zhang, (Rezong's empress), entrusted eunuch Hong Bao to select ideal consorts for young Emperor Yingzong (r. 1435-1449, 1457-1464), exemplifies the imperial concerns:

... The emperor's marriage must be decided soon; a virtuous candidate for the position of empress must be sought. The Bureau of Rites has announced recruitment in Beijing and Zhili areas. All local families who have young daughters are asked to participate in the selection. I especially send you to the prefectures around the capital, including Beijing, Zhili, Baoding, Zhending, Hejian, Yongping, Daming, Shunde, Guangping, as well as Shanxi and Shaanxi provinces. You should work closely with the regional military commissioners, administration commissioners, guard commanders, and governors. Be sure to search for nice young girls, aged between thirteen and fifteen (*sui*), from virtuous families. An ideal candidate is expected to have a noble, tall stature; pleasant facial feature with well-formed head, eyes, nose, ears, teeth, and eyebrows; shining hair and skin without blemishes; pure and gentle character, and appropriate speech and actions. Her parents must be honest and virtuous, not guilty of serious mistakes, and guided by respectable family rules. The chosen candidates should be accompanied by their parents to the capital. The expenses of their trips should be paid by the relevant offices. I grant you this mission because you are mature and reliable for such an important government business. Be careful, respectable, and obedient to law and rules. Visit the families reported by the local governors and arrange for their transportation to the capital. But do not bother about those who refused to respond to the selection process. Remind the local officials not to force reluctant families into participation. Anyone disobeying my warning shall be punished.⁶

There was widespread resentment against recruitment in local areas due to

6 ZGZXFLDJC, part II, vol. 3, p. 312 (under "*Huangming Zhaoling*," juan 11).

abuses perpetrated by corrupt government messengers. The fact that very few women were fortunate enough to attract imperial attention discouraged many parents from sending their daughters to participate in the recruitment process. When the court ordered recruitment for women, frightened people, unsure of the success of the girls, hurriedly tried to get them married without any regard for the age of the girls or the quality of the grooms.⁷ The contemporary observer Shen Yiguan (1531-1615), a scholar-official in the Wanli reign (1573-1619), incisively asked:

Why did the heavenly household seeking beautiful women,
Frighten people into hiding in forest and mountains?
Clerks carrying government orders and weapons,
Destroyed the walls and pillars of the house, like old enemies.
Father and mother knelt, elder brother and sister-in-law wept,
And offered thousands taels of silver to the clerks,
Begging for the release of their daughters and younger sisters.
Beautiful horses carried away the carts in which young beauties were huddled;
The tears of their relatives swelled like a river, but could not stop the carts.⁸

7 The memorials of the selection of “pure ladies” in 1517 under Wuzong’s reign, 1568 under Muzong, and 1581 under Shenzong, incisively expressed the fears of Jiangnan people (Mao Chining, *Wuzong waiji*; and *Yunjian zashi* by unknown Ming author, pt. II, p. 10b). Emperor Andi (r. 1644) was notorious for his abuse of consort recruitment during his brief reign in Jiangnan. The palace messengers were ordered to search for beautiful young girls everywhere in Hangzhou city. They posted small slips of yellow paper on the walls of houses possessing young girls, and shortly afterwards had them sequestered in the palace. There was widespread resentment in the cities of Hangzhou and Nanjing. Wealthy families received orders from the palace to present their daughters before the emperor. Anyone hiding their daughters was to be penalized, and even their neighbors punished. The people dared not resist even the officials did not have the governmental orders. The officials in charge of recruitment were threatened with imprisonment if they failed to find enough women for the emperor (Gu Yanwu, *Shengan banji*, juan 2, pp. 13b-14a, 32b; juan 3, p. 19a; juan 4, p. 33b; & juan 5, p. 31b).

8 The poem is cited in Zhu Ziyuan, p. 138.

The extant official records and private collections of Ming shed little light on the details of the process of empress recruitment. The early Qing scholar Ji Yun (informal name Xiaolan, 1724-1805) in his *Yian huanghou waizhuan* provided detailed information regarding the election of Lady Zhang (d. 1644) as the principal consort of Xizong (r. 1620-1627) in 1621, which exemplifies the demanded standard of beauty and complex selection procedure:

...Five thousand selected "pure ladies," aged between thirteen and sixteen (*sui*), along with their parents, arrived at the capital on January of the first year of Tianqi (1621). Their families were rewarded with silver and fabrics. All girls, divided into one hundred in each team, were lined up in the order according to their ages. The eunuchs [of the Bureau of Rites and Etiquette] carried out a thorough inspection based mainly on each candidate's physical features. One thousand girls were eliminated outright because they were either too tall or too short, or too fat or too thin. The next day, the remaining candidates were again lined up in team for selection. The eunuchs first eliminated those with imperfect eyes, nose, ears, color of hair; shapes of waist, throat, shoulder, and back. Then each of the surviving candidates was required to state clearly her name, lineage, and age. Defects like stammering or hoarseness of speech led to two thousand candidates' elimination. The short-listed candidates were required to walk several paces after the length of their feet and hands were measured so that their deportment and manners could be observed. Any slovenliness of gait or lack of dignity caused another thousand candidates' disqualification. The successful one thousand candidates were sent to the Inner Palace. They were stripped of their clothes and subjected to scrutiny by elderly serving women to check their physique, such as color of skin, shape of breasts, and smell of armpits. Three hundred candidates were ultimately chosen to undergo a month's probation as palace handmaidens. Their personality, intelligence, morality, and manners were observed [by senior imperial consorts] until at the end of the month fifty were chosen to be imperial consorts presented to Lady Liu [the consort of the late Shenzong, acting as the current empress dowager]. They were

tested on calligraphic skill and other accomplishments. Finally three women, misses Zhang, Wang, and Duan succeeded as candidates for the position of empress. Lady Liu enveloped their heads in blue turbans, and fastened the arms of each with a bracelet of jade and gold. They were then conducted into an inner chamber for a final scrutiny by the midwives and female physicians to make sure that they were without any spot or blemish. In due course their reports were prepared and from them the official chronicler compiled a detailed list of the three candidates with their physical beauty and charm. The three candidates, along with their reports, appeared before the emperor for his final decision.⁹

Only three Ming emperors, Yingzong, Shenzong, and Xizong participated in the recruitment of major consorts after they ascended the throne. The other Ming emperors acquired their major consorts when they were the crown-princes or princes. Except for Taizu and Chengzu, who had arranged marriages, other emperors and every Ming prince had major consorts selected through the recruitment system. The procedure of recruiting the principal consort for a crown-prince or other prince was similar. The following example is the final selection for the principal consort in 1626 conducted on behalf of Prince Xin, the younger brother of Xizong and the later emperor Sizong (r. 1628-1644). It was held in the Inner Palace where he resided.

The finalists for the positions of one principal consort and two senior consorts of Prince Xin were interviewed individually by Lady Zhang [the empress of Xizong] and Lady Liu [the consort of the late Shenzong and acting empress dowager]. The quartet who won the final selection received gold bracelets and fine blue silk scarves. Those rejected were paid 320 taels of silver and returned to their homes together with their birth certificates. Lady Zhang hesitated to choose Lady Zhou because she looked too skinny and fragile. Yet Lady Liu, impressed by Lady

9 Ji Yun, *Ji Xiaolan wenji*, vol. 3, pp. 2-3. Cf. E. Backhouse and O. P. Bland who visited to Beijing during the late Qing period and provided a detailed report on the final selection of Xizong's principal consort in their *Annals and Memoirs of the Court of Peking*, pp. 60-62.

Zhou's dignity of demeanor, preferred her for the position of the principal consort.

Lady Liu recalled at the time that she followed the same criteria used for the final selection of Empress Lady Zhang as Xizong's principal consort in 1621.¹⁰

The final decisions of the imperial elders were made in accordance with their personal favor and with the reports submitted by the officials and the chief eunuchs in charge of recruitment. There is no evidence showing how the official of the Bureau of Rites exercised influence on the imperial elders, though the influence of the eunuchs of the Bureau of Rites and Etiquette was recorded in detail. They sought the help of the local governments in conducting local selections, transferring the chosen candidates to the palace, taking care of their daily needs, reporting their recommendations to the imperial elders, and participating in the process of the final selection. The opinions of the chief eunuchs were particularly significant to the imperial elders. One incident, which took place in the final competition for the principal consort held on behalf of the crown prince, the future Guangzong (r. 1620-1620), in 1600, shows that the chief eunuch actually decided on the final candidates. Even though all officials and eunuchs in charge of the final selection agreed that Liu E was the most beautiful candidate, she lost the final selection because she had offended the chief eunuch. When the chief eunuch touched her cheek affectionately or fondly, Liu E felt humiliated and scolded him. The eunuch was not only upset, but also scared that she might take revenge on him if she became the principal consort. Therefore, he reported to Empress Dowager Lady Li (d. 1614) and Empress Lady Wang that Liu E was too arrogant and would not be able to please the crown-prince.¹¹

The opinions of imperial astrologers were also crucial in the final selection. During the recruitment of the principal consort for the crown prince, the future Xuanzong (r. 1426-1435) in 1417, imperial astrologers cast horoscopes showing

10 *Mingshi*, juan 114, pp. 3543-3544.

11 Zhou Yi, *Qizheng yeshi*, juan 5, pp. 7-8.

the *Kuilou* (the star of queen) in the sky above Shandong and Hebei. Several eunuchs were sent there by Chengzu to search for the ideal woman who could match the omen. Hu Rong's seven daughters were well known for their noble beauty at Jining prefecture in Shandong. The oldest daughter Shanwei was Chengzu's favorite female official because of her intelligence and beauty. The local authorities of Jining reported to the eunuchs that the local people saw the third daughter Shanxiang's chamber tower shining with an auspicious red light around it for a couple of days. The imperial astrologers claimed that Shanxiang's appearance matched the astrological sign and her horoscope numerology matched well with that of the prince, for whom she was therefore chosen as the principal consort. In similar fashion Lady Chen (d. 1528) was selected to be the principal consort of Shizong (r. 1522-1566) when he was a prince.¹²

Recruitment for major consorts was appealing to some families. To be able to qualify for the final election was an honor and privilege for the women and their families. The women who had entered the final stage of selection, even though they failed, were popular in the upper class marriage market. Men competed to have those women in marriage or as concubines and even bribed the eunuchs who were in charge of the selection. Women who failed to qualify in the selection process were returned to their homes and allowed to marry freely. Yet those who avoided recruitment or withdrew for personal reasons after having been selected were forbidden to marry. They were expected to wait for an imperial summons when they were ready. Men who married them were liable to lose their official titles or even their lives, as can be seen in two accounts from the reigns of Xianzong (r. 1465-1487) and Wuzong (r. 1506-1521). According to one, Duke Chen Fu became enamored of beautiful Lady Hao, who withdrew from the selection of "pure ladies" for Xianzong. He was tired of her soon afterwards and abandoned her. He remarried his original

12 The story of Lady Hu is reported in Zhu Quan, ed. *Minggongci*, p. 144 and that of Lady Chen is under p. 134.

fiancée, Lady Yang, the daughter of a prince, and hid his affair with Hao from her. When Lady Yang found out his secret, she accused him before the court. Chen Fu was imprisoned and stripped of his noble title and official position as punishment for the crime of marrying an imperial woman. According to the second account, a high-ranking official, Qi Shao, was sentenced to death for marrying an imperial woman who had been selected. Although Wuzong had not summoned her again, he could not tolerate the action of his official taking the woman he had selected before.¹³

The years of recruiting principal consorts for current or future emperors and the nativities of the selected principal consorts in different reigns

| reign | year of recruitment (for prince or emperor) | Selected principal consort | nativity |
|----------|--|----------------------------|------------------------|
| Taizu | 1383 (future Renzong) | Lady Zhang | Jiangsu |
| | 1395 (future Huidi) | Lady Ma | Jiangsu |
| Chengzu | 1417 (future Xuanzong) | Lady Hu | Shandong |
| Yingzong | 1441 (Yingzong) | Lady Qian | Zhejiang |
| | 1444 (future Jingdi) | Lady Wang | Hebei |
| | 1457 (future Xianzong) | Lady Wu | Hebei |
| Xianzong | 1486 (future Xiaozong) | Lady Zhang | Hebei |
| Wuzong | 1505-06 (Wuzong) | Lady Xia | Jiangsu |
| Shizong | 1521-22 (Shizong) | Lady Chen | Hebei |
| | 1552 (future Muzong) | Lady Li (first, died) | Beijing |
| | 1558 (future Muzong) | Lady Chen (second) | Beijing |
| Shenzong | 1578 (Shenzong) | Lady Wang | Zhejiang |
| | 1598 (future Guangzong) | Lady Guo | Hebei |
| Xizong | 1620-21 (Xizong) | Lady Zhang | Henan |
| | 1626 (future Sizong) | Lady Zhou | Hebei (Jiangsu origin) |

Source: *Mingshi*, juan 113 & 114. Seven empresses, married or promoted, are not included in the table. Lady Ma (Jiangsu) of Taizu and Lady Xu (Jiangsu) of Chengzu were married through the arrangement of their parents. Lady Sun (Zhouping) of Xuanzong, Lady Hang of Jingdi, Lady Zhang and Lady Fang (Jiangning) of Shizong, and Lady Wang (Jiangsu) of Xianzong all became promoted empresses. They were originally recruited as secondary or tertiary ranking consorts.

13 Shen Defu, *Wanli yehuobian*, pp. 778-779.

Wedding and Investiture Etiquette

The selected principal consort of the emperor or a prince would be ratified as a member of the imperial family through wedding ceremonies. An investiture ceremony was granted to the imperial principal consort soon after her wedding and to the principal consort of the crown prince after he ascended the throne. A promoted principal consort who replaced a deposed or deceased one also had an investiture ceremony for her formal entitlement. Through the ritual, the principal consort formally received an imperial seal and supporting documents which certified her status as the empress and legitimated her authority in the imperial family and the state. Based on ancient models, particularly those from Tang and Song precedents, the Ming imperial wedding ceremony (formalized in 1442 with slight alterations in 1578 and 1621), and the investiture ceremony (set in 1368, modified in 1424 and 1464, and finalized in 1567) were defined in the category of primary Felicitous Rites in *Daming huidian*.

The Ming imperial wedding ceremonies simplified the Six Rites into three major procedures: “presenting gifts” (*nacai*) and “asking name” (*wenming*); “presenting the valuables” (*naji*), “presenting the betrothal gifts” (*nazheng*) and “confirming the date of wedding” (*gaoqi*) as betrothal; and “issuing documents to welcome the bride” (*face-fengying*). Two more rites, “the bride presenting to her parents-in-law” (*jianjiugu*) and “the groom and the bride presenting themselves at the family temple” (*miaojian*), were performed after the wedding.

Each of the Six Rites was initiated by a worship to seek the auspices from Heaven, Earth, and ancestors in the *Fengtiandian*, the ceremonial hall for primary state events. During the ceremony, the emperor wore the *mianfu*, his first-degree ceremonial gown, and all participants wore their official uniforms; the imperial messengers were granted with the *jie*, a wooden hook with animal hair hung on its top. It was a ritual object and served as a symbol of imperial trust to propose marriage on behalf of the emperor. On the selected day, the *jie*,

the decree, the marriage documents, and the gifts, all displayed in a multicolored palanquin, followed the imperial messengers to take the “Imperial Way” (*Yudao*), the central path of the main entrance—from *Zhengyangmen* to *Damingmen* to *Wumen* to *Fengtianmen*—which was normally reserved for the emperor.¹⁴ The attendants and the rest of the group used the side paths. The whole group, led by grand musicians, left the Imperial City and traveled to the temporary residence in the Beijing City for the principal consort’s family, where the rest of ceremonies were conducted in the reception hall.

With the same procedure in each ceremony, the imperial messengers, facing south, read the decree and presented the documents and gifts to the presiding magistrate of the principal consort’s family who, as the subject of the emperor, turned to the north, bowed and knelt to receive them. He then knelt again to present the reply document to the principal imperial messenger. The imperial memorandum of documents and the reply from the principal consort’s family were standardized as follows:

[Imperial order or memorandum] I, the emperor, inheriting the heavenly order, am

14 Ming Beijing was divided into the Forbidden City (*Zijingcheng*), the Imperial City (*Huangcheng*) and the Capital City (*Jingcheng*). They were three nesting cities each surrounded by walls fitted inside the other. The Forbidden City was located at Beijing’s central area. Its central location symbolized the unified country under the sole superior imperial authority. The foundation of the city was based on the structure of the Yuan (1279-1368) palace. Major buildings and entrances were on the central longitude line, facing south. The *Wumen*, on the south, was the front door of the Forbidden City. The character “wu” means center. Toward the south of the *Wumen* there were the *Fengtianmen* (renamed as *Huangjimen*), the *Damingmen*, and then the *Zhengyangmen* as sequential entrances to the Forbidden City. The “Imperial Way,” five *li* (three *li* make one mile, ordinarily) in width, stretched across the tunnels on the direct line through the four gates to the outer part of the Capital City. It was reserved exclusively for the emperor; offenders were punished by death. The “Imperial Way” was initiated by the Wu kingdom in Jiangnan during the Three Kingdoms period (220-589) and remained important in later dynasties (Gao Zhiyu, *Zichi guan jinghua*. Also see Nancy Shatzman Steinhardt, *Chinese Imperial City Planning*; Zhang Jue, *Jingshi wucheng fangxiang hutong ji*. Cf. Liu Tong and Yu Yizheng, *Dijing jingwu lue*).

committed to the grand future of the country. Family, the primary base of the state, is built upon husband and wife. The relationship between husband and wife, the principal righteous ethic between Heaven and Earth, depends on the continuity of ancestral sacrifices and the support of elders. Under the order of my grandmother and mother, I send messengers who carry my *jie* and documents to present the ceremony of *nacai*. A virtuous confidential inner assistant to me is desperately needed for the success of state affairs. For this, I send my messengers who carry my order to perform the ceremony of *wenming*. I sincerely wish to have your reply.

The great marriage has been supported by divination with the assistance of the imperial astrologers. The imperial messengers are sent to inform you of the delightful news according to the rites of *naji*.

Your daughter with her chaste and calm virtues is the ideal choice for the national mother. She and I sincerely hope to carry out together the ritual duties of ancestral worship and making sacrifices to Heaven and Earth. I send you my messengers to present *nazheng* rites.

An auspicious year, month, date, and time have been chosen for the wedding. I send messengers to inform you according to the rites of *gaoqi*.

[The reply document from the bride's family] Your humblest subject, I bow to receive Your Majesty's honorable order. The imperial messengers, the officials with the most sincere imperial documents, summon my prominent family. My daughter born to me and my wife, is the great-great-granddaughter of the official, [name], the great-granddaughter of the official, [name], the granddaughter of my father official, [name], and the granddaughter of my wife's father official, [name]. The numerology [the date and the time of birth] of my daughter is presented in this document reported to you.¹⁵

On the day of "welcoming the bride," the principal consort, was fully dressed in *lifu*, the first-degree of ceremonial gown, and crowned. She faced

15 Shen Shixing, ed., *Daming huidian*, juan 67, p. 403.

south, as the superior, to receive the blessing of her parents, who warned her to be diligent, obedient, and conscientious day and night. Then she sat in the sedan chair, followed by the empress's gold seal and investiture document displayed on the colorful palanquin, leaving for the palace.¹⁶ The "Imperial Way" stood open to honor her when she arrived at the Forbidden City. All the court officials, attired in their uniforms, waited outside the gate, *Chengtianmen*, facing west, to pay respect to her. She was carried in her sedan chair to meet the emperor, who wore first-degree ceremonial gown, waiting in the imperial ancestral hall, *Fengxiandian*. When she arrived, the emperor descended the eastern stairs to receive her and accompanied her into the ancestral hall from the western stairs. They greeted each other and then presented themselves to the imperial ancestors. In the early morning of the wedding day, the emperor and the principal consort fully dressed in their first-degree ceremonial gowns, reverently worshipped Heaven, Earth, and imperial ancestors in the *Fengxiandian*. In the evening, they participated in the ceremony of "eating together" (*hejin*) at the main hall of the empress's residence, *Kunninggong*. The emperor sat on the eastern side of the table and the principal consort sat on the western side, each facing the other. They had food and wine in gold cups and drank wine together from the nuptial cups. This ritual emphasized that they were closely joined together as husband

16 The empress's document was bound as a small book with red thick thread. It included two pieces of pure gold; each was approximately $2\frac{2}{3}$ decimeters long, $\frac{5}{3}$ decimeters wide and $2.5\frac{2}{3}$ decimeters thick. The book was wrapped by a purse decorated with red silk and golden threads. It was displayed on a piece of fine red cotton cloth and was stored in a fine small wooden box. The lid of the box was decorated with gold sprinkles and the picture of a coiling golden dragon. The box was further saved in a double layer-purse, made of red silk and tied with five different colored thick silk threads. The seal for the empress was made of pure gold in a square form which measured $\frac{5}{3}$ decimeters thick and 9 centimeters wide on each side. It was wrapped by a red silk purse with golden thread decoration, and was displayed on a small golden tray with four coiling dragons on each of its corners. The tray was built into the inner bottom of a series of three nested wooden boxes. A red silk purse was used to wrap the outside of the nested boxes (*Daming huidian*, juan 60, p. 374).

and wife, each respecting the other.

The rite of “the bride presenting to her parents-in-law” (*jianjiugu*) was performed early next morning. The married royal couple had a formal visit with the empress dowager(s) in her residence(s). They all wore first-degree ceremonial gowns. During the visit, the principal consort performed the ceremony of serving dishes to the empress dowager. Through such ceremony, as daughter-in-law, she showed her filial piety and subservience to the empress dowager. In return, the latter granted the principal consort some food and introduced the major affairs of the imperial family and the Inner Palace. The principal consort was therefore established as the mistress of the imperial household and the Inner Palace, inferior only to the empress dowager(s). The principal consort status was confirmed the next day in the rite whereby female imperial relatives and the staff from all serving agencies in the Inner Palace paid respect to her at the empress’s residence. On the third day, as wife and subject, the principal consort was expected to show her subordination and gratitude to the emperor at his residence. The emperor, in his *pibianfu*, the second-degree ceremonial gown, accepted eight bows from the principal consort, who wore the first-degree ceremonial gown. On the fourth day, as the first lady of all women, and as the mother of all people, the principal consort respectfully received congratulations and eight bows from male imperial relatives and from the metropolitan titled ladies. The final ceremony *miaojian* was performed a few days later. The emperor and the principal consort presented themselves in the *Fengxiandian*. The principle consort performed an obedience ritual before the imperial family shrine. Finally, the emperor promulgated his marriage to the entire country and to tributary states and accepted congratulations from all the court officials in the *Fengtiandian*.

During the three imperial visits, the empress’s family received numerous gifts, such as the bride’s personal cosmetics, dresses, and jewelry, a variety of colored fabrics, food, and treasure for her family. The expenses of Wuzong’s

wedding, for instance, were at least 400,000 taels of silver. The betrothal ceremony, which involved a great number of gifts, provides one example. These gifts included 380 rolls of fine fabrics (2 rolls of black linen-silk and 2 of light red; 8 rolls of graded-red plain ramie-silk; 8 rolls of processed fine silk; 80 rolls of plain ramie-silk; 80 rolls of linen-silk; 8 rolls of white raw light silk; 40 rolls of embroiled brocade, 80 rolls of colored processed fine silk); 800 taels of gold, 2,100 taels of silver, 2,000 taels in cash, and 28 taels in pearls separated by five different grades. It also included 74 sets of plain and colored dresses for ordinary wear (4 sets of plain-color robes—one linen-silk, 2 light ramie-silk, one silver silk-gauze; 70 sets of colored robes—20 linen-silk, 18 light-silk, 20 processed silk, 12 fine silk); jewelry (flower hairpins made from gold, silver, and jade; four embroidered belts; one jade belt; a pair of jade-flowered cords; a pair of jade girdle ornaments; a pair of ornamented and plain golden bracelets; and one gold headdress decorated with a dragon, pear, and kingfisher features); cosmetics (10 taels of pearl-powder and 2 taels of wax rouge); 6 colored comforters; 50 catties of white cotton; animals (20 horses, 52 goats, 64 goose, 32 pigs); food (64 bags of tea, 1,200 round cakes, 240 bags of white flour, 340 bottles of wine, dates and chestnuts—2 *he* of nut, 4 *he* of plum, 2 *he* of hazelnut, 2 *he* of foreign peaches, and 2 *he* of walnut; various kinds of candies—4 *he* of almond candy, 4 *he* of lotus candy...).¹⁷

Some of the gifts symbolized expectations for a happy marriage as explained in Qing's ritual text, *Baihutong shuzheng*. Colored silks and linens indicated endless continuity. Black color symbolized heaven, light-red symbolized earth, the number three symbolized *yang*, and the number two symbolized *yin*. The

17 The approximate cost of Wuzong's wedding is reported in 'Zhao You zhuan' in *Mingshi*, juan 188. The costs of the recruitment of major consorts for Shenzong in 1577 and his wedding ceremonies were heavily laid upon Wanping and Daxing counties of Beijing area as reported in Shen Bang's *Wanshu zaji*, pp. 139-141. The betrothal gifts were reported in *Daming huidian*, juan 67, pp. 403-405.

round white jade, *Yuan*, represented heaven, and the square brown jade, *Xiang*, represented earth. They symbolized the match of heaven as *yang* and earth as *yin*. These gifts symbolized the concept that the marriage is the match of heaven and earth, and the complement between *yang* and *yin*. Gifts of geese were given in each ceremony to symbolize reliability and concord. The symbolism drew on the lifestyle of these birds. Their regular migration following the sun (the *yang* essence) symbolized that the wife always followed the husband. Extending the symbolism further, geese also symbolized order and harmony. They fly as a team and in order. So, too, were married couples expected to live in harmony, and children were married according to their age order. Geese have only one mate and remain unattached after the death of a mate. Married couples and their family, similarly, were expected to be permanently loyal to each other. Other gifts had symbolic significance as well. White wine was considered the source of happiness. Rice was the source of sufficiency. Goats were representative of the auspices and group concord. Gold and silver indicated a solid marriage relationship: silver for brightness and gold for constancy. Copper money symbolized abundance.¹⁸

The rite of investiture required the emperor's three days of *zaijie*, public announcements by decree, and the worship of Heaven, Earth, and ancestors before the ceremony. On the selected day, the emperor in his first-degree ceremonial gown and court officials in their uniforms performed the ceremony at the *Fengtiandian*. Officials from the Bureau of the Rites received the *jie*, the decree, and the empress's seal and investiture document granted by the emperor. They then left the hall through the main entrance and proceeded to the *Kunninggong*, where the principal consort was ready for the ceremony. After the decree was read, she in her first-degree ceremonial gown, facing south, knelt to receive her seal and investiture document. Then she sat down, facing south, to

18 Chen Li, ed., *Baihutong shuzheng*, juan 10, "jiachu," pp. 457-458. Cf. Yue Qingping, *Hunyinshi*, pp. 169-170.

accept congratulations from the representatives of the titled ladies of the Inner Court (princesses, imperial consorts, and consorts of the crown prince) and the Outer Audience (the consorts of princes, mothers and wives of civilian and military officials). They also wore their first-degree ceremonial gowns. Along with grand music, the representatives congratulated the principle consort, saying, "As humble subjects, we were so cheerful to join the ceremony in which Your Majesty was entitled as the *zhonggong* (meaning central palace)." The next day, the emperor, in his first-degree ceremonial gown, offered a sacrifice at the *Fengtian dian* and received congratulations from the metropolitan officials.

After her entitlement, the principal consort, thereby named empress, presented herself at the *Taimiao*, the imperial ancestral temple. Before worshipping, she had *zaijie* for three days, while titled ladies and staff who would participate in the ceremony had *zaijie* for one day. On the selected day, officials offered sacrifices and reported the event at the *Taimiao* on behalf of the emperor. At the auspicious time, the empress wore her first-degree ceremonial gown and a crown decorated with nine dragons and four phoenixes, facing north and entering the main hall of the *Taimiao* from the left entrance. She performed bows and ascended the eastern stairs to offer sacrifices to the imperial ancestors. The titled ladies in their first-degree ceremonial gowns, standing behind the empress, bowed to the shrine. Afterwards, the empress returned to the Inner Palace. She paid gratitude by performing bows to the empress dowager and the emperor, who wore the second-degree ceremonial gown, at their own residences. Then at her own residence, the empress received demonstrations of respect and congratulations from imperial female relatives, the titled ladies, and imperial princes. They performed eight bows and received a grand feast. In parallel fashion, the emperor received congratulations from the court officials and treated them with a grand feast. Imperial princes and the titled ladies paid respect to the empress dowager and congratulated her for having an ideal

daughter-in-law.¹⁹

The investiture ceremony was concluded by a decree as described by the following example, which was reported in 1522 when Lady Chen was crowned by Shizong as empress. It reads:

Since ancient times, wise emperors and kings have made the profound rule that the emperor be in charge of court affairs while the empress take care of the Inner Palace. I, the inheritor of the great tradition, devoted to a great state, having determined to engage in state affairs day and night, widely seek righteous intelligentsia to assist me. The holy mother, the bright sacred immortal benevolent Grand Empress Dowager [Lady Zhang, Xiaozong's empress, d. 1537], is concerned with the heavy duty of the inner affairs, especially orders the relevant bureaus to select a virtuous lady as my principal mate. Respectfully obeying her kind order, I hence dare solicit the support from Heaven, Earth, and ancestors to name Lady Chen as empress on September 28 in the first year of Jiajing period. She will be ratified as *Zhonggong* to fulfill the continuity of lineage for millennia, to serve four imperial elders [Shizong's biological parents—Emperor Xingxian and Empress Dowager Lady Jiang, Grand Empress Dowager Lady Zhang and Empress Dowager Lady Xia (Wuzong's empress)], and to carry on ancestral worship. The entire country and tributary states are acknowledged accordingly.²⁰

The investiture ceremony transformed the imperial principal consort into the empress, and the institution of empress was therefore established. The ceremony recognized that the empress was formally accepted by the imperial family and, therefore, was presented to the entire country. The empress claimed her role and status in the imperial family when she worshipped at the

19 Certain rites were added to the original after Taizu's reign. In the version of 1424, dictated by Chengzu, the emperor and the empress together presented themselves at the *Fengxiandian* before the empress worshipped at the *Taimiao*. In 1534's version, Emperor Shizong led the empress and major consorts worshipping at the *Taimiao* (*Daming huidian*, juan 46, pp. 321-324).

20 The decree is recorded in ZGZXFLDJC, part II, vol. 3, p. 638.

Fengxiandian during the wedding ceremonies, while through the investiture ceremony, the significance of her role and status in the state were confirmed when she presented herself at the *Taimiao*. These ceremonies of ancestor worship highlighted the cosmological and family-state dimensions of the match. The English word “empress” is equivalent to the Chinese character “hou” or “huanghou.” According to *Liji*, “hou,” pronounced *pei*, means “one who is an equivalent counterpart of her husband. Another name, “Yuanhou,” literally means principal consort. After the imperial harem system was established during the Former Han dynasty, the empress was also called “Zhonggong” with the meaning that her residence was located at the center of the consort’s residence area. This name symbolically implied her superior status centering the spectrum of the female hierarchy in the Inner Palace and the entire country, providing meaningful connection between the imperial family and the state.²¹

The symbolic meanings of each wedding rite, which identify the bride as the wife, daughter-in-law, and mistress in her husband’s family, were very similar in both the imperial and commoner marriage.²² Nevertheless, the procedures of the Six Rites of a commoner’s marriage, although they were less complex than those of an imperial marriage, stressed not only the principle of equivalence and complementarities between the husband and the wife,²³ but

21 The meaning of “*pei*” is discussed in the statement in “Chuli” II, a chapter of *Liji* (p. 22). The word “hou,” shown in *Zuozhuan*, originally meant “king.” “Huanghou” was used to designate the empress, the wife of the emperor, after *Qingshi huangdi* named himself as the emperor. “Zhonggong” was first used in Ban Gu’s *Hanshu* (juan 97, pt. I). See the discussion in Zhu Ziyun, p. 2. The symbolic meaning of the word “zhong” is described in Zito, *Of Body and Brush*, pp. 29-30.

22 The symbolic meanings of each wedding ceremony in the Ming period is discussed in Tang Do, *Wengong jiali huitong*, juan, 3, pp. 18b-19a; Zhang Erya, *Yili Zhengzhu judou*, juan 2, pp. 34b-35a; and Chiu Jun, *Xingli daquan*, juan 19, p. 13a & 15b.

23 The significance of the wedding ritual for the wife is indicated in chapter “Neize” which specifies that a woman undergoing the Six Rites becomes a wife; otherwise, she is a concubine. A commoner’s wife was called *qi*, which means “one who is an equivalent counterpart of her husband” (Xu Shen, *Shuowen jiezi*, juan 12, pt. II, p. 1b). A

also the affinal relationship between the two families. The completion of the whole process required the presence of the matchmaker and the parents or the elders of the two families. Marriage was expected to benefit both parties, which generally meant either that the two families ought to be of approximately equal status, or that if one family contributed somewhat greater status, then the other ought to contribute commensurably greater wealth. The ceremony of “welcoming in the bride in person” normally showed the equivalent position of the husband and the wife. “Presenting the valuables” was the important ceremony in which gifts and money were transferred between the two families, and the affinal relationship was established. Rich families gave substantial dowries with their brides, but even among the poor a bride did not enter her husband’s household empty-handed.²⁴ The rite of “Visiting the bride’s natal family” three days after the wedding further emphasized the husband as a son-in-law of the wife’s natal family and strengthened the relationships between the two families. This ceremony also stressed that the wife retained her natal family to fall back on in case of divorce or disaster. The significance of these three ceremonies secured and enhanced the wife’s status in her marital family.

Like a commoner, an emperor or a prince could have only one wife at a

consonance between the character for “wife” and that for “equivalence,” both pronounced *qi*, implies that they have the same applied meaning (Liu Xi, *Shiming*, juan 3, p. 8a). See the discussion on the meanings of a commoner’s wife and her status in Hsieh Bao Hua, “Female Hierarchy in Customary Practice: The Status of Concubines in Seventeenth Century China,” pp. 57-58.

- 24 The significance of dowry for a Chinese woman has caught the attention of many scholars. Their studies emphasize the power a wife wielded in relationship to the size of her dowry. The comprehensive western studies on this subject is Patricia Ebrey and Rubie S. Watson eds., *Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society*; in particular, see the following articles: Patricia Ebrey, “Introduction,” and “Shifts in Marriage Finance from the Sixth to the Thirteenth Centuries;” Rubie S. Watson, “Wife, Concubines, and Maids: Servitude and Kingship in the Hong Kong Region, 1900-1940.” A specific study on the Ming case is Hsieh Bao Hua, “Female Hierarchy in Customary Practice: The Status of Concubines in Seventeenth-Century China,” pp. 55-114.

time but many concubines. However, imperial marriage ceremonies were based upon a system of recruitment rather than arrangement, and thus there were no preliminary negotiations. The role of the matchmaker was not that of an intermediary between families, but rather of a witness to the marriage ceremony. The ceremony of receiving the bride was performed by imperial messengers instead of the emperor himself, yet it was officiated by the crown-prince or an alternative prince of the imperial household if the bride lived near the capital.²⁵ There was no reciprocal ceremony of the husband being presented to the wife's family. For political reasons, further communication between the empress and her blood ties were prohibited by imperial regulations set by Taizu. Imperial consorts and their parents were not allowed to visit each other without special permission. The empress's family was not expected to provide a dowry. On the other hand, the gifts from the imperial family for each stage of the marriage process, especially for betrothal, reflected the honor granted to a woman destined to be the empress. Even though the document of *nacai* and *wenming* ceremonies emphasized the royal couple as husband and wife, the entire wedding ceremonial activities strongly indicated that the empress and her natal family were subject to the emperor and the imperial family.

Residence, Apparatus, Stipends, Responsibility and Authority

For the fulfillment of her function, the harem system furnished the empress institution with a decent benefits package, which was in accordance with her complex responsibilities and authorities from multiple roles. *Baihutong shuzheng* indicates that the empress was the "xiaojun" (the minor "king" of the entire country).²⁶

25 *Baihutong shuzheng*, juan 10, "Jiachu," p. 459.

26 *Baihutong shuzheng*, juan 10, "Jiachu," p. 489.

The living compartments of the Inner Palace were located within the gate *Qianqingmen* and separated from the Outer Audience. The locations and the construction materials of the principal buildings were governed by regulations that reflected the importance of their usage and the status of the residents. The closer a building was to the southern front and the center, the higher that resident's status. Conversely, the further away from the southern front and the center, the lower the status of its residents was. The location of the front compound was superior to the secondary compound, which was superior to the back compound. The eastern chamber was superior to the western one. The building was yellow in color; its gold tiles conveyed a status superior to the buildings decorated with green tiles. The three principal buildings, the *Qianqinggong*, the *Jiaotaidian* and the *Kunninggong*, stood on the central north-south axis, facing south. They were all furnished with glazed yellow encaustic tiles. According to *Yijing*, "qian" is the first *yang* hexagram and "kun" the second *yin* hexagram. As the emperor's residence, the *Qianqinggong* symbolized the heaven and the sun; the *Kunninggong*, as the empress's residence, symbolized the earth and the moon. The *Jiaotaidian*, located between the two residences, symbolized the match of *yin* and *yang*. The hall contained the imperial seals and the empress's marriage contracts, which were engraved on golden tablets and protected by golden seals.²⁷ Twelve residential compounds with glazed green tiles roofs were located on the west and east sides of the *Jiaotaidian* and these were the residences of consorts. They symbolized twelve stars surrounding the sun and moon. Aged consorts of former emperors resided in the northwestern back side of the Inner Palace, where there were Buddhist shrines and gardens for their retirement. To the west side of the

27 In the Qing dynasty, the hall *Jiaotaidian* housed the empress's seal and marriage contract, which were engraved on golden tablets, and twenty-five imperial seals in silk-covered and glass cases. The most ancient of the seals had belonged to the emperor *Qingshi huangdi*. Frank Dorn, *The Forbidden City: The Biography of a Palace*, p. 112.

Qianqinggong, there was *Cininggong*, and to the east side was *Ciqinggong*. These were the residences of emperor dowagers. The crown prince lived in one of the east compounds (east symbolizing spring).

The empress's chamber stood along with several other buildings surrounding the central courtyard. To the northern backside of the compound was the imperial garden. The buildings on the eastern and western wings were staffed with the empress's personal servants and guards, and her room supplies were stored there. The main hall, facing south, was divided into her office and chamber. These rooms were filled with luxurious furniture and decorated with household appliances, such as kettles, plates, bowls, and pots, mostly made of gold and silver. The empress's personal property, including the annual stipend and gifts from the emperor and other people, included gold, silver, and jade, as well as fine furs, silk, and fabrics. For instance, the Qing empress during the Qianlong reign (r. 1695-1735) had an annual stipend of 1,000 taels of silver, 91 scrolls of the best silk and fabrics, 70 scrolls of regular cloth, and 50 of the finest furs. Her birthday gifts from the emperor included 90 taels of gold, 900 taels of silver, and 103 scrolls of silk and fabric. The additional presents from imperial relatives and officials were added to this.²⁸ Although the remaining Ming sources don't provide such information, annual stipends for the empress during the reigns of Shizong and Shenzong were comparable. But the empress had a smaller stipend during the early and late dynasty when the state was less wealthy. The most valuable assets of the empress consisted of her crown, official gown, and official seal and investiture document. Only the empress was allowed to wear the crown and ceremonial gown decorated with nine dragons and four phoenixes. Her official seal, marriage contracts, and investiture were all made of pure gold. The purity and value of gold and its bright yellow color

28 The empress's stipend in Qing dynasty is shown in *Guochao gongshi*, juan 7, pp. 112-113 & juan 17, p. 391. The stipend system of Song imperial consorts is discussed in Wu Yining and Gu Jichen, pp. 267-269.

demonstrated the empress's supreme status in the Inner Palace. Along with the empress dowager and the emperor, the empress was the only consort allowed to use yellow colored articles.

The emperor, the empress dowager, and consorts usually ate alone in their own chambers. The specific consort summoned to accompany the emperor for the night was honored to share the dinner with him. The daily food and utensils for the emperor and the empress were prepared by the staffs of the Court of Imperial Entertainment (*Guanglusi*) to ensure the security of meals but were supervised by the eunuch institution, the Directorate for Palace Delicacies (*Shangshanjian*), during the mid-Ming period. Beginning in Xizong's reign, the head eunuchs of the Bureau of Ceremonials (*Silijian*) and the Eastern Depot (*Dongchang*) were entrusted with this job in turn. The imperial daily menu included a long list of dishes, the names of every caterer, and a seal approval from the institutions in charge of that meal. The emperor's meals were highly nutritious from the viewpoint of Chinese medicine, but not necessarily delicious. Huge quantities of dishes were actually on display, not necessarily to attract the imperial appetite. Food that was cooked several hours ahead in order to be served on time tasted bland. Out of religious devotion, or as a way of asking for heavenly blessings during a natural calamity, the emperor adhered to a vegetarian diet. The empress dowager and higher ranked consorts had their own kitchens and according to their ranks the groceries were supplied by the Court of Imperial Entertainment or the Directorate for Palace Delicacies. Professional cooks were hired from outside the palace. There was always extra food prepared for the emperor, the empress, and the empress dowager, symbolizing the prosperity of the country. The left over food was granted by these superiors to the inferiors—consorts, children, officials, and servants—to show the superiors' virtue of benevolence. The amount and types of food the inferiors received

depended on their status and their relationships with the superiors.²⁹ During special occasions, such as New Year, a family banquet prepared by the Directorate for Palace Delicacies would be held in the imperial residence. The emperor's table and seat were on the platform at the center of the main hall, the empress dowager's table and seat were on the eastern side right under the platform, the empress's table and seat were next to those of the empress dowager, and the Imperial Honorable Consort's table and seat were on the western side. Other consorts of lower ranks in pairs shared a table without seats.

An abundance of silver and laborers were required to serve the imperial family members' daily meals. According to late Ming writer Sun Chengze's *Chunming mengyulu*, the department of catering maintained a regular staff of 6,300 during the Renzong reign, which increased to 8,000 in Xianzong's reign. Each year, the staff prepared approximately 104,700 animals (pigs, lambs, ducks, chickens, and geese) as meat products. In 1466, the cost for meat was 40,000 taels of silver. Fruit and cooking items cost 12,680,000 *jin*, and 3,770,000 pieces of delicate china were used to serve food. In addition, local areas were required to supply the staff with specialties. According to Zhu Guozhen's report in *Yongchuang xiaopin*, the Huguang area, for instance, was required to submit 2,500 *jin* of fresh fishes beginning in the year 1471. After 1481, the required total increased to 30,000 *jin* shipped in twelve boats. Each consort, according to her rank, received a certain supply of foodstuffs. During the reign of Sizong, for instance, the empress and the empress dowager were offered the same amount: 360 taels of silver and 8 *qian* of monthly food supplies, whereas the Imperial Honored Consort and the Honored Consort had 160 taels, the crown-prince had 154 taels and 9 *qian*, and the emperor was allocated 1,346 taels. The entire budget was greatly reduced during the late Ming period compared to the monthly budget of 30,000 taels allowed for food

29 Cf. Zito's discussion on Qing emperor's imperial meal, *Of Body and Brush*, pp. 28-29.

supplies for the emperor and consorts during Shizong's reign.³⁰

The empress was always crowded with attendants. Twelve serving women and eight eunuchs waited on her daily needs, and twenty armed guards were located in the antechamber to provide security for her residence. During ceremonial occasions, her retinue team, called *lubu*, included sedan-chairs, carts, eunuchs, serving women, armed guards, and titled ladies. They were organized under several *lu*. The word literally means "big wood sheer," while its applied meaning is "armed attendant." Everyone in the retinue team was assigned a certain position and responsibility recorded in a book, *bu*. On the way to the ceremony, a secondary curfew was imposed. The ceremonial hall was protected by fifty-eight armed guards and another thirty-six attendants on the floor around her throne. Armed guards carried gold weapons (swords, sticks, knives, axes, spears, lances, javelins, and whips). Eunuchs carried flags, umbrellas, and a silk cart-cover, and serving women carried fans and the empress's necessary goods which were made of pure gold (a water pot, an incense burner, a fragrant box, a spittoon, a spit-pot, a tub, two dusters, a chair and foot-rest, four square fans, four pheasant feather fans, and four red colorful round fans).

As the principal mistress, the empress wielded authority over the other consorts and entire service institutions. Consorts who offended accepted tenets would be punished by the empress. For instance, Shizong's favorite Honorable Consort Lady Tian was arrogant and neglected Empress Lady Zhou's authority. In response, Lady Zhou intentionally ignored Lady Tian and let her wait in the snow when she came to pay respect to the empress during the New Year audience. Shizong understood the rule and supported the empress's authority. He ordered Lady Tian to undergo self-examination, and forbade her from seeing

30 Zhu Guozhen, *Yongchuang xiaopin*, juan 31, p. 15b; Sun Chengze, juan 27, pp. 423-425. The common seasonal food and cooking materials in the Inner Palace are recorded in Liu Ruoyu, *Zhuozhongzhi*, juan. 20; cf. the discussion in Soulliere, "Palace Women in the Ming Dynasty, 1368-1644," pp. 218-227.

him for three months until the empress released her anger.³¹ But the empress's authority over other consorts was limited. Without imperial support, the empress might run into trouble by punishing a favorite consort. Servants who made mistakes were often punished by their masters and mistresses. Still, they were under the empress's authority for offenses of palace law. If charged, they were tried by the official institution and given the appropriate penalty. These institutions were chief (*Gongzheng*) of the General Palace Service (*Shanggongju*) for serving women and the Bureau of the Ceremonials for eunuchs. During her regular meetings with female and eunuch officials in her office in *Kunninggong*, the empress, sitting on her throne and facing south, listened to reports regarding major issues, such as personnel evaluations, budget approval, and public safety. Her gold seal was entrusted to female officials who, with the empress's approval, used it for processing her decisions. However, the empress needed to consult the empress dowager(s) regarding major decisions.

The hierarchical relationships between imperial family members, and those between master/mistress and servants were strictly regulated by ritual. Every morning and evening's formal visits that presented the inferior to the superior, and the junior to the senior, were paramount activities in the Inner Palace. Daily ritual was accepted as a standardized repertoire which emphasized that each individual's role and status in the ordered family system was to be fully followed. As a daughter-in-law, the empress's important daily ritual duty was to visit her mother-in-law, the empress dowager. The empress first received respects from other consorts, and then she led the consorts and imperial princesses in order of rank to make their formal courtesies to the empress dowager. Other irregular visits during an empress dowager's illness and elaborate birthday celebrations were expected. The emperor also visited the empress dowager approximately three times a week to show concern about her

31 *Jinggong yilu*, pt. II, pp. 4b, 7b.

health. Such visits conveyed the appropriate message to the country that the emperor and his consorts were a model of filial piety, the principal morality necessary to win popular support for the regime. During each visit the empress reported major family issues and Inner Palace business. This requirement limited the power of the empress under the authority of the empress dowager, yet through the routine report, the empress affirmed the legitimacy of her status as the principal mistress, the successor of the empress dowager, in the Inner Palace.³²

Imperial household instructions often stressed tolerance without jealousy to prevent conflicts between consorts. For the harmony of the family, the empress was expected to overcome her personal jealousy and self interests; and for the propagation of the imperial family, she should tolerate numerous consorts and a celebration of many imperial sons. During the reign of Shizong, when the emperor had no heir, the empress and other consorts were expected to perform the Supreme Intermediary Ceremony (*Gaomei*). The ceremony was defined in the category of minor Auspicious Rites, but it called for *tailao* sacrifices offered to the symbols of Heaven, the Supreme Intermediary, and imperial ancestors. The emperor, the empress, and other consorts who had sexual relationships with the emperor performed the ceremony. It was held at the end of December with a hope that at least one of consorts would conceive during the spring. The altar was established to the north of the east entry, *Yonganmen*, of the Imperial City, to receive the energy of the rising sun. During the ceremony, led by grand ritual music and dance, the emperor, facing north, presented sacrifices; then imperial consorts led by the empress, kneeling down below the altar, facing north, each received a bow, arrow, and bow-case. After they bowed to the symbols of

32 Cf. Qing emperor Qianlong's visits to the empress dowager in *Guochao gongshi*, juan 1, pp. 66-67 The political purpose of regular imperial visits for displaying the virtue of filial piety is discussed in Evelyn S. Rawski, "The Imperial Way of Death: Ming and Ch'ing Emperors and Death Ritual," p. 249.

Heaven and the Supreme Intermediary, imperial consorts inserted the bows into bow-cases.³³ This rite symbolized vitality and fertility. Only occasionally performed during the Shizong's reign, the ritual reminded the empress and other consorts of their primary responsibility to the imperial family: producing children, particularly, an heir.

The empress's political role was limited to being the private advisor and assistant of the emperor. Sometimes the empress also participated in the decision-making process, but she was permitted to exercise power only if it could be seen as acting on behalf of, and in the interests of the imperial family and the state.³⁴ Among the few Ming empresses who were allowed to become involved in politics, Lady Ma (d. 1382) was the most powerful. She did not pass up any opportunity to advise Taizu to respect the wise and righteous intellectuals, to maintain benevolent policies, and to annul strict laws. She always tasted the food prepared for the officials after court meetings. If it was not delicious enough, she would ask Taizu to have the Court of Imperial Entertainment improve it. She skillfully checked Taizu's paranoia and saved several loyal officials, such as Song Lian and Li Wenzhong, from execution when they fell under suspicion by the emperor. She maintained a frugal life style, encouraged palace women to reduce their diet when there were natural disasters, and to pray to Heaven for good harvests. She had local governments deliver free food to starving refugees in the areas affected by natural calamities. She ordered a granary established to provide regular support to the families of officials and university students. The granary remained a permanent institution which benefited the elite and their families during the Ming dynasty. When Taizu said that she should not involve herself in politics, Lady Ma replied, "Your majesty is concerned about people's livelihood as a father toward his

33 Sun Chengze, juan 19, pp. 280-281; *Mingshi*, juan 23, pp. 1225-1226 & 1276.

34 See the discussion in Soulliere, "Palace Women in the Ming Dynasty, 1368-1644," pp. 38-42.

children; being the mother of the country, that is also my responsibility.”³⁵

Lady Xu (d. 1410) of Chengzu was another empress who had substantial influence in Ming politics. As Lady Ma’s ideal daughter-in-law, Empress Lady Xu always reminded Chengzu to limit military campaigns and provide stability so that the people might prosper. As the crown prince, Renzong was often in charge of politics in Beijing while Chengzu was in the northern border undertaking military campaigns against Mongols. Lady Xu exercised great power in most major decisions, and the crown-prince regularly reported to her. Well-educated Lady Xu edited her manuscript *Neixun* (first issued in 1404), a collection of selected stories of virtuous women in *Nüjie* by Ban Zhao’s (49-120), to serve as instructions for women in the Inner Palace. Those biographies of exemplary women in the past emphasized female virtues for consorts to follow, such as frugality, filial piety, the suppression of jealousy, and the restraint of consort lineage. In due course, Lady Xu established a model for later empresses, and helped define the rules of virtuous life for the Inner Palace and for the country.³⁶

Other empresses, such as Lady Zhang of Renzong and Lady Zhang (d. 1644) of Xizong, were also involved in politics, but to a much lesser degree. It was said that Renzong was fat, clumsy, and too kind, and thus was disliked by his father, Chengzu. Renzong retained his position as the heir-apparent mainly because Lady Zhang continued to please Chengzu and Lady Xu with her capability and virtuous filial piety. Empress Lady Zhang also had a significant political role in Xizong’s reign. Although she was unable to control Lady Ke (d.

35 *Mingshi*, juan 113, p. 3507.

36 *Mingshi*, juan 113, pp. 3509-3511. Ellen Felicia Soulliere’s discussion on the Ming official publications of the texts for women’s education provides information regarding the authorships and circulations of different editions, the female virtues and exemplified virtuous women in Chinese history, and how their virtues impacted Ming imperial consorts. She indicates that *Neixun* was not edited by Lady Xu herself (Soulliere, “Palace Women in the Ming Dynasty, 1368-1644,” pp. 18-157).

1627) and the eunuch Wei Zhongxian, who manipulated Xizong, Lady Zhang was eventually entrusted by the emperor to select his younger brother, Prince Xin, as Emperor Sizong.³⁷ Most empresses, however, had to distance themselves from politics in order to secure their positions. As Lady Zhou (d. 1644) complained to Sizong: "As the subordinate wife, I served Your Majesty for more than twenty years. During all these years, you never accepted my opinions which could be helpful to you. Now the dynasty has collapsed without any hope!"³⁸ As the mother of the country, she was ordered to commit suicide, following the collapsing dynasty to death, when the peasant rebellion army entered the capital city.

Regular meetings with the titled ladies of the Outer Audience were the empress's primary responsibility and exercise of political power. Inasmuch as it was believed that the officials would serve the state well with good private assistants, the empress paid special attention to her meetings with the titled ladies. According to the rule established by Taizu in 1393, the titled ladies of the Outer Audience who ranked above rank 3b were required to present themselves in an audience with the empress during the annual feasts, such as the New Year, the Winter Solstice, and imperial birthday parties. On those ceremonial occasions, each titled lady was allowed to bring one companion, either her daughter or her daughter-in-law, when they entered the Inner Palace. The formal meeting was customarily held at the empress's residence, decorated with colorful flags and under the protection of armed imperial guards. The empress, in her first-degree ceremonial gown, mounted her throne, facing south, to receive respect from the titled ladies and their companions. They performed one bow and three *koutou*. There was intimate conversation during the meetings in which the empress encouraged the titled ladies to advise their husbands gently

37 See the biography of Empress Lady Zhang of Renzong in *Mingshi*, juan 113, pp. 3511-3512; and the biography of Empress Lady Zhang of Xizong in juan 114, pp. 3542-3543.

38 *Jinggong yilu*, pt. I, p. 9a.

and to urge them to be benevolent officials. At the end of the visit, the titled ladies were lavished with jewelry, clothes, and money, and treated to a grand feast.³⁹

In the feast the empress hosted at the end of the ceremony, the invited titled ladies, receiving the food granted by the empress, took their embodied positions as surrounding parts of the “encompassed hierarchy” in which the empress was the center. This ritual meal symbolically recognized the power of the empress by including the other women in her rulership.⁴⁰ Through the ritual of granting gifts and feast to the titled ladies, the empress affirmed her legitimacy as the first lady and performed her important political role as the emperor’s private assistant. The titled ladies submitted their loyalty to the empress and were honored with a political mission to assist their husbands for the state. The entire ceremony was led by the grand music, “Heavenly fragrant phoenix rhyme,” which was performed by the palace orchestra. The rhyme was standardized, but the name of the empress in the rhyme was changed to correspond to whichever empress currently reigned. The following words of the rhyme were performed as a song:

39 During the late Sizong’s reign, the empress’s public audition with titled ladies was held sometimes at *Renzhidian*, located behind the *Wuyingdian* where the emperor had regular meetings with his officials before Shizong’s reign. In the years 1672 and 1673 Sizong decided to have the metropolitan titled ladies come to celebrate Empress Lady Zhou’s birthday. The titled ladies’ on their sedan chairs entered the Inner Palace through the west entry *Xihuamen*. In the early morning, the empress mounted her throne to receive the titled ladies’ congratulations in *Renzhidian*. The latter performed three *koutou* and one bow ceremony. Unfortunately, only twenty-seven titled ladies participated. Because of political instability, metropolitan officials brought their concubines, instead of wives, when they came to the capital for assignment. Concubines of Outer Audience officials were not eligible to see the empress in the Inner Palace (Shen Defu, juan 23, p. 588; Sun Chengze, juan 11, p. 152).

40 The term “encompassed hierarchies,” originally from sociologist Louis Dumont in his study about the symbolic meaning of human hierarchy, is indirectly borrowed from Zito’s quotation in her *Of Body and Brush*, p. 29.

The shining grand hall and the bright sky reflected each other,
 The curtains decorated with pears hung on the jade hooks,
 The flute plays while golden cups are raised in cheer in the banquet.
 Jade, silk, and sunshine all join the grand party to congratulate the
 Phoenix, the holy Empress Xiaoci [Lady Ma's posthumous name],
 The virtuous assistant to the benevolent polity.

Heavenly praises accompanied by the grand music are showered on her.⁴¹

The Ming empress's role as mother to the country was greatly limited in view of the fact that the Sericulture Ceremony was eliminated from the Ming ritual system by Taizu. In the ancient ritual text, *Liji*, the emperor offered sacrifice to the first Agriculturalist (*Xiannong*, named *Shennong*) and took part in ceremonial land cultivation, while the empress offered sacrifice to the first Sericulturalist (*Xianchan*, named *Leizu* or *Xilingshi*) and took part in the ceremonial production of silk. The Sericulture Ceremony was performed in the northern suburb of the Imperial City as the counterpart rite of the Agriculture Ceremony, which was held in the southern suburb of the city. The south is the *yang* location and the north is the *yin* location. The south-north dichotomous ritual sites symbolize the parallel authority and responsibility of the emperor and the empress as the parents of the country. Through these ceremonies, they established a model of dedication to agricultural pursuits and self-reliant village life which were built upon a successful division of labor between men and women: men cultivating land and women weaving silk. They worked together for the survival and the prosperity of the family. The ritual activities also served symbolically to remind the imperial family of the difficulties of agricultural labor on which the dynasty depended. The people of the empire were encouraged to emulate the example set by the monarchs.

Beginning in the Han dynasty, although interrupted by the political

41 *Mingshi*, juan 63, p. 1560.

situation in the Southern Song (1128-1279), the Sericulture Ceremony was regularly performed in all major dynasties except the Ming. While the Agriculture Ceremony was a minor one among all of the rites the emperor performed, the Sericulture Ceremony was the principal ritual performed by the empress to demonstrate her virtue of caring and her concern about the needs of people. The ceremony symbolically legitimized her role as mother of the state with the power to fulfill her responsibilities by participating in policy-making decisions. The complexity of the ritual activities and the frequency of their practices were different in each dynasty and corresponded to the strength or weakness of the empress's political role at the time. The Ming Sericulture Ceremony was not actually carried out until the reign of Shizong. Even though the court officials disapproved, Shizong, in 1530, ordered the Bureau of Rites to post his decree in the country, inviting various opinions regarding his plan of resuming the Sericulture Ceremony:

... Land farming and silkworm cultivation provide millions of people with food and clothing. Neither of them can be neglected. While the Agriculture Ceremony has always been an important state event, the Sericulture Ceremony is disregarded. For generations, the rite of Sericulture has been part of the great tradition taught by Master Confucius, who remarked that the ritual and music systems established by the emperor served the function of educating people. Today many people share the natural goodness without difference, but those who are eager to control power criticized the mistakes of my policy. Some of them said it is inappropriate to resume the rite of Sericulture because it is excluded in the ancestral rule, established by Taizu. Some asked how dare I challenge Taizu's instruction, which every wise emperor before me carefully followed. Some said it is against the ancestral rule for the empress to perform the rite in the northern suburb of the Imperial City for the reason that she is prohibited from traveling outside the Gate *Wumen* [the southern front door of the Forbidden City]. Some said that the ritual and music systems of the dynasty were established by the founder who was so

wise and cautious that he had considered the best for the dynasty; they reminded me not to play smart beyond my capability and authority. Some worried about the difficulty of resuming the ceremony since it has never been performed for many reigns in the Ming dynasty. Beyond these five criticisms, the ridiculous people even warned me of the danger of threatening the state if I changed the ancestral rule.⁴²

The reason that Taizu eliminated the Sericulture Culture ceremony from the Ming ritual system is not officially recorded, yet the bureaucrats supported his decision simply because the authority of the Taizu's rule should not be challenged. Shizong argued that he resumed the ceremony for ritual and educational purposes. Unable to change Shizong's mind, officials in the Bureau of Rites completed the rites of the Sericulture Ceremony based on the instruction in *Liji* and models established in the Tang and Song dynasties.

The Ming Sericulture Ceremony took place in the northern suburb of the Imperial City, where the Altar of Sericulturist was established. In the middle month of spring, the expecting female silkworms were placed in a colorful cart together with the mothers of those silkworms and moved into the silkworm-room, where the silkworms were bathed and fed regularly. The empress had *zaijie* for three days, and the other participants had *zaijie* one day before the ceremony. In the early morning of the ceremony day, both sides of the road to the Altar were covered by heavy curtains to prevent the imperial women from being viewed by the curious public. The empress in her sedan chair and the titled ladies of the Inner Court in their carts were protected by imperial guards and followed by their retinues of armed soldiers and female musicians. After they arrived at the northern suburb, the empress changed to her first-degree ceremonial gown, offered a *shaolao* sacrifice, a scroll of black silk, and a sacrificing document to the first Sericulturalist. Titled ladies and

42 The decree was recorded in ZGZXFLDJJ, part II, vol. 3, p. 674.

royal women, standing in their positions, offered several bows afterward. After the sacrificial offerings, the empress ascended the platform facing east, plucked maple leaves and threw them into the basket; thereupon she sat down on the south side of the platform. Titled ladies by their ranks each followed the empress to pluck leaves. In the silkworm-room, the leaves were cut into small pieces and given to the empress and the titled ladies to feed and tend silkworms. In April, when silkworms produced silk, the empress led the titled ladies in the ceremonial production of silk to make the required dark silk fringe for the imperial headgear and other ritual objects.⁴³

While it followed the Tang's model, the Ming Sericulture Ceremony omitted some of the rites performed by the Tang empresses. The Tang Sericulture Ceremony, defined as a secondary Auspicious Rite, had a procedure comparable to the Agriculture Ceremony, and it even included some rites similar to those performed by the emperor during the ceremony of offering sacrifices to Heaven. Unlike the Tang rule, the Ming empress did not have male officials and was not allowed to have a public audience with court officials, who were thus excluded from the ceremony. While Han, Tang and Song ceremonies called for a *zhonglao* sacrifice, the Ming ceremony was defined in the category of minor Auspicious Rites, receiving only a *shaolao* offering.⁴⁴ According to tradition, the Ming ceremony was first performed in

43 The detailed rites of Ming Sericulture Ceremony are recorded in *Mingshi*, juan 49, pp. 1273-1276; Sun Chengze, juan 19, pp. 277-280.

44 The rites of the Sericulture Ceremony were first defined during the Han dynasty and completed in detail during the Tang dynasty. In Tang's ritual, a *tailao* was first offered to the first Sericulturist by senior court officials during late March and May. The Sericulture Ceremony, held in early March, required all participants from the empress and officials to serving women having *zaijie* before the ceremony. A *zhonglao* was offered to the first Sericulturalist for five days in the Inner Palace before the empress performed the ceremony. The ambitious Empress Lady Wei (d. 710) of Zhongzong (r. 705-710) ordered her followers to compose silk-songs, which were offered during ancestral worships, to establish her legitimacy to rule the country (Ouyang Xiu and Song

the northern suburb of the Imperial City. But the ceremony was moved into the western garden in the Forbidden City for the sake of convenience. Such a move symbolized that the empress's role was excluded from the "public" sphere and was limited within the "private" domain. The Sericulture Ceremony was eventually abolished by Shizong under the pretext of sparing the state the increasing financial and labor cost involved. The truth might be that the emperor's tremendous financial demands and his pursuit of elixir immortality sacrificed the significant rite performed by the empress. The ceremony was never resumed for the rest of the Ming rule, but was revived by the Qing dynasty, when empresses enjoyed more power than their Ming predecessors. The elimination of Sericulture Ceremony under the Ming patriarchy undermined the legitimacy of the empress's role and disabled her political power. Lady Ma, the only empress who dared argue for her right to be concerned with her people's welfare when Taizu warned her not to get involved in politics, exemplified this ritual theory.

Deposition and Promotion

Wedding and investiture rites affirming the legitimacy of the entitled empress also protected her against being deposed by her emperor without certain legal proceedings. Deposing an empress was an important state affair. Even with good reason, the emperor still needed to win the support of the empress dowager and reach agreement with the senior court officials. At that point, a decree, explaining the reasons for deposition, was required by law. It was announced to the country and reported to the imperial ancestors, Heaven, and Earth. To ensure against unsavory canards, the deposed empress was usually demoted to the status of a secondary consort, ranked 1a(iii), instead of

divorced.⁴⁵ Another consort would be promoted to fill the vacated rank of the empress. A public decree for this promotion was mandatory. The position of empress could lie vacant until an ideal replacement was available. Excluding the honored empresses who were posthumously entitled by their husbands, biological sons, or later emperors, there were twenty empresses living during their husband's reigns. Fifteen married empresses obtained their positions during their lifetimes, while three were demoted, and one died on the point of being deposed. Five senior consorts were immediately considered for the position of empress. One promoted empress was demoted. The ratio of the number of empresses who were deposed to the total number of empresses was 4 out of 20. The ratio of the number of consorts who were promoted to empress as compared to the total number of imperial consorts is approximately 5 out of 300.⁴⁶

The primary factor determining an empress's deposition or promotion was whether or not she gave birth to a son or maintained imperial favor. Holding the senior position in the consort's ranking order became a consideration for promotion to empress in cases where the imperial favorite consort did not bear a son. Without imperial favor, an empress could easily be deposed, but no

45 A deposed empress was demoted to the status of secondary consort. Disgraced, she exclusively lived in the western backside of the Inner Palace with limited servants, financial support, and social activities. She was excluded from the imperial tomb, and her remains were buried in *Jingshan* together with other secondary consorts. Her spirit-tablet had no place in any imperial ancestral hall or tomb temple. Such punishments were affirmed by the imperial family and state ritual system. The treatment of a deposed empress could be changed by later emperors under certain circumstances. They could be rewarded with honorable empress titles, posthumous names, or special benefits deserving of their merits. Such gifts however, were considered unofficial privileges without adversely offsetting the ritual system (*Mingshi*, juan 113, pp. 3519-3520; cf. Shen Defu, pp. 212-215; Long Wenbin, ed, *Minghuiyao*, juan 2, pp. 19-21; Huang Yu, *Shuanghuai suichao*, juan 9, pp. 1b-2a, 4a-4b).

46 The approximate number of Ming consorts is based on the study in Hsieh Bao Hua, "From Charwoman to Empress Dowager: Serving Women in the Ming Palace," p. 47.

empress was ever deposed if she were the mother of a living crown prince. All of the three empresses who bore no sons were deposed under such an accusation, even though one empress had had two daughters. Two promoted empresses advanced to that status gave birth to the eldest sons and obtained imperial special favor. Two others without children were nonetheless promoted because of imperial favor and their senior positions. The opinions of the court bureaucrats could be an obstacle to empress promotion. Three consorts gained imperial special favor and two of them gave birth to a son, but they were unable to advance to empress because of the strong disapproval from the bureaucracy. Fifteen empresses (twelve married and three promoted) secured their titles during their lifetimes. The factors favoring the stability of the empress's position were imperial favor, bearing the heir-apparent, or feminine virtues (such as outstanding assistance to the emperor). Only six empresses gave birth to one or more than one son, two empresses secretly adopted a son, while seven empresses gave birth to one, or more than one, daughter.

The ratio of empress's sons/daughters to the total number
of imperial sons/daughters in different reigns

| emperor | empress | married (M) promoted (P) deposed (D) | Empress's son/ total imperial sons | Empress's daughters/ total imperial daughters |
|----------|------------|--|---------------------------------------|--|
| Taizu | Lady Ma | M | 0/26 | 2/16 |
| Huidi | Lady Ma | M | 2/2 | 0/0 |
| Chengzu | Lady Xu | M | 3/4 | 2/5 |
| Renzong | Lady Zhang | M | 3/10 | 1/7 |
| Xuanzong | Lady Hu | M/D | 0/2 | 0/2 |
| | Lady Sun | P | adopted 1/2 | 1/2 |
| Yingzong | Lady Qian | M | 0/9 | 0/8 |
| Jingdi | Lady Wang | M/D | 0/1 | 2/2 |
| | Lady Hang | P | 1/1 | 0/2 |
| Xianzong | Lady Wu | M/D | 0/14 | 0/5 |
| | Lady Wang | P | 0/14 | 0/5 |
| Xiaozong | Lady Zhang | M | adopted 1/1 | 0/3 |

| | | | | |
|-----------|------------|-----|-----|------|
| Wuzong | Lady Xia | M | 0/0 | 0/0 |
| Shizong | Lady Chen | M | 0/8 | 0/5 |
| | Lady Zhang | P/D | 0/8 | 0/5 |
| | Lady Fang | P | 0/8 | 0/5 |
| | Lady Chen | M | 0/4 | 0/6 |
| Muzong | Lady Chen | M | 0/4 | 0/6 |
| Shenzong | Lady Wang | M | 0/8 | 1/10 |
| Guangzong | None | | 0/7 | 0/9 |
| Xizong | Lady Zhang | M | 0/3 | 0/2 |
| Sizong | Lady Zhou | M | 3/7 | 1/6 |

Source: For the information of individual princes and princesses, see *Mingshi*, juan 116-121. The following two consorts are not included in the table: Lady Li, the first married principal consort of Muzong, died before he ascended the throne. She gave birth to one son. Lady Guo, the married principal consort of Guangzong, was posthumously honored empress after he ascended the throne. She had no child.

There is reason to believe that the legal procedures for promoting or deposing an empress limited the emperor's power to manipulate his marriage relationship with the empress, and thus maintained the low percentage of replaced empresses. In a radical departure from Tang and Song precedents, the Ming deliberately recruited empresses from families of humble origin, weakening the competition of the consort lineage in the Outer Audience, thereby contributing to the development of bureaucrats.⁴⁷ The power of the bureaucrats, who considered themselves the guardians of the "ancestral rules" (ritual and harem system, and Taizu's regulations for consorts), exercised immense influence on the entire range of the emperors' personal lives. As long as the imperial family was united with the state, such issues as designation of an

47 See the discussions on imperial marriage system, which influenced the structure and power exercise of the Inner Court and the Outer Audience, in Jennifer Holmgren, "Imperial Marriage in the Native Chinese and Non-Han State, Han to Ming;" Rawski, "Ch'ing Imperial Marriage and Problems of Rulership;" F. W. Mote, "The Growth of Chinese Despotism: A Critique of Wittfogel Theory of Oriental Despotism as Applied to China;" Ellen Felicia Soulliere, "Reflections on Chinese Despotism and the Power of the Inner Court;" and Hsieh Bao Hua, "From Charwoman to Empress Dowager: Serving Women in the Ming Palace."

imperial heir and promoting or demoting a senior consort were not only the emperor's personal interest but also his responsibility to the state. They were under the guidance of the bureaucrats' authority. Excepting Shizong, who absolutely controlled his personal life and suppressed any active protest by the bureaucrats against his wishes, other emperors were unable to ignore the bureaucrats in the event of replacing empress. An emperor determined to pursue his wishes needed to use his power to design a plot in order to meet the requirements of law. The cases of replacing empresses in the reigns of Xuanzong and Xianzong demonstrate the balance between the authority of law and ritual, and the power of the emperor. During the reigns of Shenzong and Guangzong, the issues regarding replacing empresses eventually provoked conflicts between the emperor and the court and among the officials themselves. The court officials' power was developed to the extreme that it even forced the emperors to compromise.

Lady Hu, the married principal consort of Xuanzong, was named empress after he ascended the throne. Lady Sun (d. 1462), raised as a consort-to-be for Xuanzong in the palace, was first selected to be a third-ranked consort and soon advanced directly to the Honored Consort. Xuanzong eagerly worked to further promote her to empress after she had a son. Five grand secretaries were ordered to prepare a proper legal method to depose the empress. The senior Grand Secretary Yang Shiqi, after failing to convince the determined emperor of the danger of disturbing the state by deposing the empress without good reason, argued that it would offend filial piety for him to depose Lady Hu as long as the empress was the mother of the state. Yet he could not prevent her dismissal supported by three of the seven traditional grounds—bearing no son, frequent illness, and sterility. Shiqi suggested that Lady Hu respectfully resigned herself and that she should be well treated for the rest of her life. The imperial decree said that Lady Hu's frequent illnesses and childless status indicated she was unable to fulfill her ritual duty; since Lady Sun had fortunately borne an

imperial heir, she should replace Lady Hu as empress.⁴⁸ In fact, Lady Sun secretly adopted a serving woman's son in order to gain the empress title.

Lady Wu, the married principal consort of Xianzong, retained her empress title for only one month. She was accused of failing to be a good role model in the Inner Palace and of collaborating with the eunuch Nou Yu. The deposition of Lady Wu became a judicial incident; penalties were imposed on all suspects in this crime, including her father. Nou Yu was charged of being guilty for persuading Empress Dowager Lady Sun (Xuanzong's empress) to choose Lady Wu, and falsifying Yingzong's decree in which Lady Wang was originally selected to be Xianzong's principal consort. The direct reason for Lady Wu's demotion actually was that she exercised her empress's authority by having Xianzong's favorite consort, Lady Wan (1429-1487) punished. Since Lady Wu failed to bear a son after she had occupied the position of principal consort for seven years, Xianzong had strong legal grounds to depose her. Lady Wan was promoted to Imperial Honored Consort, rank 1a(i), but not empress because she was seventeen years older than the emperor and never conceived again after her son, the first imperial heir, died in infancy. Lady Wang (d. 1518) was named empress on account of her senior position in the harem system.⁴⁹

The power of Ming bureaucrats was evident in their confrontations with Shenzong. Without determined subterfuge, Shenzong's attempt to name his favorite Imperial Honored Consort Lady Zheng (d. 1630) empress failed, disregarding the strong legal ground that she had given birth to the third prince, Changxun, and two daughters. Shenzong preferred her son to be the heir-apparent over the eldest son, Changluo, the future Guangzong, born by the disfavored consort Lady Wang (1565-1611). Lady Zheng was accused by the bureaucrats that she manipulated imperial special favor to jeopardize consort

48 *Mingshi*, juan 113, pp. 3513-3514; cf. Shen Defu, pp. 201-202.

49 See the detailed discussion on the event in Hsieh Bao Hua, "From Charwoman to Empress Dowager: Serving Women in the Ming Palace," p. 51-53.

order and threaten the primogeniture inheritance system. According to Ray Huang's study of the Wanli reign, Lady Zheng was eligible to be empress since Empress Lady Wang had no son and was often ill; from the standpoint of customary law, Shenzong could easily find precedents to name Changxun as the heir because Changluo was of no significant worth.⁵⁰ Shenzong struggled with his moral guilt, as a father, of being unfair to his eldest son, hesitating to name his favored son as the heir but also delaying to entitle the eldest son. The plot of Lady Zheng and her allies to assassinate Changluo promoted panic in the court. The court officials feared Lady Zheng and her allies would threaten state security if she became the empress and, worse yet, became the empress dowager once her son ascended the throne. Unwilling to accept her failure after Shenzong compromised with the bureaucrats, Lady Zheng extended her ambition to the reigns of Guangzong and Xizong after Shenzong departed. Nevertheless, the Bureau of Rites rejected both Guangzong's proposal to name her empress dowager and Xizong's idea to honor her with an empress title. Guangzong's proposal to name his favorite minor consort, the childless Lady Li, empress was also firmly denied by the court, even though the position of empress was vacant after his principal consort died. Imperial Secretary Sun Ruyou and Grand Secretary Fang Congzhe argued that the principal consort was by ritual the official empress and empress dowager; only a non-empress consort who gave birth to the later emperor was eligible for a title of empress dowager; other consorts could not have a title of empress or empress dowager because of serving the emperor well.⁵¹

The controversy between the court and the emperors and the conflicts among officials themselves continued through the reigns of Shenzong,

50 Ray Huang, *1587, A Year of No Significance*, pp. 83-85.

51 See the bitter conflicts between the bureaucracy and Lady Zheng and Lady Li during the reigns of Shenzong, Guangzong and Xizong in Wen Bing, *Xianbo zhishi*, vol. 2, pt. 1, 35a; Wen Gongyi, *Mingmo sanan*; and Huang Ray's, *1587, A Year of No Significance*.

Guangzong and Xizong, alienating the emperors from the court. The bureaucrats successfully forced the unwilling emperors to compromise but were unable to control eunuchs. Due to their proximity to the emperor and influential consorts, eunuchs, as one major force of potential power, filled up the vacuum in the power structure left by weak consort lineage in the Inner Court.⁵² The gradually enhanced power of eunuchs aroused the anxieties of the bureaucrats, who were concerned a disfavored change in empress could threaten the interests of the court and upset the balance in the power struggle between the Inner Court and Outer Audience. The bureaucrats stiffly upheld “ancestral rules” as an effective weapon to attack the imperial favored consort whom they disapproved becoming empress out of concern for the stability of the state. Yet the long term power struggle between the court and the eunuch institution inevitably rocked the dynasty toward its end.

Even though the empress could secure her position, conjugal relationships with the emperor would have to reckon with the competition from numerous beauties in the Inner Palace. The emperor had absolute power to choose the consort with whom he desired to share the night.⁵³ Lady Zhang, was the only empress who had a marriage relationship with her emperor Xiaozong (r. 1487-1505) like an ordinary couple's, and the childless Empress Lady Qian

52 See the study of eunuchs in Ts'ai, Shih-shan Henry's *The Eunuchs in the Ming Dynasty*.

53 According to the Ming and Qing's rule, each consort's name was engraved on a jade tablet. The name-tablets of the consorts, who were available, were displayed in a tray for the emperor to choose after his dinner. The emperor chose his partner for the evening by turning face down the name-tablet of the desired consort. He then shared the night with the consort together at her chamber. It seems to be a regulation only during Shizong's reign after 1542 that the chosen consort was ordered to strip naked and wrapped herself in a large yellow brocade quilt, and then was carried to the imperial chamber by a eunuch. In the early dawn, the eunuch came to carry her back. The exact time of the consort's visit was entered in the connubial record to confirm the legitimacy of any child she might bear. During the reign of Sizong, the chosen consort was notified immediately to prepare for the imperial visit. The red lantern outside her chamber was lightened to express the honor imperial bestowed upon her (*Minggongci*, p. 93).

maintained her position by sharing affections with Yingzong when he was replaced by Jingdi.⁵⁴ In order to secure her position, it was not unusual in Chinese dynastic history for the empress to steal or adopt a son from other imperial consorts or serving women. Imperial consorts also did this in order to advance to empress. While a biological mother whose son was stolen or adopted was the victim of the empress or the favorite consort, the son advanced his status to be the son of the empress. This entitled him to the priority of succession based on the primogeniture succession system, which was intended to distinguish *di* (the wife and her sons) from *shu* (concubines and their sons). According to “Shiqinshu” (“Explanations on Relatives”), a chapter in *Shiming*, the Chinese character *di* had the same pronunciation as the word for “comparison” in the sense of “to match” or “to compare equivalently;” the character *shu*, on the other hand, had the same pronunciation as the word for “picking” with the meaning of elevating an inferior but treating them in an informal manner.⁵⁵ The empress’s biological sons and grandsons were the primary candidates for succession. The priority was reserved in order for her eldest sons, then eldest biological grandson, and then other sons. Other consorts’ sons were potential successors, but they were eligible only if the empress had no son or was considered too old to have a son. The eldest concubine’s son had the priority. All children respected their father’s wife as the legal mother, the primary first-degree mother. The primogeniture succession system was held to secure the stability of the state by clarifying the succession order and naming the heir-apparent as early as possible, so that disorderly competition among imperial sons could be avoided. Yet the preferential treatment of the wife’s sons over the concubines’ in such system aroused bloody family and state discords when Chengzu claimed his legitimacy to ascending the throne. The succession system, nevertheless, created mutual beneficial relationships between the

54 *Mingshi*, juan 113, p. 3516; cf. Zha Jizuo, *Zuiweilu*, p. 1156.

55 *Shiming*, juan 3, pp. 8a-8b.

empress and her adopted sons in the cases of Yingzong and Wuzong.

Taizu had twenty-six sons. There were several different theories regarding the biological mother of Prince Yan, the future Chengzu. According to official records such as *Taizu shilu* (issued in 1411), *Taizong shilu* (compiled during Yongle reign), and *Mingshi*, Empress Lady Ma, in addition to two daughters, gave birth to five sons, including the eldest prince Yiwen, and the fourth prince Yan. But another Ming official record *Nanjing taichang sizhi* revealed that all the eunuchs, who took care of Taizu's tomb, remarked that Lady Ma had born no son; Prince Yiwen was born by consort Lady Li, grade 1a(ii), and Prince Yan was born by Lady Gong, grade 1a(iii). The latter statement was supported by unofficial Ming records such as *Zaolin zazu* by Tan Qian (1549-1657), who disclosed the evidence in the Taizu's tomb temple and the ancestral hall in the Inner Palace. He pointed out that in the *Fengxiandian*, the spirit-tablet of Lady Gong was placed alone on the west side of those of Taizu and Lady Ma, while the spirit-tablets of the other consorts who had sons were placed together on the east side. The prestige particularly reserved for Lady Gong was made by Chengzu in order to honor his biological mother. Modern scholar Wu Han concluded that Lady Ma bore two daughters but no son; she raised several sons adopted from other imperial consorts and even outside families. Prince Yan particularly pleased Lady Ma because he was such a strong healthy boy with a vigorous voice, and he showed the potential of becoming a great emperor. In order to establish his legitimacy for taking over the throne from Huidi, the eldest son and primary successor of prince Yiwen, through rebellion, Chengzu claimed himself born by Empress Lady Ma, and therefore was the only legal successor, since at that time all the elder princes before him had already died.⁵⁶

According to *Mingshi*, Yingzong was born by an unknown serving woman,

56 See *Nanjing taichang sizhi*'s report in He Qiaoyuan's *Mingshancang*, juan 6, p. 1a; Tan Qian's evidence in *Zaolin zazu*, p. 3635; and Wu Han's study in "Ming Chengzu shengmu kao."

but stolen by Lady Sun in order to advance to the status of empress, whereas Wuzong, born by a serving woman, was stolen by Empress Lady Zhang in order to secure her position. With special imperial favor, two consorts were able to succeed in their plots, and both sons gained their legitimacy of succession since they were recognized as the empress' sons. The two sons grew up to be emperors and honored their adoptive mothers. The records in *Mingshi*, and early Qing's *Shengchao tongshi shiyiji* and *Nianershi zaji*, assume that Yingzong was grateful to Lady Sun for her endeavors in raising, supporting, and assisting him when he ascended the throne at the age of eight. His biological mother was thus never recognized since he did not order an investigation. Several Ming and early Qing sources, such as *Xiaozong shilu*, *Wanli yehuobian*, and *Wuzong waiji* maintain that Zheng Huanger was Wuzong's biological mother, while according to *Nianershi zaji*, Wuzong refused to accept her story when she told him about their true relationship; moreover, she was punished with demotion from imperial consort to the female service organization and her father was executed immediately.⁵⁷ These two incidents indicated that both Yingzong and Wuzong came to be aware of their true natal origins after they ascended the throne but they were unwilling to recognize the evidence with a view to retaining their legitimacy. In fact, Wuzong punished his biological mother in order to secure

57 The major Ming and early Qing sources, which assume that Yingzong was born by an unknown service women, include *Mingshi* (juan 113, p. 3514), Mao Qiling's *Shengchao tongshi shiyiji* (juan 2, pp. 7b-8a), and Zhao Yi's *Nianershi zaji* (p. 475). But such a statement was not approved by other contemporary sources, such as Shen Defu's *Wanli yehuobian* (p. 201) and Wang Shizhen's *Yanshantang bieji* (chap. 31). However, based on Yin Zhi's *Jianzai suo zhuilu*, Shen Defu believed that Wuzong was actually born by Zheng Huanger, a minor consort promoted from serving organization, but was raised by Empress Lady Zhang (*Wanli yehuobian*, pp. 226-229). Other sources supporting Zheng Huanger's story are *Nianershi zaji* (p. 475), *Xiaozong shilu* (juan 1, p. 1a), and *Wuzong waji* (p. 4828). See the detailed discussion about Yingzong and Wuzong's birth in Hsieh Bao Hua, "From Charwoman to Empress Dowager: Serving Women in the Ming Palace," p. 58.

his throne.

The married or promoted empress was guaranteed a title of empress dowager during her lifetime, even if she had not given birth to a child. The non-empress consort, who bore the later emperor, was also eligible for the privileges of an empress dowager. The emperor was obliged to name his father's surviving empress and his biological mother as empress dowager for the sake of adhering to filial piety. Among the thirteen empress dowagers entitled during their lifetime, six were married empresses, two were promoted empresses, and five were non-empress consorts whose sons rose to become emperors (One of them lost her title after her son was dethroned). Five non-empress consorts, who died before their biological sons ascended the throne, were rewarded with the honorific empress dowager title. The ratio of the number of empresses who advanced to empress dowager to the total number of empresses is 8 out of 20. Only one among these eight empresses gave birth to the later emperor, yet except the dynasty founder Taizu, Huidi (eldest grandson of Taizu), and Shizong (a cousin of Wuzong), 11 out of 13 Ming emperors were born by non-empress consorts.

Death Ritual: Funeral Ceremony and Ancestral Worship

The Ming imperial death ritual, including funeral rites and ancestral worship, as well as the deceased's legitimacy to the imperial tomb and claims to worship in certain ancestral halls were primarily defined by Taizu. These rituals and instructions were modeled on Tang and Song precedents. Supplementary rules and substantial changes made by individual emperors according to their personal interests added to the complexities of the Ming system.⁵⁸

58 See the detailed Ming imperial funeral rites in *Daming huidian*, juan 97, pp. 545-549; and the rites of ancestral worship in *Mingshi*, juan 47 to 52.

A deceased empress's funeral rites were initiated in the ceremonies of *xiaolian* and *dalian* through which her body was cleansed, dressed, made up, and placed in a coffin made of pine, cedar, or catalpa wood. It was popularly believed that these types of wood delayed the decay of the corpse. Then the spirit-tablet was set up on altars and the coffin was laid in state in *Kunninggong* for one hundred days. Starting the second day after the announcement of her death, the southeastern side-entry, *Youshunmen*, of the Forbidden City remained open for three days. This enabled the metropolitan civil and military officials, along with the titled ladies, graded one to five, of the Outer Audience, to come to offer their condolences to the imperial family while presenting libations to the empress's spirit-tablet. They were obliged to wear the *zhancui*, the first-degree mourning dress, for twenty-seven days, starting on the fifth day, and to remain in white robes for another one hundred days.⁵⁹ The imperial heir-apparent was

59 In the Ming ritual and law, the first-degree of mourning, *zhancui*, involved wearing "untrimmed sackcloth" with a mourning stick and a mourning hood. Women were not required to have a hood or a stick. The word *zhan* means not to sew the bottom or the seams of the mourning clothes, while the word *cui* means that the heart is destroyed because of sorrow. The mourning hood, made of paper, was tall; it indicated that the heavy weight of the sorrow always pressed on the mourner. The mourning shoes were made of villous grass. The mourning stick for the deceased father was made of bamboo, while that for the deceased mother was made of paulownia wood. The round shape of the bamboo stick symbolized the round sky and indicated that the father was the Heaven of the child, while its smooth inside symbolized the continuing sorrow of the child through the seasons. The Chinese character for "paulownia," pronounced "tong," the same as that of the word "similarity," indicates that a child's sorrow for the deceased mother was as much as that for the deceased father. The paulownia stick has a round top and a square bottom. The square bottom symbolized the earth. The earth was the symbol for "mother." The mourning stick was as high as the position of a person's heart which indicated that the sorrow of the filial child came from his heart. It was used to support the mourner when he became weak because of his grief. The mourning length was called "three years" because it had already entered the third year, but was actually twenty-seven months long in Ming custom (see "Sangfu" in *Daming lüli jijie fuli*). The description is quoted from Hsieh Bao Hua (Sheieh Bau Hwa), "Appendix A" in "Concubines in Chinese Society from the Fourteenth to the Seventeenth Centuries,"

the principal mourner for the empress even though she might not be his biological mother. He wore *zhancui* for twenty-seven months and regularly offered libations to her spirit-tablet. The emperor suspended court business for one hundred days and wore mourning dress as an emperor-husband did for his wife during this time period. Other relatives in the imperial family had mourning obligations according to their relationships with the empress. There was a three-day memorial ceremony observed throughout the land. Noblemen, local officials, and titled ladies of the Outer Audience knelt, facing the palace, to pay condolence. Every ordinary person wore *zhancui* for three days. A moratorium was placed on entertainment and ritual: a one hundred day ban was placed on playing music; the offering of sacrifices for all; and marriage in the families of officials. Thirty days were recognized for the marriage of commoners and fifty-nine days for the slaughtering of animals in the capital city, while only three days for the same in the outlying areas.⁶⁰

At the end of one hundred days there was the ceremony of *fayin* for moving the coffin out of the palace to the cemetery. No animal slaughter or music was allowed in the capital before the ceremony was completed. Sacrifices were offered to the deities of each bridge, gate, and temple in the Forbidden City and the Capital City through which the coffin would pass on its way to the cemetery. Worships were offered in the *Taimiao*, the *Tiantan*, and the *Sheji* three days before the ceremony. Every imperial relative and metropolitan official was required to fulfill three day's *zaijie* before they attended the

p. 290. According to Zhu Xi, the length of the first-degree of mourning was twenty-five months, whereas in Ming ritual text, *Siliyi*, Lü Kun (1538-1618) stated that this length was twenty-seven months (Lü Kun, "Sangfu yuyan," *Siliyi*, p. 4).

60 Based on the funeral rites of Lady Ma, as discussed in the main text, the funerals for other deceased empresses remained the same procedure with slight changes. For instance, when Lady Xu died in 1407, Chengzu had the local officials fast for one day and live in their offices for twenty-seven days during their *zhancui* mourning obligation (*Daming huidian*, juan 97, p. 545).

ceremony. On the day of the ceremony, the coffin, the spirit-tablet, the gold document with the posthumous name and temple name, and the accompanied materials for the departed empress's underground life were displayed in carts. They were protected by the surrounded retinues according to her status. The emperor and imperial relatives, all in their morning dresses, came to offer sacrifice to the empress's spirit-tablet and accompanied her coffin to the southern entry, *Wumen*. The crownprince held the big rope tied to the coffin while showing his grief until the eunuchs cut the rope and the funeral team left the Forbidden City. After the spirit-tablet was presented in the *Taimiao* to bid farewell to the imperial ancestors, the metropolitan officials, in their full mourning dress, accompanied the coffin and the spirit-tablet through *Damingmen* to the north eastern entry of the Capital City, *Deshengmen*, where they paid their final respects. The spirit-tablet and the coffin, carried by hundreds of soldiers, were protected by imperial guards, and officials continued their journey to the cemetery in *Changping* in the northeastern suburb of the Capital City. The trip usually took three to four days. Sacrifices were regularly offered to the spirit-tablet at several stations on the route. The people watching the coffin pass were required to pay their respects by kneeling down. Along with numerous amounts of accompanied items, the coffin was placed in the burial chamber in the main hall of the imperial tomb where the deceased waited for reunion with the emperor after he died. The tomb was then sealed.

The deceased empress's spirit-tablet was carried back to the Forbidden City after her burial ceremonies. Regular sacrifices were offered on its return trip until it was permanently exhibited in the *Taimiao*. Another spirit-tablet was later set up at the Sacrificial Hall (*Xiangdian*, renamed as *Lingendian* in 1538), in the cemetery. A third spirit-tablet was installed in the *Fengxiandian* beginning in Xiaozong's reign. Each spirit-tablet was titled under the deceased empress's posthumous name (*shihao*) and temple name (*miaohao*). A posthumous name, suggested by the Bureau of Rites and approved by the

emperor, included a list of characters which identified the empress's virtues, and her contributions to the emperor, the imperial family, and the country. Except for Lady Ma's posthumous name, which included thirteen characters, other empresses had only twelve. The characters commonly used for empresses' posthumous names were: filial (*xiao*), caring (*ci*), respectful (*jing*), benevolent (*xian*), sincere (*cheng*), worthy (*gong*), dignified (*zhuang*), gentle (*xun*), cautious (*shen*), chaste (*zhen*), brilliant (*hui*), complacent (*an*), virtuous (*de*), and honorable (*duan*). The deceased empress's temple name, accorded to her emperor husband according to her position in the imperial lineage, had only one character. It was added to the end of the posthumous name. Each empress, who maintained her title during her lifetime, had the same temple name as that of her husband. For instance, Lady Ma, following Taizu, had the character "supreme" (*gao*) as her temple name. The character indicated they were the primary ancestors of the imperial family. The characters caring, filial, benevolent and virtuous were, in particular, reserved for empresses. They showed the empress's roles as the daughter-in-law of the imperial family, the mother of the country, and the private helper of the emperor. The characters gentle, cautious, complacent, and honorable were more often granted to other consorts. They showed the roles of the non-empress, serving well the emperor as a concubine, and thus received honor.⁶¹ The first married principal consort was privileged with both names even if she had died before her husband ascended the throne. The empresses of Huidi and Jingdi had neither name after the emperors lost the throne during the political events. The non-empress consorts, who gave birth to the later emperors, also had a posthumous name, but not a temple name.

Both posthumous and temple names were first presented to ancestors, and then written on a gold document granted to the deceased empress through a

61 Zhu Ziyang, pp. 321-325. Also see pp. 306-326 for the information regarding the development of the system of posthumous and temple names from Han to Qing dynasties.

cebao ceremony before they were carved on her spirit-tablet. The ceremony, usually granted to the deceased empress before she was interred into imperial tomb, required the emperor to complete a three-day's *zaijie* and to acquire Heaven and Earth in the *Fengtiandian*. Ritual officials reported the event to imperial ancestors in the *Taimiao*, and a public announcement was issued in a decree afterwards. During the ceremony, the empress's investiture gold document and seal were presented to her spirit-tablet in *Kunninggong*.⁶² After being entitled with her posthumous name and temple name, the deceased empress's three spirit-tablets were ready to be installed in the three major ancestral halls. The ceremony of dotting spirit-tablet demanded the participation of the emperor and metropolitan officials. Pre-ceremonial *zaijie* was required for all participants. The emperor wore light colored dress and every official wore official uniforms during the ceremonies.

The ceremonies of *cebao* and dotting spirit-tablet, both defined under the category of Auspicious Rites, indicated symbolic significance constructed in Chinese beliefs of afterlife. The significance of the death ritual and the reciprocal relationships between living and dead in Chinese philosophy has caught the attention of western scholars. Anthropologist James L. Watson in his study on the ideology of Chinese funerary rites provides the essential feature of Chinese beliefs regarding afterlife: one's social status remains largely unaffected by death; one's relationships with agnatic kinsmen are not terminated by death but rather transformed into reciprocal relationships through the ritual of funerals and post-burial mortuary practices; and through the ritual of offering sacrifices to the deceased, the living expects certain benefits in return.⁶³ Watson's assumptions appear to furnish the following perspectives. The Ming *cebao* ceremony entitled the deceased empress to the status of ancestor, whereas the ceremony of dotting spirit-tablet confirmed this status. These two ceremonies

62 The detailed *cebao* ceremony was appended in *Daming huidian*, juan 97, p. 548.

63 James L. Watson, "The Structure of Chinese Funerary Rites," pp. 4, 8, 9.

accorded the deceased empress privilege and power, provided her spirit regular material support in the ultimate home, and protected her status, right, and privilege as the principal ancestress. In return, the deceased empress was expected to provide consultation and blessing for important family and even state affairs. Such reciprocal relationships were concretely expressed through the ritual of ancestor worship in the sacrificial ceremonies regularly performed in the three major imperial ancestral halls.

The *Taimiao*, which was located outside the *Wumen* to the east of the Outer Audience compound, had nine individual rooms for the spirit-tablets of emperors and empresses. The spirit-tablets of the oldest generation were removed when those of the youngest were moved in. Each room could have only one emperor and one empress, who owned the title during her lifetime, from each generation at one time. They all owned both posthumous and temple names. Taizu and his empress Lady Ma, as befitted chief ancestors, occupied the central shrine; their descendants were ranked by generations, alternating to the left and right of the founder. The emperor and the empress who were eligible to be in the *Taimiao* also had a place in the *Fengxiandian*, located in the Inner Palace compound. Both halls had the same structure, although the latter one was relatively smaller. The biological mothers of later emperors without empress title during their lifetimes were not housed in the *Taimiao* or the *Fengxiandian*, but were worshipped in the minor ancestral chapels, *Hongxiaodian*, *Shenxiaodian*, and *Fengcidian*. Nevertheless, all the spirit-tablets there were removed to the *Fengxiandian* during Shenzong's reign when the three chapels were abolished. Each of the nine individual rooms in *Fengxiandian* therefore sheltered the emperor, the empress, and the biological mother of the later emperor.

The imperial lineage worship conducted in the *Taimiao* was regarded as a state affair in which the emperor or one of his male descendants was chief ritual performer, other princes and metropolitan officials serving as participants.

Observance of *zaijie* for a day was required for all the participants before the sacrificial ceremony. The worship in *Fengxiandian*, as the private imperial cult, was a family matter observed only by the imperial family members. The empress dowager or the empress had no part in the state ritual activities in the precincts of the *Taimiao*, but they performed the rite in the *Fengxiandian* and minor ancestral chapels. Every morning and evening and on other occasions, the emperor or one of his male descendants, as the head of the imperial family, stood in the left front and led male family members in worshipping the male ancestries. The empress, as the principal mistress of the imperial family, stood in the right front behind the empress dowager and led female family members in worshipping the female ancestors. In regular daily and monthly worship, when the emperor or empress dowager did not attend the occasion, the empress, as the daughter-in-law of the imperial family, performed the ritual. Other consorts as assistants stood behind her according to the order of their ranks. They all participated in food preparation for the ritual.

In the *Taimiao*, *tailao* sacrifices were regularly offered at the beginning of each month, each season, and the New Year, and also before any special events. Sacrificial ceremonies were more frequent but less elaborate in the *Fengxiandian*. Regular sacrifices were offered on a daily and monthly basis and the beginning of every season. *Tailao* sacrifices were offered on annual festivals, the days of ancestral births and deaths, and during special events. The rites of offering sacrifices were similar in both ancestral halls. During ceremonies, each spirit tablet was brought out from the inner shrines and assigned to a long row of throne chairs in order of precedence. The yellow cushions of the throne were made of brocade embroidered with dragons for the emperors, and with phoenixes for the empress. Spirit tablets, balanced upright by small wooden stands on the seat of each chair, were in pairs set up side by side. The older ancestors were honored first, and then their least distinguished descendants

shared equally in the offerings.⁶⁴ Through the sacrificial ceremonies, all participants knelt on the ground and offered sacrifices while the chief ritual performer read the sacrificial document to the spirit-tablets, asking for advice regarding important family and state issues.

Sacrificial food based on seasonal materials was prepared by the Office of Imperial Sacrifices, including rice, fruits, vegetables, and animal meats. The late Ming scholar Sun Chengze in *Chunming mengyulu* reported that during Shenzong reign, the cost for a full month's sacrificial food in *Fengxiandian* was approximately 1,593 taels of silver. Each sacrifice offered in the middle of the month cost 168 taels of silver. Another scholar Shen Bang in *Wanshu zaji* provided detailed information regarding the expenses for the *Taimiao* and the *Fengxiandian* during the late reign of Shizong. The budget for regular sacrifices in both halls was greatly reduced. Still, monthly cost for the *Fengxiandian* remained approximately 85 taels of silver, plus the necessary materials for worship (e.g. utensils, paper money, silk, candles, inks, coals, blushes, incense, etc.) which totaled around 800 taels of silver. The *Taimiao*'s annual expense for sacrificial food was approximately 800 taels for principal worship, plus 550 taels for regular worship.⁶⁵ The tremendous costs for sacrificial food indicated the importance of ancestral worship. The ceremonies must be elaborate and sacrificial items offered must be abundant, disregarding the costs, in order to express the sincerity of filial piety and the strength of the dynasty. The sacrificial food was fundamentally similar to those offered to the deities of Heaven and Earth. The status of imperial ancestors was considered relatively compatible to deities, and their advices and blessing were therefore essential for dynasty's fortune.⁶⁶

64 Sun Chengze, juan 18, pp. 241-254.

65 Sun Chengze, juan 18, p. 266; Shen Bang, pp. 122-129.

66 Using twentieth century Taiwan religious customs as example, Stuart E. Thompson discusses the different food people offered to deities and ancestors during worship. He

Similar rules which guided the ritual of ancestral worship in the *Taimiao* and the *Fengxiandian* were confirmed in imperial burial chambers and in ancestral worship in the cemeteries. The architecture of an imperial tomb was modeled on that of the Forbidden City. Each tomb consisted of a series of courtyards surrounded by palace-style rectangular buildings, the Sacrificial Hall, the Bright Tower (*Minglou*) and the wing-buildings on their eastern and western sides. This group of courtyards played a symbolic rather than a functional role. The Treasure Vault (*Baoding*), located in the back yard of the court, was a funeral vault surrounded by a fortified wall. The vault was covered by an artificial mound with numerous pines, cedars, catalpa trees, and others planted on its top. The rectangular shape symbolized the Heaven, while roundness symbolized the Earth, corresponding to the Chinese concept of the universe. The underground building beneath the vault was the burial chamber, called the "Black Palace" (*Xuangong*, also named *Baocheng*). It served as the symbolic Inner Palace for the departed emperor and empress along with their material goods (precious clothes, jewelry, and household objects).⁶⁷

In early Ming, only the consort who held the title of empress during her lifetime had the right to share the burial chamber with the emperor. It was not until Xianzong's reign that the non-empress consorts with the title of empress dowager (the biological mothers, or in one case, the biological grandmother, of the later emperors) were also honored with a place in the imperial tombs. Lady Zhou, the biological mother of Xianzong (and Yingzong's Honored Consort),

points out that deities received a whole meal, including meats, vegetables, rice, fruits, and beverage; but ancestors received such a treatment during special occasions; and were otherwise given only rice and vegetables. He indicates that people consider the status of deities is higher than that of their ancestors (Thompson, "Death, Food, and Fertility," pp. 71-108).

67 The comprehensive studies on the structure of the Ming imperial cemetery and tomb worship include Sun Chengze's *Chunming mengyulu*, Hu Hansheng's *Ming Shisanling*, and Ann Paludan's *The Imperial Ming Tombs*.

was the first non-empress consort who won a space in the imperial tomb after hard and bitter conflicts with court officials, who finally compromised with Xianzong's filial devotion to his mother. Lady Zhou's successful struggle established the rule for the later consorts who met similar criteria, still she was unable to change the ritual rule regulated the imperial harem system. The status of those consorts who shared burial chambers with their emperors was however, clearly distinguished in Yingzong and later emperors' tombs in order to advocate status differentiations. The coffin of the empress was placed on the left side of the emperor, while those of the other consorts were placed on the right side. The left was considered superior to the right.⁶⁸ Such regulations were enforced in tomb attached sacrificial halls where the spirit-tablets of the deceased emperor and honored ladies resided. Each spirit-tablet was preserved in a wooden tabernacle decorated with dragons for emperor and with phoenixes for empress, and displayed together in the north center the hall. During sacrifice rituals, the spirit-tablets of the emperor and the empress were set in the center, and those of other consorts lined both sides. Each spirit-tablet had one serving table in front of it to receive the sacrifices which was strictly regulated

68 Not specially favored by Yingzong, Lady Zhou was promoted to Honored Consort, rank 1a(i) but without the credits she expected for giving birth to the heir, the future Xianzong. Yingzong did not allow Lady Zhou to affront the hierarchy order in his harem; in particular, when she tried to challenge the authority of Lady Qian, the married empress. In order to protect Lady Qian, Yingzong had his will, written and guarded by the bureaucracy, in which he ordered that Lady Qian would be named empress dowager and share the tomb *Yuling* with him after she died. Upset with this, Lady Zhou persuaded Xianzong not to have the deceased Lady Qian buried in the tomb. Her obstruction prompted Xianzong, who could not make this decision alone, to call for a court meeting. Holding onto the lack of historical cases in the pre-Ming, the Grand Secretary Li Xian, who wrote Yingzong's will, rejected Lady Zhou's demand. The court officials, led by Yao Kui, knelt on the ground below the west entry of the Forbidden City, protesting until Lady Zhou accepted a compromise—both Ladies were buried in the imperial tomb; Lady Qian had the right side-room, and Lady Zhou had the left one (*Mingshi*, juan 114, pp. 3516-3518).

according to rank. The empress's serving table had the same dishes as those of the emperor's, but without wine. They shared animal meat displayed on the common table in front of them. The other consorts had less of a variety of delicacies.

Imperial ancestors who had the right to reside in the underground inner palace had the symbolic power of ruling the country as guardians and advisors of their descents. In the main hall of the "Black Palace" were three marble thrones, facing south. The one for the emperor, located at the center, was carved with dragons and clouds; the others with phoenixes, displayed on each side of the dragon throne or behind it, were for the empresses (the principal empress and honored empresses, who were later emperor's biological mothers). The thrones were prepared for their spirits to rule over state affairs in the underworld as imperial ancestry demanded. A *tailao* was offered in the Sacrificial Hall of each imperial tomb during the three major worships: Grave Sweeping Day, the Ghost Festival, and the Winter Solstice. Regular sacrifices were offered during the New Year, the beginning of winter, the days of birth and death of the deceased, and the birthday of the current emperor. Moreover, incense, fruits and wine were offered by the princes before they moved to their kingdoms, when they returned to visit the capital, or on the occasions when important state affairs were held. Issued examples are a new emperor ascendance, palace and tomb construction, or other institutional events. Princes and imperial son-in-laws were the chief ritual performers. Irregularly, the emperor personally visited and performed sacrificial rites at cemeteries. Attendance was required of all major officials of every local government in the metropolitan area during the three major worships. The occasions were similar to the court meetings the officials had with their emperor before he died. Every official was expected to follow the regulations during the ceremony or accept the pain of punishment.⁶⁹

69 Hu Hansheng, *Ming shisanling*, pp. 344-348.

During the ceremonies, a sacrificial document regarding important state issues was reported to the spirit-tablets to ask for advice.

Like marriage, death was another occasion to display the imperial family's social status and financial reserves, as well as the power of the state. The death ritual for a deceased empress was fundamentally the same as that practiced by commoners, only much more elaborate.⁷⁰ It was refined by Buddhist and Daoist religious ceremonies, but fundamentally regulated according to orthodox Confucian ideology. Led by officials trained in classical Confucian ritual texts, the social value of the Ming imperial death ritual was to educate people in filial piety through mourning observances performed by every citizen and the people of many tributary states. Recognizing that the condensed core of the family was filial piety and that the stability of the family system was the foundation of the state, Taizu inculcated filial piety as a primary value for the populace. In Ming ritual and legal code, he promoted children's mourning obligations to their deceased mothers, particularly their first-degree mothers (legal, biological, adoptive, and foster mothers), and punished infringements of mourning observance. In *Xiaocilu* (edited in 1374) and a decree issued in 1375, Taizu ordered that children should wear first-degree of mourning for their deceased first-degree mothers, the same degree of mourning as they wore for their deceased father, because they owed them same gratitude according to human nature. Children's mourning obligation to their deceased mothers was second-degree in *Yili* and Tang and Song rituals.⁷¹

70 The comprehensive study on Chinese funeral ritual is presented in J. J. M de Groot, *The Religious System of China* and James L. Watson and Evelyn S. Rawski eds., *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China*.

71 According to *Yili*, children wore a second-degree of mourning, 2b, for their deceased first-degree mothers (the wife of father, biological mother, adoptive mother, and foster mother), so as not to offend their living father; however, they wore 2a for their first-degree mothers if their father (or adoptive-father) was dead. In the Tang, under the order of the female Emperor Wu Zhao (r. 684-704), the period of wearing mourning clothes for first-degree mothers increased to 2a even while the father was still alive.

In Ming politics, the death ritual of the deceased empress had essential symbolic significance for the imperial heir-apparent as her principal mourner. Using Qing imperial death ritual as an example, historian Evelyn S. Rawski points out that through observation of mourning for the deceased emperor father, the empress dowager mother or the empress dowager grandmother, the new emperor reinforced his legitimacy.⁷² Rawski's statement is instructive for the study of the Ming case. Apparently, by expressing his filial devotion to the departed empress in *zhancui* mourning observance and in elaborate ancestral worship, the Ming imperial heir-apparent established for himself the image of a social model to the people. According to the Confucian philosophy, a filial son was ipso facto a good ruler. Moreover, he used the death ritual for the deceased empress as a mechanism to heighten the legitimacy of his regime. Such ritual significance was particularly important for the heir-apparent if he was born to a non-empress consort, insofar as the imperial lineage system and primogeniture succession system preferred the empress and her biological sons as the grand line. Through mourning observance and ancestral worship, the imperial heir-apparent affirmed his legitimacy by enforcing his relationship with the deceased empress, who was promoted to the principal ancestress of the imperial patrilineal system, even though she had no son.

Ming Taizu further increased children's mourning obligations to *zhancui* for their first-degree mothers. The Ming rule was followed during the Qing period. It appears that the rule was initially made for Taizu's favorite sonless consort, Lady Sun, who only had two biological daughters to wear 2a mourning for her. Taizu thus ordered Prince Zhou to wear *zhancui* for deceased Lady Sun, and entitled her as the prince's foster mother, even though his biological mother was still alive. The other rules of Ming mourning observances were not changed (see Zhang Lu, ed., *Xiaocilu* and the discussion in Hsieh Bao Hua (Sheih Bau Hwa), "Concubines in Chinese Society from the Fourteenth to the Seventeenth Centuries," chap. 4, pp. 126-134).

72 Rawski, "The Imperial Way of Death: Ming and Ch'ing Emperors and Death Ritual," p. 229; and her *The Last Emperor*, chapter 6. Also cf. the discussion about the functions of ritual in James L. Hevia, *Cherishing Men From Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1791*, pp. 21-24.

Death ritual had active, not passive, meanings for both living and deceased empresses. Funeral ritual, defined in the category of Funeral Rites, expressed the pang of separation between living and dead. Yet the ritual of ancestral worship, categorized in Auspicious Rites, defined the living empress's ritual responsibility and power. The right of the living empress to be the chief female ritual performer in the *Fengxiandian* was unchallengeable by other consorts. She maneuvered this right to affirm her legitimized status and power as the principal daughter-in-law of the imperial family. The political significance of her hosting the ancestral worship in the *Fengxiandian* was not limited to the domestic sphere. The empress demonstrated an important political function for the state by serving as exemplar of filial piety, thus strengthening the popular base of the Ming dynasty. The ritual of ancestral worship granted the deceased empress elaborate post-mortem benefits. In the ancestral halls, the deceased emperor and empress's spirit-tablets were always in a pair displayed side by side. During sacrificial ceremonies, they shared the same food on one desk, and together received the sacrificial document reported by their descendants. The deceased empress's political function as imperial private assistant was not affected by her death.

The emperor's participation in the ancestral worships in the *Taimiao* and the *Fengxiandian* was not only his obligation as the successor of the imperial family, but also his political mechanism to ratify his right and power as the head of the family and the ruler of the state. Grave worship performed by the emperor moreover strengthened imperial lineage organization, demonstrated the infinitive wealth of the dynasty, and furthered the emperor's personal political interests.⁷³ For instance, Shenzong conducted three pilgrimages to imperial

73 See the analyses of the significance of imperial rituals in the *Taimiao* and cemeteries in Howard J. Wechsler's *Offerings of Jade and Silk: Ritual and Symbol in the Legitimation of T'ang Dynasty*; Rawski's "The Imperial Way of Death: Ming and Ch'ing Emperors and Death Ritual," and her *The Last Emperors*; as well as Angela R. Zito's "Re-

cemeteries during his early reign (in the years 1580, 1583, and 1588) to assert his legitimacy and power as a new young emperor. Ascending the throne at age ten, Shenzong was under the guidance of his strict mother, Empress Dowager Lady Li, and the capable Grand Secretary, Zhang Juzheng (1525-1582). His visit to the cemeteries in the year 1580, when he was eighteen, indicated his desire to claim his independence from the control of his mother and, in particular, the dominance of Juzheng. Each of his visits to imperial cemeteries was an exhibition of his filial piety to imperial ancestors and demonstration of his good family relationship. The imperial team always included the empress dowager, consorts, and children. Nevertheless, Ming imperial grave worship was not conducted according to regular ritual schedules. Xianzong and Xiaozong never performed a grave worship during their reigns, whereas other emperors had at least one visit to imperial cemeteries. The main reason for the low frequency for imperial tomb worship, according to dynastic records, was that the tremendous cost would put a great burden on the local population.⁷⁴

The entire death ritual incorporated strict rules that were followed carefully by most of the Ming emperors, except Shizong. The funeral of married Lady Chen was exceptionally simplified. Still holding an empress title when she died in 1528, Lady Chen was treated as a deposed empress and accorded the burial rites of a secondary consort. According to *Mingshi*, Lady Chen, in a fit of jealousy, had thrown away a teacup served to her by two attendant consorts when Shizong being attracted to their beautiful hands ignored her. Shizong was

Presenting Sacrifice: Cosmology and the Editing of Texts,” “Ritualizing Li: Implications for Studying Power and Gender,” and *Of Body and Brush*.

74 *Taichang xukao* records the expenses for Shenzong's visit at the imperial cemeteries during the Grave Sweeping Day in 1580. The items for worship included 136 kilograms of incense, more than 500 taels of candles, 44 scrolls of colored and plain silk, animal meat (five calves, ten pigs, seven sheep, six rabbits, and one deer), various kinds of food, and 14 bottles of wine. 1,500 female sedan chair carriers were temporarily recruited to serve the imperial women (*Taichang xukao*, juan 4). See the imperial visit of 1588 recorded in Shen Bang, *Wanshu Zaji*, pp. 130-131.

so violently angry about her behavior that he kicked her and caused her fetus to abort. She died a couple of months later on the point of being deposed. Yet Shizong did not release her punishment. Her spirit-tablet was not given a place in the *Taimiao* or the *Fengxiandian*, but in the *Fengcidian*, the hall for the worship of the non-empress imperial biological mothers. Shizong did not wear formal mourning dress, only plain clothes for ten days, and suspended court business for merely twelve days. Slaughtering was prohibited only for seven days in the entire country. Court officials were ordered not to wear *zhancui*, but plain clothes with black mourning arm-bands when they came to the regular court meeting and plain clothes with white hats at home for twenty-seven days. The titled ladies of the Outer Audience also did not wear *zhancui*. Lady Chen was buried in *Jingshan*, the graveyard for secondary consorts.⁷⁵ The day after her interment, Shizong almost immediately ordered the court officials to resume normal dress, disregarding their criticism. But the funeral of the promoted empress, Lady Fang, was treated very differently when she died in 1548. Shizong had her interred in his tomb, *Yongling*, and her spirit-tablet was worshiped in the *Taimiao* and the *Fengxiandian*, to express his gratefulness for the lady who had protected him against an attempted assassination by the serving women in 1542.⁷⁶

75 In the early Ming, the childless imperial consorts were possibly forced or persuaded to follow their departed emperor to his death. The empress and some senior consorts, even without a child, were exempted from this rule. Yingzong suspended the rule before he died. The consorts and the serving women who died for their emperor were buried together in the tombs surrounding the eastern and western areas of the imperial tomb. The other consorts, who did not follow the emperor to death, were buried after their natural death in the graveyard at *Jingshan*. Those ranked 1a(ii) and above had individual tombs, while the lower ranking ones were buried together in a single tomb (Sun Chengze, juan 70, p. 1349). Lady Chen was buried according to a secondary consort. See the discussion in *Mingshi*, juan 114, p. 3530; and *Daming huidian*, juan 97, pp. 547-548.

76 See Hsieh Bao Hua, "From Charwoman to Empress Dowager: Serving Women in the Ming Palace," p. 41 about the details of the palace coup in 1542.

Shizong's inappropriate decision was rectified by his son Muzong (r. 1567-1572). Under his order, supported by the court, Lady Chen was honored with both posthumous and temple names and her remains were reburied in Shizong's tomb. Her spirit-tablet replaced that of Lady Fang in the *Taimiao* and the *Fengxiandian*, whereas the latter was removed to the *Hongxiaodian*. Unlike other promoted empresses who ascended to the empress position after the previous one had been deposed, Lady Fang, as a promoted empress, had only a posthumous name since Lady Chen still held empress title when she died. Being much ignored by his father, Muzong was insecure about his succession until he was thirty years old when the death of Shizong was announced. After he ascended the throne, Muzong was eager to establish his image as a virtuous emperor by impressing the court that he was the right successor because of his proper values and behavior. He thus affirmed his legitimacy by following the ancestral ritual system.

While the *Taimiao*, with its strict regulations, was rigorously guarded by the Outer Audience, the *Fengxiandian* and imperial tomb were often maneuvered to serve an individual emperor's political and private interests. Xianzong initiated the rule which granted his biological mother, Lady Zhou, and all biological mothers of later emperors a space in the imperial tomb; Xiaozong established the *Fengcidian* to worship his biological mother, Lady Ji (a secondary consort of Xianzong), and his biological grandmother, Lady Zhou (Xianzong's biological mother); Shizong had his grandmother Lady Shao (Xianzong's Honored Consort) also worshipped in the *Fengcidian*; he then in 1536, had the hall closed and the three empress dowagers' spirit-tablets moved to the *Fengxiandia*. In the year 1574, Shenzong furthered the spirit-tablets of his biological grandmother, Lady Du (a secondary consort of Shizong and the biological mother of Muzong), and other non-empress biological mothers of emperors all being moved into the *Fengxiandian*. Lady Fang's spirit-tablet was therefore benefited and also moved to the *Fengxiandian*. These emperors' decisions were, in general, supported by court officials for as long as the imperial filial devotion served the state's political

purposes to exemplify a social model in the education of all Chinese people. However, Lady Wang, the biological mother of Xizong, and Lady Liu, the biological mother of Sizong, possessed no place in the *Fengxiandian*. Consequently, neither emperor was able to fulfill his filial piety for his biological mother due to there being no vacancy there at the time of their deaths. Both emperors' wishes to build extra rooms in the hall were rejected by the court because of the lack of ritual ground.⁷⁷ Thus, with the decline of the function of the ritual of ancestral worship, which had served as a means of ordering the imperial family, the Ming dynasty lost its strength.

The consorts who advanced to empress and/or empress dowager
with/without temple and/or posthumous names

| emperor husband | married empress (M) promoted empress (P) non-empress consorts (N) honored title (H) empress dowager (ED) | temple name | posthumous name |
|---------------------------|--|---------------|-------------------|
| Taizu | Lady Ma M | <i>gao</i> | <i>xiaoci</i> |
| Huidi | *Lady Ma M | <i>none</i> | <i>none</i> |
| Chengzu | Lady Xu M | <i>wen</i> | <i>renxiao</i> |
| Renzong | Lady Zhang M/ED | <i>zhao</i> | <i>chengxiao</i> |
| Xuangzong | Lady Sun P/ED | <i>zhang</i> | <i>xiaogong</i> |
| | *Lady Wu N/ED | <i>none</i> | <i>none</i> |
| Yingzong | Lady Qian M/ED | <i>rui</i> | <i>xiaozhuang</i> |
| | Lady Zhou N/ED | <i>none</i> | <i>xiaosu</i> |
| Jingdi | *Lady Hang P | <i>none</i> | <i>none</i> |
| Xianzong | Lady Wang P/ED | <i>chun</i> | <i>xiaozhen</i> |
| | Lady Ji N/ED (H) | <i>none</i> | <i>xiaomu</i> |
| | *Lady Shao N/ED | <i>none</i> | <i>xiaohui</i> |
| Xiaozong | Lady Zhang M/ED | <i>jing</i> | <i>xiaokang</i> |
| Wuzong | Lady Xia M/ED | <i>yi</i> | <i>xiaojing</i> |
| Ruizong (Prince Xingxian) | Lady Jiang M/ED | <i>xian</i> | <i>xiaoci</i> |
| Shizong | Lady Chen M | <i>su</i> | <i>xiaojie</i> |
| | Lady Fang P | <i>none</i> | <i>xiaolie</i> |
| | Lady Du N/ED (H) | <i>none</i> | <i>xiaoke</i> |
| Muzong | Lady Li M (1 st wife) (H) | <i>zhuang</i> | <i>xiaoyi</i> |
| | Lady Chen M (2 nd wife)/ED | <i>none</i> | <i>xiaolan</i> |

77 Sun Chengze, *Chunming mengyulu* juan 18, pp. 261-262 & 267-269.

| | | | | |
|-----------|------------|----------|------------------|-----------------|
| Shenzong | Lady Li | N/ED | none | <i>xiaoding</i> |
| | Lady Wang | M | <i>xian</i> | <i>xiaoduan</i> |
| Guangzong | Lady Wang | N/ED (H) | none | <i>xiaojing</i> |
| | Lady Guo | M (H) | <i>zhen</i> | <i>xiaoyuan</i> |
| | Lady Wang | N/ED (H) | none | <i>xiaohe</i> |
| Xizong | Lady Liu | N/ED (H) | none | <i>xiaochun</i> |
| | Lady Zhang | M/ED | <i>zhe</i> | <i>yan</i> |
| Sizong | Lady Zhou | M | <i>zhuanglie</i> | <i>min</i> |

Sources: Sun Chengze, *Chunming mengyulu*, juan 17, pp. 242-245 and juan 18, pp. 263-265.

*Lady Wu was entitled empress dowager by her biological son, Jingdi, yet her title was removed and her rank was demoted to secondary consort by Yingzong after he regained the throne. Both Huidi's empress Lady Ma and Jingdi's empress Lady Hang were excluded from the *Fengxiandian* and the *Taimiao* after both emperors were dethroned during the political coups. Lady Shao of Xianzong was entitled empress dowager by her grandson Shizong and Lady Zhang of Xizong was entitled by his younger brother Sizong. The other empress dowagers were entitled by their legal or biological sons.

Conclusion

Ritual and the harem system ratified the superiority of the empress in the Inner Palace where she exercised certain powers and authority. She led daily activities, maintained the function of staff organization, and performed regular ancestral worship and filial piety. Yet her status could not bring any satisfaction to her emotional life. On the other hand, her privileges inspired jealousy of other women, as numerous beauties competed for status. In this power struggle, the emperor mostly sided with his favorite consort. If the empress survived the endemic power struggle in the harem and secured her title, she could retire into the secure life of empress dowager, and even manage to acquire prestige for herself and her lineage, although not significant power in the Ming political system. Those who died as empress or empress dowager with an empress title were guaranteed handsome post-mortem privileges. Death ritual produced an active and permanent status for the deceased empress as an ancestor of the imperial family and the state. She was provided with a secured and sufficient afterlife, and was allowed to wield symbolic power.

As a counterpart to the emperor institution, the *yang* essence, the empress institution was ritually designed to be the complementary force of *yin* essence. Both components of the duality, husband/wife and mother/father, were compulsory for the creation of the imperial family and the state. The empress institution ritually served as the connection between the imperial family and the state. But in the interest of the Ming patriarchal political system, the empress institution was forced to compromise. The empress was selected from candidates with humble social backgrounds by a well designed recruitment system. Taizu's regulations for consorts strictly limited the empress's political activities and influence, and prohibited her connections with the outside world with a view to eliminating her lineage support. To further weaken the empress institution, Taizu eliminated the Sericultural Ceremony. Taizu's instructions became firmly established by the bureaucrats, who considered themselves the guardians of the "ancestral rules." In the late Ming dynasty, bureaucrats resorted to court intrigues in such issues as the promotion or deposition of empresses and the selection of an imperial heir or whenever the bureaucrats considered it necessary to protect the state's interests. Ironically enough, the weak empress institution and the generally humble lineage of each empress prior to her marriage into the royal family did not strengthen the patriarchy of the emperors, thereby enabling eunuchs and bureaucrats to enhance their power in the government. This situation eventually weakened the dynasty and affected the socio-political state of society generally.

To understand the denouement of the drama of social and political turmoil resulting from the weak empress institution, further research is needed in order to understand the empress in the broad context of political and social history. Also the life of imperial children, and the role of the empress and her function as their legal mother, especially the relationship between the empress and the crown princes, must be explored to more fruitfully understand the empress institution. Furthermore, the social influence of the empress as a role model for

the women of the country calls for attention. The Ming feminine qualities, such as chastity, fidelity, and submissiveness, were passive as compared with those of the pre-Ming society. How the empress exerted her influence on women's education and contributed to the establishment of female virtues that were valued by the patriarchal social system is an essential issue in Chinese women history.

Appendix: The Ranks and Titles of Imperial Consorts

Imperial grandmother: Grand Empress Dowager 太皇太后

Imperial mother: Empress Dowager 皇太后

Imperial principal consort: Empress 皇后

Imperial non-principal consorts:

Titles for secondary consorts (*fei* 妃), grade 1a:

Grade 1a(i): Imperial Honored Consort (*huangguifei* 皇貴妃)

Grade 1a(ii): Honored Consort (*guifei* 貴妃)

Grade 1a(iii):

Worthy Consort (*xianfei* 賢妃)

Pure Consort (*shufei* 淑妃)

Dignified Consort (*zhuangfei* 莊妃)

Honorable Consort (*jinfei* 瑾妃)

Gentle Consort (*huifei* 惠妃)

Complaisant Consort (*xunfei* 順妃)

Peaceful Consort (*kangfei* 康妃)

Restful Consort (*ningfei* 寧妃)

Respectful Consort (*gongfei* 恭妃)

Virtuous Consort (*defei* 德妃)

Chamber Consort (*chenfei* 宸妃)

Elegant Consort (*lifei* 麗妃)

Calm Consort (*anfei* 安妃)

Chaste Consort (*zhenfei* 貞妃)

Stable Consort (*dingfei* 定妃)

Luminous Consort (*zhaofei* 昭妃)

Happy Consort (*xifei* 熹妃)

Solemn Consort (*dongfei* 董妃)

Tolerant Consort (*rongfei* 容妃)

Titles for third class consorts (*pin* 嬪), grade 2a:

Worthy Lady (*xianpin* 賢嬪)

Pure Lady (*shupin* 淑嬪)

Dignified Lady (*zhuangpin* 莊嬪)

Honorable Lady (*jinpin* 瑾嬪)

Gentle Lady (*huipin* 惠嬪)

Complaisant Lady (*xunpin* 順嬪)

Peaceful Lady (*kangpin* 康嬪)

Restful Lady (*ningpin* 寧嬪)

Elegant Lady (*lipin* 麗嬪)
 Calm Lady (*anpin* 安嬪)
 Harmonious Lady (*hepin* 和嬪)
 Happy Lady (*xipin* 熹嬪)
 Respectful Lady (*gongpin* 恭嬪)
 Cautious Lady (*shenpin* 慎嬪)
 Virtuous Lady (*depin* 德嬪)

Titles for minor consort grades:

Grade 3a: Talented One (*cairen* 才人)
 Grade 4a: Fair And Handsome (*jieryu* 婕妤)
 Grade 5a: Luminous Department (*zhaoyi* 昭儀)
 Grade 6a: Noble One (*guiren* 貴人)
 Grade 7a: Beautiful One (*meiren* 美人)
 Grade 8a: Luminous Countenance (*zhaorong* 昭容)
 Grade 9a: Selected Companion (*xuanshi* 選侍)
 Grade 10a: Pure One (*shunü* 淑女)

sources: Mao Qiling, *Shengchao tongshi shiyiji*, p. 6b.

The Ming consort system, founded by Taizu, was based on the Tang and Song models with slight modification. *Huangguifei*, created by Xianzong in 1466, was ranked 1a(i). The rank of *guifei* was demoted to 1a(ii). The *pin* system was not completed until 1531 by Shizong in order to reinforce the ideal consort system set during the Zhou dynasty. The total positions of 21 *fei*, 14 *pin*, and 8 minor consorts were probably never filled in most of the Ming period, while Shizong created additional number of *fei* and *pin*.

This Appendix is quoted from Hsieh Bao Hua, "From Charwoman to Empress Dowager: Serving Women in the Ming Palace," *Ming Studies*, vol. 42 (1999), pp. 72-73.

GLASSORY

- (Lady) Cao 曹氏
cebao 冊寶
 Changluo 常洛
 Changxun 常洵
 (Lady) Chen 陳氏
 Chen Fu 陳輔
chi, cun 尺，寸
dalian, xiaolian 大殮，小殮
di, shu 嫡，庶
 Dongchang 東廠
 (Lady) Fang 方氏
fayin 發引
 Fang Congzhe 方從哲
 Gaomei 高禱
 Gongzheng 宮正
 Guanglusi 光祿寺
 (Lady) Gong 竝氏
 (Lady) Guo 郭氏
 (Lady) Hang 杭氏
 (Lady) Hao 郝氏
he 合
hejin 合昏
 Hong Bao 洪保
hou, huanghou, yuanhou
 后，皇后，元后
Huangming zuxun 皇明祖訓
 (Hu) Shanwei 胡善爲
 (Hu) Shanxiang 胡善祥
 Hu Rong 胡容
 (Lady) Hu 胡氏
 (Lady) Ji 紀氏
Jili, Jiali, Xiongli 吉禮，嘉禮，凶禮
 (Lady) Jiang 蔣氏
jie 節
jin, qian 斤，錢
 (Lady) Ke 客氏
Kuilou 奎婁
 (Lady) Li 李氏
 Li Wenzhong 李文忠
 Li Xian 李賢
Libu 禮部
lifu 禮服
Liyifang 禮儀房
 Liu E 劉娥
Lubu 鹵簿
 (Lady) Ma 馬氏
miaohao, shihao 廟號，諡號
mianfu 冕服
nacai, wenming, naji, nazheng, gaoqi
 納采，問名，納吉，納徵，告期
face-fengying, jianjiugu, miaojian
 發冊奉迎，見舅姑，廟見
neiting, waichao 內廷，外朝
Neixun 內訓
Nüjie 女誡
pei 配
pibianfu 皮弁服
 Qi Shao 齊韶
 (Lady) Qian 錢氏
qian, kun 乾，坤
Qingshi huangdi 秦始皇帝
Shanggongju 尚宮局
Shangshanqian 尚膳監

(Lady) Shao 邵氏

shunü 淑女

Silijian 司禮監

Song Lian 宋濂

sui 歲

(Lady) Sun 孫氏

Sun Ruyou 孫如游

Taichangsi 太常寺

Tailao, zhonglao, shalao

太牢，中牢，少牢

(Lady) Tian 田氏

(Lady) Wan 萬氏

(Lady) Wang 王氏

(Lady) Wang (Jingdi's deposed empress)

汪氏

(Lady) Wei 韋氏

Wei Zhongxian 魏忠賢

(Lady) Wu 吳氏

(Lady) Xia 夏氏

Xiannong (Shennong) 先農，神農

xiaojun 小君

Xianchan (Leizu or Xilingshi)

先蠶，嫫祖，西陵氏

(Prince) Xin 信王

(Lady) Xu 徐氏

Yang Shiqi 楊士奇

Yao Kui 姚奎

Yuan, Xiang 元，象

zaijie 齋戒

zhancui 斬衰

(Lady) Zhang 張氏

Zhang Juzheng 張居正

(Lady) Zheng 鄭氏

(Lady) Zhou 周氏

Zhonggong 中宮

Temple names

chun 純

gao 高

jing 敬

rui 睿

su 肅

wen 文

xian (Ruizong, Prince Xingxian)

獻 (興獻王，睿宗)

xian (Shenzong) 顯 (神宗)

yi 毅

zhao 昭

zhang 章

zhen 貞

zhe 愨

zhuang 莊

zhuanglie 莊烈

Posthumous names

Xiaoci 孝慈

renxiao 仁孝

chengxiao 誠孝

xiaogong 孝恭

xiaozhuang 孝莊

xiaosu 孝肅

xiaozhen 孝貞

xiaomu 孝穆

xiaohui 孝惠

xiaokang 孝康
xiaojing (Empress Lady Xia of Wuzong) 孝靜
xiaojie 孝潔
xiaolie 孝烈
xiaoke 孝恪
xiaoyi 孝懿
xiaolan 孝安
xiaoding 孝定
xiaoduan 孝端
xiaojing (Imperial Honored Consort, Lady Wang of Shenzong) 孝靖
xiaoyuan 孝元
xiaohe 孝和
xiaochun 孝純
yian 懿安
min 愍

Names of cities, gates, ceremonial halls, ancestral halls, palace residences, and imperial cemetery and tombs

Baocheng (*Xuangong*), *Baoding*, *Minglou*
 寶城 (玄宮), 寶頂, 明樓
Beianmen 北安門
Changping 昌平
Cininggong 慈寧宮
Ciqinggong 慈慶宮
Damingmen 大明門
Fengtianmen 奉天門
Fengtiandian 奉天殿

Fengcidian 奉慈殿
Fengxiandian 奉先殿
Hongxiaodian 弘孝殿
Huagaidian 華蓋殿
Deshengmen 德勝門
Huangcheng, *Jingcheng*, *Zijingcheng*
 皇城, 京城, 紫禁城
Jingshan 金山
Jingshendian 謹身殿
Qianqingmen 乾清門
Qianqinggong, *Jiaotaidian*, *Kunninggong*
 乾清宮, 交泰殿, 坤寧宮
Renzhidian 仁智殿
Shenxiaodian 神霄殿壇
Sheji 社稷
Taimiao 太廟
Tiantan 天壇
Tonghuamen 東華門
Wumen 午門
Wuyingdian 武英殿
Xiaoling 孝陵
Xiangdian (*Lingendian*) 享殿, 稜恩殿
Xihuamen 西華門
Xuanwumen 玄武門
Yongling 永陵
Zhengyangmen 正陽門
Yonganmen 永安門
Youshunmen 右順門
Yudao 御道
Yuling 裕陵

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明代的皇后

謝 葆 華

摘 要

明代皇后制度的探討是明史研究中重要的一環。本文深入淺出闡述了明代皇后制度的建立及其運作。討論範圍涵蓋了皇后的甄選以及皇后的角色、地位和權利的界定。本文主旨指出明代的禮制在嘉禮、吉禮和凶禮中奠定皇后制度為皇帝制度不可或缺的輔助機構。而且皇后制度於運作上遷就於太祖的后妃規範，受限於明代朝廷裏皇帝權限和政黨政治的衝突。

關鍵詞：明代的皇后