



*Celestial Women:  
Imperial Wives and Concubines in  
China from Song to Qing*

**Keith McMahan**

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*Celestial Women: Imperial Wives and Concubines in China from Song to Qing*. By Keith McMahon. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016. ISBN: 978-1-4422-5501-2. xxxiv + 276 pp. £54.95.

**W**hat role did women play in state politics in the second millennium of imperial China? Keith McMahon struggles with this question in *Celestial Women: Imperial Wives and Concubines in China from Song to Qing* by analysing (dis-)continuities of the ways that imperial women have exercised power in China from the aftermath of Wu Zetian (625–705), the first and only female emperor in Chinese history, to Empress Dowager Cixi (1835–1908), China’s last woman ruler. Chronologically, this volume is a continuation of McMahon’s previous book *Women Shall Not Rule: Imperial Wives and Concubines in China from Han to Liao* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), which focuses on the history of China’s polygamist emperors and their wives from the legendary past to 1125. In this book, McMahon pieces together vignettes about empresses and consorts through the last one thousand years of imperial China to argue that “polygamy was an institution and a social environment with rules and expectations that monitored and limited [the emperor’s] behaviour” and that despite the fundamental opposition to women rulers “women nevertheless had access to power” (xviii).

In his effort to present the jagged and overlapping nature of the various aspects he covers, McMahon divides his narrative into a series of brief accounts, each given its own title. They generally follow a chronological order but fork consistently into separate topics and episodes. The first section is devoted primarily to the Song (960/1179), Jin (1125/1234), and Yuan (1271/1368) dynasties. McMahon begins his inquiry with an analysis of the imperial women of the Song. Like their predecessors, Song empresses exerted enormous influence in political and cultural realms, serving nine times as regents throughout the dynasty. However, these women were fully aware of a new reality—“the necessity to avoid the appearance of Wu-Zetian-like behaviour” (32), to which the officialdom fiercely objected. Diving into the stories of the licentious Jin emperor Hailing (r. 1149-61) and determined Mongol mothers who promoted their sons to power, McMahon examines how the non-Chinese (i.e. Jurchen and Mongol) traditions differed from the Chinese in terms of gender roles and women’s status.

The second section proceeds to the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). Although influential women continued to appear, in comparison with previous dynasties, the position of empress significantly weakened. This is partly due to the dynastic founder’s decree that empresses were forbidden to serve as regents, and that imperial wives shall come from lower social ranks in

order to reduce the potential of interference by privileged women and their powerful in-law families. But more importantly, the emperor's decision to make himself the direct head of twenty-three government agencies led to eunuchs being more numerous and influential. During the Ming, four even became notorious as eunuch dictators, and one even nearly usurped the throne. As McMahon persuasively reminds readers, throughout the Ming there can be observed a general trend of "narrowing the distinctions that had usually been made between the principal wife, on the one hand, and the concubines, birth mothers, and stepmothers, on the other" (151). Thus, the orthodox function of polygamy continued so to provide imperial successors when the empress failed to do so, yet the position of empress was neutralised and their role was further fragmented.

In contrast to the Ming, as McMahon demonstrates in the third section, the Qing took imperial wives preferably from higher social classes, especially Mongol nobility. The Manchu rulers took from the Manchurian traditions that the imperial household supplied a bride-price to the woman's natal family. Once she entered the palace, she became the property of the royal house and accordingly assumed a new identity. The alliance between high-status wives and their kinsmen, which once threatened and eroded the power of the imperial clan, was considerably tempered under the Qing. In general, the history of the Qing was marked by vigorous emperors and limited influence of palace women and eunuchs. However, when male leadership declined in the latter half of the dynasty—the fourth last emperor had only three children, and the last three emperors none at all—a strong woman stepped in: Empress Dowager Cixi began a forty-seven-year reign as the supreme monarch that lasted until 1908.

McMahon's work, intertextual in its reading and inter-temporal in its scope, makes a significant contribution to the study of palace women's lives and roles in imperial China. He ably demonstrates that there has been a long-standing normative ideal that women should be segregated to the domestic sphere of the palace. Female rulership was considered "abnormal and undesirable" and it posed "an absolute, categorical threat" (242) to the ideal model of imperial rulership. But McMahon forcefully argues that this does not reflect what was already in place. Indeed, the history of imperial China has witnessed ample examples of prominent imperial women who repeatedly took part in state politics. However, it is necessary to bear in mind that because these women ruled in spite of the prohibition against them, their actions were affected by that pressure. Moreover, since history is usually told from perspectives of emperors and their political, economic, and military deeds, it requires special lenses to interpret the accounts about them in order to better comprehend the roles and deeds of these women. McMahon acknowledges

such difficulties with veracity, yet he succeeds in providing lively pictures of these women by filtering out reliable information from the sea of historical records, some of them utterly fictional and even scandalous. His felicitous, lucid translation of selected excerpts from biographical texts and literary records, frequently assembled from numerous, not always consistent, sources, provides a real flavour of the sources and a vivid instance of how they can and should be used.

As someone who is more focused on China's frontier and its nomadic neighbours, I am delighted to read that McMahon has touched upon the question of non-Chinese traditions, a topic conventionally overlooked, if not totally neglected, in traditional historiography. In fact, the continued rules of the Khitan, Jurchen, Tangut, Mongol, and Manchu, which together amounted to almost seven centuries, have exerted tremendous impact on the historical development of China in virtually all aspects. In terms of gender issues and imperial women, these nomadic non-Chinese peoples differed considerably from the sedentary Confucian Chinese.

While discussing the imperial women of the Manchu Qing dynasty, McMahon remarks that Manchu women, like the Khitan and Mongol, “practiced levirate marriage” and “cross-generation marriage” and “did things that the Han[-Chinese] shunned, such as riding horses, archery, hunting with men, and participating in battle” (164). McMahon's examination of the Manchu women could benefit from a deeper discussion of the Khitan, Mongol, and the Jurchen, their consanguineous ancestors. As Linda Cooke Johnson (*Women of the Conquest Dynasties: Gender and Identity in Liao and Jin China* [University of Hawai'i Press, 2011]) has cogently argued, the marriage patterns of these non-Chinese peoples had solid economic and cultural backgrounds different from the Chinese, and their imperial marriages greatly influenced the administrative structure and political conduct of their respective dynasties. In fact, the Qing way of organising imperial marriage, the status of women in the palace, and state politics were not purely Manchu inventions but more an accumulation of the experiences of their dynastic predecessors.

Certainly, this should in no way diminish the remarkable achievement of McMahon's erudite command of several hundred primary and secondary sources and his meticulous analysis of empresses and consorts in the last ten centuries of imperial China. Overall, *Celestial Women* is clearly written with an engaging narrative and interlocking arguments, making the reading of this book a real joy. It takes us a step further towards a more interactive, and less bounded, history of imperial women in China. The many issues discussed

invite comparative studies on queenship and imperial marriages in other cultures and will definitely appeal to a broad readership.

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