

Yuen-Gen Liang. *Family and Empire: The Fernández de Córdoba and the Spanish Realm*.

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Yuen-Gen Liang presents a new method of analyzing empire through the study of the noble family networks that “constituted an essential pillar of Spanish imperial administration” (2). By tracing the history of the Fernández de Córdoba family from medieval roots in southern Spain to an early modern presence that spanned from Navarre to North Africa, Liang argues that the noble family was a social unit that developed experience, expertise, and connections that were as crucial to developing the Spanish empire as either royal power or imperial institutions and offices. Pursuing the “horizontal mechanisms” that held an empire together, Liang focuses on a family to study how administrators faced the daily challenges of running an empire. Liang argues that noble families shaped royal policy while simultaneously transforming from an independent warrior caste to a skilled administration that worked for the royal government to maintain the empire. As much as noble families impacted the Spanish Empire, their imperial service also changed the lineage by shortening male lives, pushing women into the convent, shaping marriage alliances, and loosening the family’s ties to Córdoba. Liang’s study draws on an impressive variety of archive sources, chronicles, genealogies, and noble and royal correspondence.

The Fernández de Córdoba family started with an identity that was shaped by their close ties to the physical environment of Córdoba, where they gained land and power by defending Spain’s borderlands. After 1482, the less wealthy branches of the Fernández de Córdoba moved away from their medieval roots to pursue profits in the expanding Spanish Empire. They began to develop a family stash of experience and knowledge that was passed between generations. The next generation of the family used their developing expertise to move from local to national politics. As royal governors, they took up trusted positions in rebellious Toledo at a difficult time just after the *Comunero* revolt. This devoted service cost the family, as their younger sons died in battle and an entire generation of daughters was cloistered to avoid paying for dowries. Conversely, the rewards were great, although their nature changed from the traditional land grants to financial incentives and more lucrative posts.

The Fernández de Córdoba expanded with Spain’s growing empire to govern Navarre, a recently conquered kingdom with strong European connections. This

new task drew on their acquired expertise and helped them develop international skills. It also separated this branch of the family from their roots in Córdoba as Martín Fernández de Córdoba's sons were sent to court for education and connections and his wife and daughters accompanied him to Navarre. These expanding family activities enacted empire, creating a sense of identity that spanned far beyond the physical lands and created a "human consistency" that was vital to the development of the empire (138). From Navarre, the Fernández de Córdoba, now accomplished frontier administrators, took their cumulative skills, expertise, and professional identity to Algeria in the mid-sixteenth century. Liang argues that there were significant similarities between Navarre (long part of Christian Europe) and Oran (newly conquered from the Muslim empire) since both were frontiers that brought together different cultures, languages, and religions that created a rich and combative internal diversity. Both of these frontiers gave the nobility theaters for independent action that shaped royal policy. Simultaneously, the Fernández de Córdoba used their independent actions and collective royal service as evidence and precedent to convince the crown to follow their strategy, compiling a rich family history for themselves in the process.

Liang argues convincingly that the study of family networks tells the history of empire in a multifaceted way by examining and connecting five territories through one coherent lens. This new method enriches the narrative by looking simultaneously at the growth of the empire, the development of the human network that held it together, and the changes a developing empire created in Spanish society and families. Liang's approach challenges historians of the family and historians of empire by convincingly connecting family history to larger political and economic developments. In turn, Liang might benefit from a more systematic analysis of the role of gender (rather than simply individual women) in both empires and family networks. Nevertheless, this book is well written and compelling with an innovative methodology, a convincing argument, and a rich bibliography.

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