
_Celestial Women_ is the second of a two-volume work by Keith McMahon on the history of imperial wives and concubines at Chinese courts. While the first volume, _Women Shall Not Rule_ (2013), focused on the period from early China to the Liao dynasty (1250BCE to 1125), _Celestial Women_ covers the Song to the Qing dynasties. The book is divided into three parts: Part one includes a chapter on the Song and a – rather short – chapter on the Jin and Yuan dynasties; part two discusses the Ming dynasty, and part three is dedicated to the Qing dynasty (with a special focus on the emperors of the High Qing and on the last female regent, Cixi, the subject of the last chapter). The book is framed by two chapters that discuss queenship from a cross-cultural comparative perspective, connecting the work with recent research in the field of comparative court history. McMahon’s main sources are the dynastic histories and their chapters on imperial women. These are complemented by other records such as accounts written by officials, eunuchs, and European missionaries, as well as by specialized scholarship on Chinese dynastic history.

Discussing the empresses, concubines, and court women reign by reign, the book contains a rich fundus of stories that exemplify emperors’ sexuality, imperial women’s agency, dynastic reproduction, and succession. It also traces changes in the social and political patterns of the Chinese court. McMahon shows not only how empress-regents – still very common in the Song – became virtually nonexistent during the Ming and Qing dynasties, but also how the Ming tried to minimize imperial wives’ political influence by choosing women of lower social standing. However, these processes should not, as he demonstrates, be interpreted as signaling the elimination of female influence over the emperor. It was during the Ming that a nursemaid (Honored Consort Wan during the Xianzong reign, 1465-87) and a wetnurse (Madam Ke during the Tianqi reign, 1621-27) gained significant influence on imperial politics.

The development of gender arrangements in the imperial household was not a homogenous and unidirectional process as McMahon’s discussion of the status change and increased power of concubines in the late imperial period shows. In a rupture with established practice, Ming Taizu accorded concubine birth mothers equal inheritance rights (but ordered thirty-eight sonless concubines to commit suicide at his death). Concubine birth mothers’ ancestral tablets also started to be revered in a special temple inside the Forbidden City, the Temple for the Compassionate Mother (_Fengci dian_ 奉慈殿) during the Xiaozong reign (1488-
and in a special section of the Temple for Predecessors (Fengxian dian 奉先殿) during the Chongzhen reign (1628-1644). Starting with the Yongzheng emperor, during the Qing, favored concubines were buried in the emperor’s mausoleum even if they did not produce children. This indicates that the gap between empresses and concubines had become smaller than ever before.

Celestial Women has a particular focus on the ways in which tropes and narratives of imperial women were reproduced throughout Chinese history. McMahon not only analyses what historical records tell us about the ill-reputed Prince of Hailing from the Jin dynasty, but also shows how (partially pornographic) Ming fiction re-used this material. In addition, we learn about Wei Zhongxian, the powerful eunuch ally of the above-mentioned Madam Ke and his fictionalization in four novels. McMahon also tries to assess the reliability of his sources, pointing, for instance, to biases in contemporary writings concerning the empress dowager Cixi.

However, despite this critical assessment of sources, McMahon does not always make clear whether we should understand the narratives presented in dynastic histories (his main sources) as reflections of practices or as a part of a rather standardized discourse. McMahon states, for example, that empresses and concubines often had a moderating influence on emperors. It remains unclear, however, why we should interpret (as McMahon suggests) the stories about soothing wives recorded in dynastic histories as reflections of reality rather than as a part of the Confucian discourse on wifely virtues. The book would have benefitted from an exploration of this question. Moreover, McMahon’s decision to stick closely to the sources and the stories they tell makes for a fascinating read, but it comes at the cost of a deeper analysis of the Chinese court’s social and political structures.

Covering almost one thousand years of Chinese history, Celestial Women provides readers with a rich overview of themes, sources, and literature relevant to a gendered history of China’s imperial court. Furthermore, McMahon repeatedly connects the history of imperial women to the broader history of women in China and discusses how Han customs merged with those of the Jurchens, Mongols, and Manchus in the Jin, Yuan, and Qing dynasties respectively. Thus, it makes a valuable contribution not only to gender relations in China, but also to the history of the Chinese court.

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