
*From Evil Women to Dissolute Rulers: Changes in
Gender Representation across the Zuo zhuan, Guoyu,
and Shiji*



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Abstract

This article examines gender representation in early Chinese histories with a focus on Shiji 史記 (Records of the Historian). Presenting beautiful and evil women, rather than male rulers, as responsible for political crises is a long-standing practice of Chinese historiography. Previous scholarship contends that this practice began with such depictions in Shiji and thus stems from its model impact upon subsequent histories. By scrutinising the interplay between the two genders within royal houses, this article extends the scope of previous scholarly examination from women to their husbands, i.e. the male rulers. Comparison of the causation chains of political disasters as built in Zuo zhuan 左傳 (Zuo Commentary), Guoyu 國語 (Discourses of the States), and Shiji shows that Shiji diminishes women's agency, describing them as neither the original cause of political crises nor a tool to shield rulers from criticism. Unlike its predecessors, Shiji presents political catastrophes as ruler-dominant consequences resulting from their own unrestricted desires and cross-boundary misbehaviour, explaining the rise and decay in history.

Keywords: Gender representation, early Chinese rulers, Zuo zhuan, Guoyu, Shiji

While editing *Xintangshu* 新唐書 (The New History of the Tang Dynasty [618–907 CE]), the Song scholar and historian Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–1072 CE) used the term *nühuo* 女禍 (female disaster) to blame “evil” women for taking advantage of their husbands' favour in order to generate political chaos.¹ To emphasise the destructive effects of women, it has long been a cliché to describe the beauty of women as *qingguo* 傾國 (brings down kingdoms) and *qingcheng* 傾城 (brings down cities) in Chinese literature, dating back at least to the *Shijing* 詩經 (Book of Odes). Historians both earlier and later than Ouyang related dynastic

¹Zhang Jing 张菁, “Zhongguo Gudai nühuo shiguan de yuanliu—cong “püjisichen” dao “bixingqingguo”” 中國古代女禍史觀的源流—從“牝雞司晨”到“嬖幸傾國”, *Shehui kexue zhanxian* 社會科學戰線 11 (2013), p. 71.

downfalls to women, thus stories displaying ‘Misogynistic ideology’ appear across Chinese historiography from pre-imperial histories to later standard dynastic histories.²

Although this common practice is seen in books that predate the *Shiji* 史記 (Records of the Historian), this monumental work by the Han historian Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145–86 BCE?) has been considered a pivotal text in building the evil woman archetype for three reasons.³ First, the *Shiji*’s influence upon subsequent Chinese histories was unparalleled. Viewed as the ultimate exemplar of historical writings, its concepts and principles were widely praised and inherited by later historians. Ostensibly women’s evil persona in the destructive narratives of the Shang 商 and Zhou 周 dynasties give the impression that the *Shiji* portrays women as the main cause of serious political disorder, and thus implies that the *Shiji* as a model has profoundly shaped the representation of female malfeasance in classical Chinese historiography. Second, this paradox is further reinforced by a parallel regarding three notorious women in Chinese history, Mo Xi 末喜, Da Ji 妲己 and Bao Si 褒姒—in the *Shiji* chapter “Hereditary Houses of the Families Related to the Emperors by Marriage” 外戚世家. As the favourites of three rulers who were all the last of their line, these women have been widely criticised for bringing down the three pre-imperial dynasties, namely the Xia 夏, Shang 商 and Zhou 周 respectively.⁴ Third, texts composed around the end of the Western Han period elaborate upon wifely virtues, creating role models for female instruction.⁵ This scholarly attention to women has caused anachronistic interpretation of their role in the *Shiji*. For example, Liu Xiang 劉向 (77–76 BCE)’s *Lienü zhuan* 列女傳 (Categorised Biographies of Women) consolidates the role that women played in state affairs. The category of *niebi* 孽嬖, depraved concubines who seduce the rulers through sexual power (including the three aforementioned women), forms a contrast with exemplary women who advise and even remonstrate rulers. This attention to women’s behaviour, rather than that of their husbands, causes an overemphasis on women’s impact and pardons their husbands within these catastrophic narratives.⁶ Indeed, Bao Si’s image as an evil woman

²Liu Jie 劉潔, ‘Cong liangxing guanxi bianhua kan xianqin qinhan funnü guannian de bianqian’ 從兩性關係變化看先秦秦漢婦女觀念的變遷, *Anyang shifan xueyuan xuebao* 安陽師範學院學報 4 (2004), p. 47. Yang Yun 楊允 and Xu Zhigang 許志剛 argue that *Shiji* inherits the *nühuo* concept from the pre-Qin period and uses it to interpret the dictionary of history in ‘He he zong zhou, Bao Si mie zhi---“nüse huoguo lun” ji qi wenxue biao xian tanxi’ 赫赫宗周·褒姒滅之—‘女色禍國論’及其文學表現探析, *Shehui kexue jikan* 社會科學輯刊 3 (2008), pp. 214–217.

³Bret Hinsch argues that “although Zhou Dynasty writers sometimes criticized female malfeasance, the historian Sima Qian took a much more forceful line against powerful women in his influential *Memoirs of the Historian* (*Shi ji*), which set the standard for orthodox historiography”, in *Women in Imperial China* (Lanham, 2016), pp. 40–41.

⁴*Shiji* (Beijing, 1959), Chapter 49, p. 1967. Although this proverb includes Mo Xi, *Shiji* does not mention her in the *benji* (basic annals) chapter that is fully devoted to the Xia Dynasty, nor any other section of the book. The parallel of all three women seems to be a popular proverb among several historical texts, rather than a creation of Sima Qian. The earliest is probably *Guoyu*, Chapter 1.7 (‘Jinyu’ 晉語). See Xu Yuangao 徐元誥, *Guoyu jiji* 國語集解 (Beijing, 2002), pp. 250–251. Recent archaeological findings suggest that, by the end of the Eastern Han (25–220 CE), contempt for these three women had already modelled a notion of women as destructive. See Jiang Sheng 姜生, ‘Hujing Da Ji tu yu Hanmu Fengdu Liu tiangong kao’ 狐精妲己圖與漢墓豐都六天宮考, *Fudan daxue xuebao* 復旦大學學報 4 (2018), pp. 85–99.

⁵Griet Vankeerberghen, ‘A Sexual Order in the Making: Wives and Slaves in Early Imperial China’, in *Sex, Power, and Slavery*, (eds.) Gwyn Campbell and Elizabeth Elbourne (Athens, 2014), p. 128.

⁶A general introduction to the *niebi* section can be found in Anne Behnke Kinney’s *Exemplary Women of Early China* (New York, 2014), p. xlvi. Some scholars claim that *Shiji* conveys the *nühuo* concept or represents the repression of women during the Han dynasty. Zhang Jing, ‘Zhongguo Gudai nühuo shiguan de yuanliu’, p. 72. Bret Hinsch argues that the figure of the depraved women conveniently helps to shield the king or emperor from

in the *Lienü zhuan* has been so influential that it is anachronistically read into her story in the *Shiji*.⁷

Does the *Shiji* deflect blame from these rulers onto their wives, and portray the women instead as the main cause of serious political disorder? Is female malfeasance a historiographical practice inherited from the *Shiji*? What changes took place during the evolution of early Chinese historiography regarding this issue? To answer these questions, I closely examine the *Shiji*'s rewriting of narratives in *Zuozhuan* 左傳 (Zuo Commentary) and *Guoyu* 國語 (Discourses of the States), two early anecdotal histories that depict a large number of not only male but also female characters in great detail, providing a lens through which the gender relationship in pre-imperial China was understood. Compiled in the fourth century BCE, the former text is still transmitted as a commentary to the laconic chronicle the *Chunqiu* 春秋 (Annals of the Spring and Autumn). As a long extant text, the *Zuozhuan* is probably the most significant source for political affairs in competing states from 722 to 468 BCE. It is filled with extremely rich descriptions of political life from this era, relating rulers and their consorts to the rise and decline of states.⁸ *Guoyu*, another crucial source of events during the *Chunqiu* period, is a collection of historical narratives packed with a large quantity of speeches arranged by the state of their origin. Compiled in the same general era as the *Zuozhuan*, *Guoyu* covers a longer period, starting with King Mu (r. 956–918 BCE) of the Western Zhou and ending in 453 BCE.⁹ Approximately two hundred years after the *Zuozhuan* and the *Guoyu*'s appearance, Sima Qian compiled the *Shiji* by relying heavily on some version(s) of these two texts for events before and during the *Chunqiu* period.

Despite the scholarly disagreement over whether *Shiji* is a Confucian text, its compilation occurred within the backdrop of creating imperial sovereignty by Confucian Scholars from early Han onwards.¹⁰ Three influential thinkers, Lu Jia 陸賈 (ca. 228–ca. 140 BCE), Jia Yi 賈誼 (201–169 BCE), and Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (fl. 152–119 BCE) each contributed to political discourse from the early Han to Emperor Wu's reign. Their ideas brought together two seemingly contradictory implications: on the one hand, the dignity of emperors was reinforced by rituals and institutions that were established only after the founding of the empire; on the other, this dignity was based on the moral grounds that the emperor, as the son of Heaven, was chosen to rule because of his virtue and merit. These implications justified the ruler's right to rule while constraining his behaviour by demanding virtue.

significant criticism, allowing the historian (Sima Qian) to censure the self-destructive monarch. See Hinsch, *Women in Ancient China*, p. 105.

⁷Hans van Ess briefly discusses the characterisation of Bao Si in *Lienü zhuan*. He argues that Sima Qian has a purpose differing from that of the author of *Lienü zhuan*. See his 'Praise and Slander: The Evocation of Empress Lü in the *Shiji* and *Hanshu*', *Nan Nü: Men, Women and Gender in China* 8, 2 (2006), pp. 222–223.

⁸For female characters described in *Zuozhuan*, see Gao Fang 高方, *Zuozhuan nüxing yanjiu* 左傳女性研究 (Ha'erbin, 2010).

⁹David Schaberg, *A Patterned Past: Form and Thought in Early Chinese Historiography* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 5–6. For the relation between *Zuozhuan* and *Guoyu*, see Zhang Yiren 張以仁, 'Lun Guoyu yu Zuozhuan de guanxi' 論國語與左傳的關係, *Lishi yuyan yanjiusuo jikan* 歷史語言研究所輯刊 33 (1962), pp. 233–286.

¹⁰For example, Li Changzhi 李長之 contends that, even though Sima Qian revered Confucius and studied with Confucian scholars, he believed in Daoism and *Shiji* is a Daoist text. See his *Sima Qian zhi fenggeyu renge* 司馬遷之風格與人格 (Taipei, 1963). In contrast, Stephen Durrant believes that Sima desired to be the second Confucius and that *Shiji* is Confucian history: see his *Cloudy Mirror: Tension and Conflict in the Writings of Sima Qian* (Albany, 1995). Other scholars' viewpoints are summarised in Zhang Mingxin 張明信 and Yu Zhanghua 俞樟華, *Sima Qian sixiang yanjiu* 司馬遷思想研究, v.10. in the collection *Shiji yanjiu jicheng* 史記研究集成, (ed.) Zhang Dake 張大可 (Beijing, 2005), pp. 317–326.

Lu Jia's *Xinyu* 新語 (New Speeches), in keeping with his realisation that there could be faults in the practice of imperial sovereignty, advises the emperor to regulate his activities in accordance with the rhythm of *yin* and *yang*. In *Xinshu* 新書 (New Writings), Jia Yi proposes placing emperors at the top of the social hierarchy. Dong Zhongshu, acknowledging the paramount position of emperors in the human realm, subordinated imperial authority to purposive cosmological forces. While ruling the subjects, the emperor is under the control of Heaven, which wilfully and constantly alerts him to any misrule.¹¹ Although the role of Heaven is far from consistent in the *Shiji*, ideas focusing on rulers may well explain the cyclical rise and decay of history in the text.¹²

In accordance with these philosophical trends, the *Shiji* reduces the representation of women's agency as seen in its predecessors and recasts the storyline to emphasise the role of rulers; however, the gender representation in the *Shiji* has seldom been studied in the context of political catastrophes.¹³ Unlike previous scholarship, which isolates women's actions from those of the male rulers and thus evaluates their actions out of context, this article extends the scope from just women to both genders, with a particular focus on their interplays in between. During the late Western Zhou and *Chunqiu* period, although a primary wife enjoyed the apex title of *di* 嫡, and only her son could succeed to the throne, the ruler's favour towards a concubine could easily make him transgress the hierarchy between primary and secondary wives, directly impacting the line of succession, sometimes even leading to a political disaster.¹⁴ Given women's involvement as mothers and wives in succession issues, accounts of power transition usually describe the interactions between the ruler and his consort(s). Since the *Zuozhuan*, *Guoyu* and *Shiji* recount in detail political catastrophes involving succession crises, their accounts preserve rich information for a re-evaluation of the misogynistic ideology present in early histories. Comparison of parallel accounts in the *Guoyu* and *Shiji*, as well as the *Zuozhuan* and *Shiji*, highlights the systematic changes and decisions made by Sima Qian. In this analysis, what is important about the three texts is not their historical accuracy, but the manner in which they build the logical chain of historical events. Their divergent representations of the roles of the two sexes in political affairs shed light on the evolution of gender representation in Chinese historiography.

I first analyse the preface of the *Shiji* chapter, 'Hereditary Houses of the Families Related to the Emperors by Marriage'. Next, I compare three parallel stories: the fall of the Western Zhou, the chaos in the state of Jin, and the tragedy in the state of Wei. The first story is recounted in both the *Guoyu* and *Shiji*; the second appears in all three texts; and the third is narrated both in the *Zuozhuan* and *Shiji*. These comparisons demonstrate that the

¹¹The *Cambridge History of China: Ch'in and Han (221 B.C.- A.D. 220)*, (eds.) Denis Twitchett and Michael Loewe (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 731–732. Zhang Lingxu 張凌虛, *Xihan Zhengzhi Sixiang Lunji* 西漢政治思想論集 (Taipei, 1988), pp. 78–83. Durrant, *Cloudy Mirror*, p. 56. For differences between the thinkers, see Paul R. Goldin, 'Xunzi and Early Han Philosophy', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 67 (2007), pp. 135–166.

¹²Michael Loewe, 'The Authority of the Emperors of Ch'in and Han', in *State and Law in East Asia: Festschrift Karl Banger*, (eds.) Dieter Eikemeier and Herbert Franke (Wiesbaden, 1981), p. 87.

¹³Xiucan Zheng examines the changes of women's representation from *Zuozhuan* to *Shiji*. This discussion suggests that, by replacing women's motivation, actions and power in its narratives, the latter text reduces women's agency from the former and sets up the gender type. See 'From *Zuo zhuan* to *Shi ji*: Changes in Gender Representation in Sima Qian's Rewriting of Stories', *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 36 (2014), pp. 149–174.

¹⁴Geng Chao 耿超 Liu Shan 劉珊, 'Chunqiu shiqi funü de canzheng yu liangxing guanxi' 春秋時期的婦女參政及兩性關係, *Guanzi Xuekan* 管子學刊 2 (2002), pp. 97–101.

Shiji recounts the political crises by focusing much more on the male rulers than their female consorts—exactly the opposite from what is seen in the narratives of the *Zuozhuan* and *Guoyu*. In particular, the *Shiji* systematically remodels the causation of narratives in its two sources, building the paradigm that dissolute rulers cause fatal catastrophes. The neglect and dissipation stirred by their own desire destroys the established orders within royal houses, inviting women's involvement in state affairs. I argue that the *Shiji* accuses male rulers of triggering and developing political disasters by presenting the destructive narratives as a ruler-dominated process. Shifting the blame from women to men, the *Shiji* does not shield these rulers, but criticises them in order to legitimise dynastic circles.

Theory of the Husband-Wife Relationship in *Shiji*

While the *Shiji* portrays numerous rulers, and their wives, in narratives, this text only abstractly discusses the husband-wife relationship within a royal family. 'The Hereditary Houses of the Families Related to the Emperors by Marriage' is a chapter fully devoted to the empresses and concubines of Han emperors as well as the families of these women, from the founder Liu Bang 劉邦 (r. 202–195 BCE) to Emperor Wu's time. Its preface acknowledges the aid provided by women (and their families) to their husbands while warning that women could be involved in dynastic downfalls. However, this is far from saying that women are inherently wicked as indicated by the *nühuo* concept. This preface calls upon the ruler's discretion to maintain appropriate relationship with his wives.¹⁵

The excerpt reads:

自古受命帝王及繼體守文之君，非獨內德茂也，蓋亦有外戚之助焉。夏之興也以涂山，而桀之放也以末喜。殷之興也以有娀，紂之殺也嬖妲己。周之興也以姜原及大任，而幽王之禽也淫於褒姒。故易基乾坤，詩始關雎，書美釐降，春秋譏不親迎。夫婦之際，人道之大倫也。禮之用，唯婚姻為兢兢。夫樂調而四時和，陰陽之變，萬物之統也。可不慎與？¹⁶

From antiquity, the emperors and kings who received the Mandate of Heaven to found new dynasties, as well as those who succeeded to the throne by merit of birth and carried on the institutions of their predecessors, have won glory not only through the virtue of their own families, but also seem to have been aided by the families related to them by marriage. Thus the rise of the Xia dynasty was due in part to Emperor Yu's marriage to the Tushan family, while the banishment of the last Xia ruler, Jie, had to do with his empress, Mo Xi. The rise of the Yin dynasty was due in part to the [matriarch] Yourong, but the death of its last emperor, Zhou [i.e., Zhou Xin], came about because of his favourite, Da Ji. The Zhou dynasty began with the ladies Jiang Yuan and Tai Ren, but it was King You's infatuation with Bao Si that led to his being seized by the [invading barbarians]. Therefore, the *Book of Changes* takes as its basis *qian* and *kun*, the trigrams of the male and female; the *Book of Odes* opens with 'The Crying Ospreys', [a song in praise of royal consort]; the *Book of Documents* celebrates the marriage of Emperor Yao's daughters; and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* censures laxity of wedding ritual. The bond between husband and wife is among the most solemn of human relationships. Of ritual customs, none demands more strict observance than those of marriage. As the harmony of music brings order to the

¹⁵van Ess, 'Praise and Slander', p. 228.

¹⁶*Shiji* Chapter 49, p. 1967.

four seasons, so the interactions of the *yin* and *yang* [the male and female principles] unify all creatures. How then can one fail to approach [matters of marriage] with utmost circumspection?¹⁷

This excerpt suggests that the Mandate of Heaven goes to the dynastic founders and their heirs not only because of their *neide* 內德 (inner virtues), but also because of the assistance provided by consorts and their families, which is well supported by the rest of the chapter. The concept of *de* 德 closely relates to dynastic circles, which explains the justification of a ruling house. *De* is generated or rewarded to a person if he or she demonstrates acts of self-restraint, self-sacrifice or generosity, or shows an attitude of humanity. Alternatively, a person can inherit *de* from ancestors who have earned the reward. Having accumulated *de* through either process, one receives the Mandate of Heaven, and, therefore, the ability to rule; if a ruler failed to retain *de*, he would lose the Mandate of Heaven.¹⁸ Hence, the primary duty of a ruler was to maintain his *de*; when he fails, the dynasty will decline. In this way, the *Shiji* explains historical direction by integrating personal behaviour and the Mandate of Heaven, two aligning aspects rather than two incompatible aspects.¹⁹

The preface continues with the quotation of a proverb containing three exemplary women as well as the three aforementioned infamous women, namely Mo Xi, Dai Ji and Bao Si, in order to alert the rulers to be careful with the marital relationship. Just as a dynasty would rise as the result of joint efforts from both the rulers and their consorts, the catastrophes of the three dynasties cannot be understood as outcomes completely caused by women. Claiming that the *Shiji* depicts women as the source of political disasters solely on the basis of this proverb overly simplifies the issue discussed in the preface.

The classics stress the marital relationship and rituals were made to regulate both sexes, but applying the rituals in a relationship is extremely hard, which makes one feel 戰戰兢兢 (fearful and vigilant). The passage highlights the importance of this relationship by arguing that it is the fundamental law ruling the entire the world.²⁰ Ending with a rhetorical question, the preface clearly warns rulers, instead of their consorts, that although it is almost impossible to perfectly manage the marital relationship, a dutiful ruler must be cautious about the boundary between him and his wife. In this way, the *Shiji* puts forward the view that the vicissitudes of a dynasty are closely related to the marital relationship of the ruler. The preface then reiterates the difficulty of love between a couple: “人能弘道，無如命何，甚哉，妃匹之愛！君不能得之於臣，父不能得之於子，況卑下乎？” Although commentators disagree on how to translate this section, evidently the authorial voice speaks not to a woman, but to a ruler.²¹

¹⁷All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

¹⁸See David S. Nivison's study of the notion of *de* in early Chinese thought: “‘Virtue’ in Bone and Bronze”, in *The Ways of Confucianism: Investigations in Chinese Philosophy*, (ed.) Bryan W. Van Norden (Chicago and La Salle, 1996), pp. 17–30. Chao Fulin 晁福林, ‘Xianqin shiqi “de” guanxian de qiyuan yu fazhan’ 先秦時期“德”觀念的起源與發展, *Zhongguo shehui kexue* 中國社會科學 4 (2005), pp. 192–204. David W. Pankenier, ‘The Cosmopolitical Background of Heaven’s Mandate’, *Early China* 20 (1995), pp. 121–176.

¹⁹Shi Ding 施丁 argues that in addition to the role of Heaven in the course of history, the historical figures such as emperors, kings and generals are decisive. See his ‘Lun Sima Qian de tong gujin zhi bian’ 論司馬遷的通古今之變, *Lishi yanjiu* 歷史研究 2 (1980), pp. 139–140.

²⁰Yi Jo-lan, ‘Social Status, Gender Division and Institutions: Sources Relating to Women in Chinese Standard Histories’, in *Overt and Covert Treasures — Essays on the Sources for Chinese Women’s History*, (ed.) Clara Wing-chung Ho (Hong Kong, 2012), p. 135. Liu Jinxian 劉錦賢, ‘Rujia zhi hunyin guan’ 儒家之婚姻觀, *Xingda zhongwen xuebao* 興大中文學報 21 (2007), pp. 7–8.

²¹For a summary of other possible interpretations, see van Ess, ‘Praise and Slander’, p. 228.

This theory discussed in the abstract in the preface is painstakingly interwoven in the *Shiji*'s narratives. As seen in the three case studies below, the rewriting of the *Shiji* assigns to male rulers the determining role in the state's historical trajectory, depicting women as merely a factor that is triggered and affected by their rulers.

The Fall of the Western Zhou

While several kings of the Western Zhou have been considered models for later rulers, its last leader, King You of Zhou (周幽王 r. 781–771 BCE), is one of the most infamous rulers in Chinese history. Despite the textual variations concerning the cause of the Western Zhou's collapse, the basic story appears as follows.²² Defeated by King You, the people of Bao presented the beauty Bao Si to make peace. She was favoured by the king and gave birth to a son called Bo Fu 伯服. The king established Bo Fu as the crown prince by removing his legitimate successor, Yi Jiu 宜臼, the son of the queen. Since the queen's father, the Marquis of Shen, ruled the regional state of Shen 申, Yi Jiu went to Shen, in order to get his grandfather's help. In retribution for his grandson's deposition, the Marquis of Shen then attacked the king with barbarian troops. King You was defeated, and the Western Zhou collapsed.²³ These basic building blocks of our storyline are organised in *Guoyu* and *Shiji* in different ways.

Guoyu recounts two self-contained episodes related to Bao Si in two chapters. Serving distinct purposes, the two episodes compete in characterising Bao Si and King You. One is the 'Jinyu' (the Discourse of Jin) chapter, in which the Jin scribe Su 史蘇 speaks of *nürong* 女戎 (women as weapons) employed by conquered states to ruin their conquerors. To show the danger of a woman, Su appeals to the historical precedents of Xia, Shang and Zhou, attributing the downfalls of these three dynasties to Mo Xi, Da Ji and Bao Si, respectively.²⁴ The 'Jinyu' chapter briefly depicts Bao Si as a dissipated concubine who actively conspired with an official, Guo Shifu 虢石甫, to install her own son as the crown prince. Explained as a result of *nürong*, the collapse of Zhou is attributed here to Bao Si rather than her husband, King You, who merely serves as the backdrop of this story.

周幽王伐有褒，褒人以褒姒女焉，褒姒有寵，生伯服，于是乎與虢石甫比，逐太子宜臼而立伯服。²⁵

²²Burton Watson, *Ssu-ma Chi'en: Grand Historian of China* (New York and London, 1958), p. 111. The fall of the Western Zhou is also briefly recounted in the bamboo manuscript, *Xinian* 繫年, a recent archaeological finding published in 2011.

²³*Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 (Master Lü's Annals of Spring and Autumn) narrates an event, *fenghuo xi zhuhou* 烽火戲諸侯 (making fun of the regional lords by lighting the beacon fire), which is not recounted in *Guoyu*. Both archaeological and textual findings show that the Marquis of Shen later restored his grandson as King Ping 平王 (r. 770–720 BCE) in the eastern capital, ending the Western Zhou period. Ma Yinqin 馬銀琴 reconstructs the historical facts regarding the fall of the Western Zhou. She points out that King Ping claimed the title 'Heavenly King' while King You was alive, positing that this challenge to King You's authority was the real cause of dynastic collapse. See 'Bao Si mie Zhou gushi yu Shijing xiaoya zhengyue de xingzhi' 褒姒滅周故事與《詩經·小雅·正月》的性質, *Journal of Peking University* 55 (2018), pp. 99–103. For more discussion of Bao Si in *Shijing*, see Paul R. Goldin, *The Culture of Sex in Ancient China* (Honolulu, 2002), pp. 49–51.

²⁴The scribe predicted the inauspicious outcome of a military campaign launched by Lord Xian 獻公. According to the scribe, a woman would endanger the lord's state. For details, see the third case study regarding Lady Li in the next section.

²⁵Xu, *Guoyu jijie*, pp. 250–251. This passage does not provide the exact date of this conversation. According to *Shiji*, the scribe speaks of the predestined collapse in 780 BCE, the second year of King You's reign.

King You of Zhou attacked *youbao* [i.e., Bao]. The people of Bao had Bao Si to be his consort. Bao Si had favour [from the king] and gave birth to Bo Fu. Then [she] schemed with Guo Shifu, had the crown prince exiled, and Bo Fu installed.

In contrast to this apparent agency on the part of Bao Si, the other chapter, ‘Zhengyu’ (the Discourse of Zheng), features a conversation between the founder of Zheng 鄭, Lord Huan 桓公 (?–771 BCE), and the Zhou minister Shi Bo 史伯 (also known as Bo Yangfu 伯陽父) about ten years before the fall of Zhou. The lord asks Shi Bo whether Zhou will collapse. Shi Bo confirms that because of King You’s misconduct, Heaven will soon take the mandate away from Zhou.²⁶ To demonstrate this predestination, Shi Bo introduces the mysterious birth of Bao Si. During the Xia Dynasty, the god or goddess of the Bao people became two dragons. The emperor of Xia had them caught in a wooden box, from which they vanished—leaving just their saliva behind. Later, during the reign of King You’s grandfather, King Li of Zhou 周厲王 (r. 857/53–842/28 BCE), the box was opened, and the saliva turned into a reptile, which impregnated a young girl. This girl gave birth to a baby, but soon abandoned her. Later, King You’s father, King Xuan 周宣王 (r. 827/25–782 BCE), had heard a children’s ditty predicting that a couple selling a bow and quiver would destroy the Zhou. Having found such a couple, he arrested them and prepared to have them killed; however, this couple successfully escaped and found the abandoned baby on their way. They took her and headed to Bao. This baby was Bao Si. Sent by Heaven, the destiny of Bao Si was to destroy the Zhou.²⁷

While the *Shiji* probably frames its own narrative through adaptations of *Guoyu*, Sima Qian carefully reshapes the collapse of Zhou to write ‘The Basic Annals of Zhou’, a full chapter devoted to the entire Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BCE). As shown in the excerpt below, three major events are rewritten to shift the story’s focus from Bao Si to King You. The king’s dangerous intentions and actions, which I have underlined, formulate the causation to attribute responsibility for the collapse to the king:

(1)三年，幽王嬖愛褒姒。褒姒生子伯服，幽王欲廢太子。太子母申侯女，而為后。後幽王得褒姒，愛之，欲廢申后，并去太子宜臼。以褒姒為后，以伯服為太子。……(2)褒姒不好笑，幽王欲其笑萬方，故不笑。幽王為烽燧大鼓，有寇至則舉烽火。諸侯悉至，至而無寇，褒姒乃大笑。幽王說之，為數舉烽火。其後不信，諸侯益亦不至。²⁸(3)幽王以虢石父為卿，用事，國人皆怨。石父為人佞巧善諛好利，王用之。又廢申后，去太子也。申侯怒，與繒、西夷犬戎攻幽王。幽王舉烽火徵兵，兵莫至。遂殺幽王驪山下，虜褒姒，盡取周賂而去。²⁹

(1) In the third year [of King You’s reign], King You doted on Bao Si. [After] Bao Si gave birth to the son Bo Fu, King You wanted to depose the crown prince. The mother of the crown prince, the queen, was the daughter of the Marquis of Shen. Later King You obtained Bao Si, favoured her, and wanted to remove the queen and depose Crown Prince Yi Jiu together. [The king] made Bao Si the queen and Bo Fu the crown prince ... (2) Bao Si did not like to smile.

²⁶For a full analysis of the theories of earthquakes and the energies of *yin* and *yang*, see Schaberg, *A Pattern of the Past*, p. 103.

²⁷Xu, *Guoyuyijie* 16, pp. 473–475.

²⁸This event may be borrowed from the *Lishi chunqiu*. The beacon fire is a military emergency signal that the king used to call for assistance from the regional lords. In this text, only the barbarians attacked the Zhou capital.

²⁹*Shiji* Chapter 4, pp. 147–149.

King You wanted her to smile and tried ten thousand ways to make her smile, but she still did not smile. King You built a beacon-fire tower with a great drum on it, and lit the beacon-fire whenever there was an enemy presence. [Once] all the lords came but there were no enemies. Bao Si then burst out laughing. King You was pleased at it and repeatedly lit the beacon-fire for [her]. Afterward the king was not trusted, and lords would not come. (3) King You used Guo Shifu as the high minister. [Shifu] was in power and the people of the state all resented it. The personality of Shifu was good at fawning, flattering, and was fond of profit, [but] the king used him [nonetheless]. [The king] also expelled the Queen [of Shen] and the crown prince. The Marquis of Shen was enraged. He attacked King You with [the forces of] Zeng and the west barbarian Quanrong. King You lit the beacon-fire to summon the armies, [but] none of the armies came. [The marquis's forces] then killed King You at the bottom of Mount Li, captured Bao Si, took all of Zhou's property, and left.

The shift in focus from Bao Si to the king results from several changes made in the *Shiji*. First, the *Shiji* removes the element of scheming seen between Bao Si and Guo Shifu in *Guoyu*.³⁰ Bao Si neither takes the initiative to install her son as the crown prince, nor seeks to ruin her husband's rule. Second, *Shiji* narrates the unwise appointment of the wicked official Guo Shifu and completely attributes it to the king rather than Bao Si. The text labels this appointment as a failure of King You to empower a righteous minister, a critical and dangerous choice that reveals the incompetence of the ruler. Regardless of Shifu's disqualifications, the king insists on his decision, arousing the people's resentment. Skipping entirely the conspiracy between Bao Si and Shifu, and instead attaching the appointment mistake to the king, *Shiji* shifts the blame away from Bao Si and onto King You's shoulders.

Third, *Shiji* characterises the king in greater detail, advancing this story of decline with a clear causation between the three rulers dominating events and dynastic collapse. In the first event, contrary to the *Guoyu*, it is the *king* who wants to replace the queen and the legitimate crown prince. His reckless decision breaches the bond of marital relationship, which inevitably interrupts the succession line and leads to even more severe consequences. Next, the king again indulges in personal desire while failing to see the risk of losing his allies. The narration of events one and two repeatedly use the word *yu* 欲 (desire; intend) three times to strengthen this causation: the king's intentions drive the storyline forward, and eventually cause the demise of the Western Zhou. The underlined desires not only shift the focal point from Bao Si to the king, but also compel readers to trace the trigger of the disaster to him.

The second event in the *Shiji* seems to best illustrate the inner evilness of Bao Si, as she only laughs when the king falsely sounds the alarm. However, this long-standing interpretation is a result of isolating this single episode from the greater context. In fact, between events one and two, the *Shiji* narrates Bao Si's miraculous birth as a fatherless baby (not shown in the excerpt above), which heavily relies on *Guoyu*'s 'Zhengyu' chapter. In doing so, *Shiji* minimises the agency of Bao Si by presenting her as a tool sent by Heaven to end the Zhou, suggesting that the fall of the Western Zhou was also a result of destiny.³¹ King Xuan's vain attempt to stop the prophecy from coming to fruition only reinforces that

³⁰See *Guoyu jijie* 7, p. 255. For a full examination of the evolution of Bao Si's story in early historiography, see Li Feng, *Landscape and Power in Early China: the crisis and fall of the Western Zhou 1045–771 BC* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 198–203.

³¹*Shiji* 4, p. 147.

the Western Zhou was doomed to collapse no matter what the will of the people involved was. Bao Si is thus an instrumental device to fulfill the dynastic downfall, which contrasts with the king's misconduct deriving from his own agency.

Moreover, the decline of Zhou in the *Shiji* is a gradual and coherent process commencing long before King You's reign. In addition to the dynastic cycle following from one dynasty to another, the *Shiji* also pays attention to the linear changes from rise to fall within one dynasty.³² In 'The Basic Annals of Zhou', which recount all the Zhou kings, multiple signs were sent by Heaven to warn badly behaving rulers two generations earlier. As early as the mid-ninth century BCE, King You's grandfather, King Li, was overthrown by his people because of his cruelty and arrogance, but particularly his repeated failures to heed remonstrations. The *Shiji* painstakingly narrates the sins of this paradigmatic evil ruler in Chinese history, focusing especially on his covetousness and brutal punishment for those who defamed and criticised him.³³ King Xuan, King You's father, succeeded the throne, but eventually ended his reign with the same failure to take advice from righteous officials. King You came to power in 781 BCE; however, his installation was followed by unusual natural disasters such as earthquakes, landslides and obstruction of the sources of the rivers.³⁴ The *Shiji* again borrows the speech from Shi Bo in *Guoyu*, in which he pointed out the predestined collapse of Zhou: “若國亡不過十年，數之紀也。天之所棄，不過其紀” (The kingdom will meet its demise in more than ten years. [This] is a unit period of numbers. Discarded by Heaven, it will not exceed its unit period).³⁵ The chapter recounts the dynastic downfall as an accumulated outcome, rather than as a sudden collapse.

In the above three respects, the *Shiji* attributes the accusation to three generations of Zhou rulers. It is not even fair to solely criticise King You; multiple badly behaving rulers failed to maintain *de*, which resulted in their loss of the Mandate of Heaven. Bao Si is hardly “ill-willed” because the rewriting of her role in the *Shiji* does not even depict her will. Her strange laugh at the allies' arrival only fulfills Heaven's will, rather than suggesting any wicked agency. Inheriting the already declining Zhou, King You failed to restrict his desires, and thereby inevitably transgressed the requirements of an appropriate marital relationship. This failure directly caused the Marquis of Shen to seek vengeance, prompting the fatal blow to the dynasty.

The Chaos of Jin: The Fault of Lord Xian or Lady Li?

The most notorious woman of the Spring and Autumn 春秋 period (770–481 BCE) is probably Lady Li 驪, the favourite concubine of Lord Xian of Jin 晉獻公 (r. 676–651 BCE). The succession struggle between her son Yi Wu, 夷吾, and the crown prince, Shen Sheng 申生,

³²Juri L. Kroll, 'Toward a Study of the Concept of Linear Time in the *Shiji*', in *Views from Within, Views from Beyond: Approaches to the Shiji as an Early Work of Historiography*, (eds.) Hans van Ess, Olga Lomová and Dorothee Schaab-Hanke (Wiesbaden, 2015), pp. 31–39.

³³Li Jixiang 李紀祥 examines *Shiji*'s chapter 'The Table by Years of the Twelve Lords' (十二諸侯年表) and argues that Sima Qian highlights the significance of the decline during King Li's reign as a turning point in the entire Zhou history. See 'Sima Qian's View of Zhou History in *Shiji*' 《史記》中司馬遷的周史觀, *Views from Within, Views from Beyond*, pp. 41–66.

³⁴Schaberg, *A Patterned Past*, p. 103.

³⁵See *Guoyu jijie* 1.10, p. 27; *Shiji* 4, p. 146. Note, the *Shiji* refers to Shi Bo as Bo Yangfu.

caused long-term turmoil known as the five-generation chaos 五世之亂. The *Zuozhuan*, *Guoyu* and *Shiji* all portray Lady Li and her husband's story in great detail, but differ in their emphases. The *Shiji*'s rewriting of their story again shifts the focal point from the woman to her husband, following the pattern established with Bao Si. In contrast to depictions in *Zuozhuan* and *Guoyu* of Lady Li as a calculated woman who generated conflict and bloodshed, *Shiji* diminishes her agency and instead characterises Lord Xian as an imprudent ruler. He repeatedly misbehaves in his interactions with his wife, eventually leading to the consequential interruption of the line of succession.

In the *Zuozhuan*, Lady Li was presented to Lord Xian after the state of Jin defeated her tribe, the Lirong 驪戎. Two divinations were conducted to see whether taking Lady Li as a concubine would be auspicious. Although one showed the outcome to be inauspicious, Lord Xian followed the other, the auspicious one, and took her as a concubine. After the legitimate crown prince, Shen Sheng, had already been established, Lady Li bore Lord Xian a son, Xi Qi 奚齊. The *Zuozhuan* version centres on Lady Li, highlighting her scheme to depose the crown prince and install her own son. In order to achieve her goal, she bribes two male favourites of Lord Xian to persuade the lord to send her son's rivals (i.e., the crown prince and other sons) outside the capital. As a result of this conspiracy, the crown prince was dispatched to Quwo, the former capital of the Jin; Xi Qi was arranged to stay in the contemporary capital by the king. Later, by speaking ill of the other sons, Lady Li finally made Lord Xian install her son as the crown prince.³⁶ The underlined description highlights Lady Li's desire and actions in the passage from the *Zuozhuan*.

驪姬嬖，欲立其子，賂外嬖梁五，與東關嬖五，使言於公曰：「曲沃，君之宗也；蒲與二屈，君之疆也；不可以無主。宗邑無主，則民不威；疆場無主，則啟戎心。戎之生心，民慢其政，國之患也。若使大子主曲沃，而重耳夷吾主蒲與屈，則可以威民而懼戎，且旌君伐。」使俱曰：「狄之廣莫，於晉為都，晉之啟土，不亦宜乎！」晉侯說之。夏，使大子居曲沃，重耳居蒲城，夷吾居屈。群公子皆鄙，唯二姬之子在絳。二五卒與驪姬譖群公子，而立奚齊。晉人謂之二耦。³⁷

Lady Li enjoyed great favour of the lord and wanted to have her son Xi Qi established [as the crown prince]. She [accordingly] bribed Liang Wu and Wu from Dongguan, the lord's two [male] favourites living outside of the harem. [She] had them speak to the lord: "Quwo is the site of our lord's ancestral temple. Pu and Qu are the lord's frontier. [They] must not be left without overseers. Lacking an overseer in the city of the ancestral temple will cause people to lack awe; lacking an overseer on the frontier will provoke the harbouring of ambition of the Rong tribes. [If] their harboured ambition is provoked, people will despise our government. This is the concern of our state. If you let the crown prince oversee Quwo and Chong'er and Yiwu oversee Pu and Qu respectively, then it will awe the people, frighten the Rong, and at the same time make a display of the ruler's merit." [Lady Li] had them both say [to the lord]: "Since the lands of the barbarians are so broad and vast, Jin should make Pu and Qu into cities of importance. Jin will thus open new territory. Would that not be great?" The lord was pleased at their suggestions. In the summer, he ordered the crown prince to reside in Quwo, Chong'er to reside in the city of Pu, and Yiwu to reside in Qu. Various sons were sent to outlying areas. Only

³⁶Gao, *Zuozhuan nüxing yanjiu*, pp. 79–84.

³⁷Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhu* 春秋左傳注 (Beijing, 2009) vol.1, Lord Zhuang 28.2, pp. 239–240.

the two sons of two concubines, [Lady Li and her younger sister], stayed in Jiang. The two Wus eventually joined Lady Li in slandering various sons of the lord and established Xi Qi as the crown prince. People of Jin referred to it as “the teamwork of the two Wus”.

In addition to this crafty plan, *Zuozhuan* recounts Lady Li’s other scheme, by which she incriminated the innocent legitimate crown prince and directly caused his suicide. She fabricated that Lord Xian dreamed of Shen Sheng’s deceased mother and therefore urged Shen Sheng to make a sacrifice for his mother’s ghost by going to the ancestral temple located in Quwo. Upon his return, Shen Sheng brought blessed meat to present to his father. However, since the lord was off hunting, Lady Li kept and secretly poisoned the meat. When the lord came back, she presented the venomous meat and attributed it to Shen Sheng. Facing the accusation of attempting to murder the lord, Shen Sheng had no choice but to flee back to Quwo, where he hanged himself in the ancestral temple.³⁸

With similar episodes, *Guoyu* also portrays Lady Li as a culpable woman. But the text goes even further in portraying her licentiousness. She copulates with the entertainer of the lord, Shi 施, who provides multiple clandestine schemes for her to depose Shen Sheng and other sons of the lord. Unlike *Zuozhuan*, bribing the lord’s two male favourites and tricking the lord into dispatching out his sons become Shi’s tactics, not hers. Conspiring with Shi, Lady Li successfully sparks and develops the power struggle between the father and his legitimate successor. In several isolated entries, she manipulates Lord Xian, making him agree to kill Shen Sheng and replace him with Xi Qi. She also weeps and falsely incriminates Shen Sheng, claiming that he would assassinate the lord in order to seize power. Like the *Zuozhuan*, the *Guoyu* narrates that Lady Li accuses Shen Sheng of poisoning the meat so as to murder the lord, leading to the suicide of Shen Sheng.³⁹ The *Guoyu* characterises this woman using greater detail, some of which does not appear in *Zuozhuan*. Although the new character, Shi, removes part of Lady Li’s culpability, Lady Li is nonetheless figured as a female weapon, namely a revenger, who deliberately makes chaos in Jin.

In contrast to the *Zuozhuan* and the *Guoyu*, the *Shiji* narrates this fierce succession dispute with remarkable differences, diminishing Lady Li’s agency and tracing the origin of the dispute back to Lord Xian. The key issue is who initiates the replacement of the legitimate crown prince. Like the story of Bao Si, Sima Qian displaces the motivations of Lady Li onto Lord Xian.⁴⁰ In the *Zuozhuan*, the plot unfolds according to Lady Li’s scheme, which was implemented step by step; it is thus the woman in that story who initiates the crisis of succession. In the *Guoyu*, although Lady Li could not claim responsibility for every scheme, her image as an evil woman is unquestionable. By contrast, the *Shiji* centres on Lord Xian by establishing a clear causal chain over the course of fifteen years. Three remodelled events outline the development of the crisis from its early origins. Here, it is *his* intentions that drive the development of the crisis, shifting the blame from Lady Li to the lord. With his intentions underlined, the *Shiji* excerpts read:

³⁸Yang, *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhu* vol.1, Lord Xi 4.6, p. 299.

³⁹*Guoyu* 2.8, p. 279.

⁴⁰Zheng, ‘Gender Representation in the *Shiji*’, pp. 158–160.

(1) 五年，伐驪戎，得驪姬、驪姬弟，俱愛幸之。……

In the fifth year (672 BCE), [Lord Xian] led an expedition against the Lirong and obtained Lady Li and her younger sister. He loved and favoured both of them...

(2) 十二年，驪姬生奚齊。獻公有意廢太子，乃曰：「曲沃吾先祖宗廟所在，而蒲邊秦，屈邊翟，不使諸子居之，我懼焉。」於是使太子申生居曲沃，公子重耳居蒲，公子夷吾居屈。獻公與驪姬子奚齊居絳。晉國以此知太子不立也。

……

In the twelfth year [665 BCE], Lady Li gave birth to Xi Qi. Lord Xian, intending to depose the crown prince, said “Quwo is the place where my ancestral temple is located, Pu is along the border of Qin; Qu is along the border of Di. If I do not charge my sons to reside at these [places], I would fear [Qin and Di]”. He then sent Crown Prince Shen Sheng to reside at Pu, and the noble scion Yiwu to reside at Quwo. Lord Xian and Lady Li’s son Xi Qi [still] resided at Jiang. The people of Jin, because of this, knew that the heir would not be invested...

(3) [十九年] 獻公私謂驪姬曰：「吾欲廢太子，以奚齊代之。」驪姬泣曰：「太子之立，諸侯皆已知之，而數將兵，百姓附之，柰何以賤妾之故廢適立庶？君必行之，妾自殺也。」驪姬詳譽太子，而陰令人譖惡太子，而欲立其子。⁴¹

[In the nineteenth year (658 BCE)], Lord Xian said to Lady Li in private, “I intend to depose the crown prince and replace him with Xi Qi”. Lady Li wept and said, “All regional lords have known of the crown prince’s establishment. And he had commanded troops several times. The families of the hundred cognomens follow him. How can you remove the oldest son borne by the principal wife just because of me, a humble concubine? If my lord is bound to do that, I will kill myself”. Lady Li falsely praised the crown prince, but secretly ordered people to slander and denounce him, intending to establish her son [in his place].⁴²

The *Shiji* showcases the lord’s failure to restrain his desires and speeches. The first event recounts that the lord favours Lady Li as soon as she arrives in Jin. Seven years later, it is Lord Xian, rather than Lady Li, who intends to replace his crown prince Shen Sheng, after Lady Li gives birth to Xi Qi. Evidently, the lord’s love for Lady Li brings him to this dangerous idea. Then the lord himself, without any interference from Lady Li, comes up with the idea to dispatch Shen Sheng and all other sons away from the capital. He not only tells her this plan, but also implements it quickly. Switching this speech from wife to husband clears Lady Li from any claim that she manipulates the lord.

Another seven years later, Lord Xian goes even further, speaking aloud the reckless thoughts he had been harbouring in his mind. He explicitly tells Lady Li that he wants to depose the crown prince and substitute him with Lady Li’s son. Until this moment, the tale does not show any intention on Lady Li’s part to establish her own son as the crown

⁴¹ *Shiji* 39, p. 1640.

⁴² The translation is based on Zhao Hua and William H. Nienhauser Jr.’s translation with minor modifications. See Nienhauser, *The Grand Scribe’s Records: The Hereditary Houses of Pre-Han China* (Bloomington, 2006) vol. 1, pp. 305–309.

prince, nor any plot against the crown prince himself. Although Lady Li does eventually slander Shen Sheng and hope that her son will replace him, this is only after she hears the lord's ideas. Despite Lady Li's later calculations, the text compels the readers to attribute the fault to Lord Xian.

From the fifth year to the nineteenth year of Lord Xian's reign, these three events focus on the dangerous intention and reckless conduct of the lord himself. Event one is the root cause, the lord's favour of Lady Li; event two is the development of the crisis, from the favour to the lord's wrongful exile of his sons; event three is the lord's disposition, which incites Lady Li's subsequent involvement. In this string of events, Lord Xian, rather than Lady Li, takes the initiative and fosters the development of the crisis. Despite her slander and incrimination of the crown prince, Lady Li's guilt in the *Shiji* reinforces the consequences of the lord's misconduct, which is de-emphasised, or even completely ignored, in the *Zuozhuan* and *Guoyu*.

The Tragedy of Wei

Comparable to Lady Li is Lady Xuan Jiang 宣姜, a beautiful concubine of Lord Xuan of Wei 衛宣公 (r. 718–700 BCE). Several texts blame this woman for severely compromising the succession of Wei.⁴³ The *Zuozhuan* and *Shiji* recount her story in similar frameworks but with different details. The *Zuozhuan*'s version begins with Lord Xuan's copulation with his father's concubine, Yi Jiang 夷姜, by referring to this unfilial cross-generation sexual relationship as *zheng* 烝.⁴⁴ Their son, Ji Zi 急子, was named crown prince. However, the lord later found Ji Zi's wife to be, Xuan Jiang, very beautiful and appropriated her for himself instead. Xuan Jiang then bore the lord two sons, Shou 壽 and Shuo 朔. She conspired with Shuo to slander Ji Zi in front of the lord, causing the lord to arrange for Ji Zi's assassination.⁴⁵ The *Zuozhuan* excerpt reads:

初，衛宣公烝於夷姜，生急子，屬諸右公子。為之娶於齊而美，公取之。生壽及朔。屬壽於左公子。夷姜縊。宣姜與公子朔構急子。公使諸齊。使盜待諸莘，將殺之。⁴⁶

Before [coming to the throne], Lord Xuan of Wei committed *zheng* with Yi Jiang [his father's concubine]. She gave birth to Ji Zi, whom [Lord Xuan] entrusted to the Right Prince. [Lord Xuan] found [Ji Zi] a wife from Qi, but since she was beautiful, Lord [Xuan] took her [for himself]. She gave birth to Shou and Shuo. [Lord Xuan] entrusted Shou to the Left Prince. Yi Jiang hanged herself. Xuan Jiang and Prince Shuo slandered Ji Zi, and Lord [Xuan] sent Ji Zi to Qi, and sent thugs to wait for him at Xin, where they were to kill him.⁴⁷

⁴³The story of Xuan Jiang is addressed in several odes in the *Book of Odes*. The *Mao Commentary* depicts her as a negative model, but the *Preface* on Mao no. 43, 'Xin tai' 新臺 (New Tower) blames the lord for appropriating her. See Anne Behnke Kinney, 'The Mao Commentary to the Book of Odes as a Source for Women's History', in *Overt and Covert Treasures — Essays on the Sources for Chinese Women's History*, (ed.) Clara Wing-chung Ho (Hong Kong, 2012), p. 81. Like Bao Si and Lady Li Xuan Jiang is also placed in the group of *niebi* in *Lienüzhuan*, 7.4, p. 148.

⁴⁴The creation of the word in early China, *zheng*, indicates that people in early China needed to talk about this odd relationship. In *Zuozhuan*, offspring born of *zheng* tend not to have a happy end, and contribute the added consequence of a disruption to the line of succession. See Paul Goldin, 'Copulating with One's Stepmother—Or Birth Mother?', *Behaving Badly in Early and Medieval China*, (eds.) Harry N. Rothschild and Leslie V. Wallace (Honolulu, 2017), p. 57.

⁴⁵For a full storyline, see Kinney, 'The Mao Commentary', pp. 80–81.

⁴⁶Yang, *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhu* v.1, Lord Huan 16.5, pp. 145–146.

⁴⁷Modified version of Goldin's translation in 'Copulating with One's Stepmother', p. 57.

Throughout the story, the lord should be responsible for the bloody succession dispute, but the story does not have a clear focus on any of the figures. The lord first copulated with his father's concubine, and then married the woman originally intended for his son. However, the *Zuo zhuan* only briefly depicts his transgressive sexual relations by using the word *zheng*. The fact that Yi Jiang *yi* (hanged) herself also indicates the bloody competition in the lord's harem. Educated and experienced readers of the *Zuo zhuan* may well judge that the lord's actions were against *li* 禮 (ritual) and criticise the lord's corruption, but Xuan Jiang is equally blamed for slandering the crown prince. Lacking an overt focus, characters are given equal weight.

By contrast, the story in the *Shiji* is more embellished. By forging the narrative frame, the *Shiji* focuses substantially more on the lord, particularly on his mental process and emotional state, as the causation of the story. Ji Zi is referred to as Ji 伋 in the *Shiji*. The active emotions, which I have underlined, highlight changes in the lord's desire. This version reads:

十八年，初，宣公愛夫人夷姜，夷姜生子伋，以為太子，而令右公子傅之。右公子為太子取齊女，未入室，而宣公見所欲為太子婦者好。說而自取之，更為太子取他女。宣公得齊女，生子壽、子朔，令左公子傅之。太子伋母死，宣公正夫人與朔共讒惡太子伋。宣公自以其奪太子妻也，心惡太子，欲廢之。及聞其惡，大怒，乃使太子伋於齊而令盜遮界上殺之，與太子白旄，而告界盜見持白旄者殺之。⁴⁸

In the eighteenth year [701 BCE], Lord Xuan favoured Lady Yi Jiang; and Yi Jiang gave birth to a son, Ji. [The lord] made him the crown prince and ordered the Right Prince to tutor him. The Right Prince arranged for the crown prince to take the daughter of Qi as his wife, but when the match was consummated, Lord Xuan saw that the girl who was to be made the crown prince's wife was a beauty. He was pleased with her and took her instead. He then arranged for the crown prince to take a different girl. Lord Xuan obtained the daughter of Qi and had two sons [with her], Shou and Shuo, and ordered the Left Prince to tutor them. The Crown Prince Ji's mother died. Lord Xuan's principal consort [i.e., Xuan Jiang], along with Shuo, together slandered and spoke ill of the heir. Lord Xuan himself, because of [his] capturing the crown prince's wife, was disgusted by the crown prince and intended to depose him. Hearing the crown prince's misconduct, the lord was extremely angry, and consequently had Crown Prince Ji go to Qi, and ordered thugs to kill him at the border. The lord gave the crown prince a white ox-tail flag and informed the thugs at the border that they were to kill the person they saw carrying the white ox-tail flag.

The *Shiji* clarifies a coherent causation chain by focusing on the lord rather than Xuan Jiang. Throughout the timeline, the lord's mental process discloses his unconstrained desires and fickle affections for women, which drive the storyline forward. In contrast to the term *zheng* in *Zuo zhuan*, *Shiji* uses *ai* (favour). When Lord Xuan later saw the beautiful wife to be of the crown prince, the *Zuo zhuan* recounts that the lord *qu zhi* (took her); the *Shiji* instead narrates that he *yue* (had delight in) her. Although the designation of successor was an extremely important state affair, the lord decided based on his personal feelings. When Lord Xuan favoured Yi Jiang, he made her son the crown prince; after appropriating the crown prince's fiancée, the lord disapproved of him. Xuan Jiang and Shuo's slander happened to arrive at the right time, aggravating a murder scheme already in motion. The

⁴⁸*Shiji* Chapter 37, p. 1593.

lord's philandering in *Shiji* provides greater reason to blame the lord, rather than Xuan Jiang, as the main cause of the crown prince's assassination.

Concluding Remarks

Comparisons in gender representation as seen in the above examples show that *Shiji* significantly increases the importance of male rulers, and simultaneously diminishes the weight of women, in the political crises recounted in the *Zuo zhuan* and the *Guoyu*. By attaching mental intents and speeches to the male rulers, the *Shiji* systematically remodels the logic chain in narrative and establishes the male rulers as the dominant characters. In these complex power struggles, neither Bao Si, nor Lady Li, nor Xuan Jiang initiate their state's turmoil. Instead, their actions are highly dependent on their husbands, who frequently generate conflict and bloodshed. The rulers' unconstrained desires not only trigger but also drive the development of crises.

The *Shiji*'s painstaking portrayal of rulers' careless speeches and reckless actions suggests that the text is interested in warning rulers on how seemingly trivial intentions and misconduct can develop into serious transgressions, first disrupting order in the royal house and then eventually culminating into catastrophe. This echoes the difficulty of maintaining an appropriate boundary between the two sexes, as Sima Qian described in the preface to 'Hereditary Houses of the Families Related to the Emperors by Marriage'. Because of the practice of polygyny in early China, the impact of the royal wives upon succession issues ultimately stemmed from the rulers at the top of the hierarchy: indulging in their desires, lords failed to recognise that they transgressed the appropriate boundary between a royal couple, which inevitably incited women's involvement from Heaven or elsewhere within the royal family.

Unlike the *Zuo zhuan* and the *Guoyu*, the *Shiji* takes a profoundly different approach to link historical direction and individual rulers. The recurrent pattern in the *Shiji* is not that evil women bring down a state, but that dissolute rulers shake the foundations of the ruling order. Warning the rulers to use caution and discipline in their behaviour within the harem, the *Shiji* neither blames women as a way of shielding their husbands from accusation, nor sets up a staple of female malfeasance in classical Chinese historiography. In fact, the text's portrayal of these beautiful women consistently assists with the characterisation of rulers as sinful, rather than the other way around. The power transition, whether a peaceful process or a blood-letting, depends on the ruler's management of his harem. Despite the complex interference of Heaven in the rise and decline of a power, whether a ruler can maintain the Mandate of Heaven depends on his personal behaviour, which can either increase or diminish his 'credit' in terms of virtue. The decisive role of rulers rationalises the recurrence of the inescapable circle of rise and decay in *Shiji*.

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