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BOOK REVIEWS

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

By Keith McMahon. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016. xxxiii + 276 pp. £60.00 (cloth)

Crossing the Gate: Everyday Lives of Women in Song Fujian (960–1279)

By Man Xu. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016. 372 pp. $90.00 (cloth), $27.95 (paper).

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At first glance, these two books have very little in common. They both deal with women in China's past, but the women they write about are quite different, as are the sources they use and are the questions they ask. McMahon's book is a rapid tour through a thousand years of empresses and imperial consorts in a mere 276 pages. It is a well-organized and well-written tour, but it is still the sort of whirlwind that leaves the reader's head spinning. Xu Man confines her story to a single province (Fujian) and a single dynasty (the Song). While the women McMahon writes about are everything but ordinary, Xu is at pains to excavate everything she can about the everyday lives of women, both ordinary and elite.

I would recommend that anyone who is interested in gender and court politics in late imperial China keep McMahon's book close at hand. It is an encyclopedic view of empresses, consorts, and palace maids—and the intrigues surrounding them. One of the many virtues of the book is its careful attention to sources. Tales of palace intrigue abound, and it can be hard to sort fact from fiction. McMahon reads in a wide variety of sources and does an excellent job of telling the reader about the various kinds of sources he is using. He alerts us when he is skeptical about the truth of lurid allegations (though he does repeat the allegations). One could use this book as a point of reference to dig deeper into any one of a number of episodes involving imperial women. Indeed, it may well be more useful as a reference book than as a straight-through read. And those with a serious interest in imperial women of the Qing dynasty would do well to take a look at *Empresses of China's Forbidden City 1644–1912*, edited by Daisy Yiyou Wang and Jan Stuart (Yale University Press, 2018). The book, a catalog of the 2018 exhibition of the same name, is a beautifully illustrated account of five of the Qing empresses. The illustrations (both of the empresses themselves and the material

objects which surround them) are accompanied by excellent essays. It makes a terrific companion to the McMahon volume, which was published before both the exhibition and the catalog.

There are advantages to taking the long view as McMahon does, and in his summary sections he provides us some insights from that view. In some ways the view of imperial women confirms what we know both about the imperial institution and gender relations in the past 1,000 years of Chinese history. Song imperial women had more power than did their successors in the Ming and Qing. In the Northern Song, female regents ruled for a total of 25 years, and in the Southern Song influential empresses ruled (sometimes without the formal title of regent) for more than a hundred years. Their power came not simply from their position as imperial wives but also from their male allies, often kinsmen (32). The imperial women in the conquest dynasties—the Liao, the Jin, and the Yuan—did not conform to Chinese norms. They were rather more likely to leave the palace, to ride horseback, and to go on excursions. And the mother of Kublai Khan was referred to in a Persian source as "towering above all the women in the world" (62).

But Ming and Qing empresses and palace women lived much more circumscribed lives. Ming empresses (and other consorts) were generally selected from families of modest importance, thus obviating the problem of powerful relatives. The Ming founder decreed that no woman could serve as regent; in fact only one did, and she did so unofficially (75–76). He also decreed that palace women were to "act as models of motherhood for the world, they never were to involve themselves in politics" (78). The ancestral instructions of the Ming founder set out clear rules for succession of the emperor: the successor was to be the eldest son of the empress. In fact, only two of the Ming emperors were unambiguously the son of the empress (152), and the naming of the heir apparent could be the cause for much palace intrigue.

The Qing continued the policy of limiting the power of imperial women. Qing succession rules did not follow even the ragged primogeniture advocated by the Ming; hence, jockeying to become named empress had a different valence than it had in the Ming. The stories that circulate about the mothers of emperors illustrate the intense privacy of the imperial inner chambers. And these stories recur throughout history. Song Renzong was not told who his birth mother was until after the death of the Empress Dowager Liu, by which time his mother herself had died (13). One of Zhu Di's claims to legitimacy was that he was the son of Empress Ma, the principal wife of the Ming founder. But persistent rumors circulated that he was in fact not her son (88–89). The rare but recurring erasure of the biological mother of the emperor is just one more piece of evidence about the strength of the patriline. The stories also show us simultaneously how little the maternal line mattered—how can one not know for sure who the mother of an emperor is—and how much it mattered; if it did not matter, what is the source of fascination with it?

Marriage has the capacity to create kinship, and the problem of in-laws is a serious one for all royal houses. The empresses and consorts of Ming emperors usually came from families of modest distinction. Princes were sent far away from the capital, where their threat to imperial power was minimal. Qing imperial kinsmen, on the other hand, were often given roles to play in the government. And, especially at the beginning of the dynasty, Qing rulers used marriage as a way of forging alliances. Though imperial women in the Qing might come from prominent families, they were required to sever relationships with their families upon their entering the court. And because marriage partners came from banner households, Han Chinese families could not forge marriage alliances with the Qing ruling house (162).

McMahon ends his book with a comparative excursion into the role of women as rulers in Eurasian societies. He asks the question: what are the conditions under which a woman can rule? His answer seems to be that when there is a vacuum of male leadership, women can step in. The Empress Dowager Cixi, surely the most powerful female ruler in China since Wu Zetian, certainly took advantage of a lack of male power to assert her authority as regent. But she also used her power to assure that there would be no strong emperors to threaten her.

Crossing the Gate, by contrast, looks as if it is tightly focused on one time and place, though in fact it discusses all of Fujian in the Song dynasty, scarcely a short time period or a small place. Xu Man's task, reconstructing the ordinary lives of women in Song dynasty Fujian, is made more difficult by the fact that there is relatively little writing by Song dynasty women still extant. However, Song men wrote extensively about women. Xu makes good use of those texts as well as existing material objects to reconstruct the world of the everyday. She begins her book with the idea of the home, the *jia* 家, and the prescription that elite women should be secluded in the *jia*. Her argument on seclusion is revealed in her title—there was a gate, and women often crossed it. The first chapter is about doorways and gates themselves. The next chapter "Women on Journeys" delineates modes of transportation for women, particularly sedan chairs. Sumptuary regulations restricted men's access to sedan chairs, but they seem not to have been applied to women (64–74). The sedan chair was an ideal way for a woman of the elite to cross the gate, to go out in public without exposing herself to unwanted gazes.

Xu shows that women in Song Fujian were active in their local communities. They provided assistance to neighbors. They were active in famine relief; Xu recounts one episode in which a woman fed prisoners (110). Other women gave financial assistance, which raises the question of where money came from—it could of course come from her dowry, or from family resources, over which she was likely to have some control. And some women took money they earned from weaving and made charitable contributions with it (122–124).

In the chapter on "Women and Local Government," Xu uses eulogies of women to show that women provided useful career advice to their husbands, and she is able to show women as plaintiffs and witnesses in court. Crimes against women were a particular issue in Song Fujian—girl children were vulnerable to being abducted. Wealthy families had a need for servants and would buy children to serve as servants. Kidnappers would steal children and later sell them. Local governments took measures to protect girls from being kidnapped (152). The chapter does a clear job of demonstrating the subtle nuances of governed and governing in Song Fujian. The chapter on women and religion demonstrates that even staunch Confucians who were sharp critics of Buddhism and Taoism had no objections to their mothers or wives practicing those religions (165) and suggests that we see fewer complaints from elite men about women's religious activity than we see in later dynasties (205). The chapter also discusses the circulation of religious objects, including religious embroidery done by women. Objects that circulate are another way the gate is crossed.

In some ways, Xu's most ambitious chapter is the last one, which is about burial practices. She is alert to the problems of interpreting tombs—while there are clear relationships between this world and the next, the relationships are not neat and tidy. Song tombs were called *yinzhai*, the rooms of the dead. Through a careful examination of reports on eighty-two tombs she argues that "orthodox standards regulating women's mundane life, such as the separation of inner and outer, were no longer enforced in the underground context" (259).

There is already a distinguished body of work on women in the Song dynasty, which Xu acknowledges and makes good use of. What makes Xu's work distinctive is that she centers her book on the *jia*—the household—and looks at the ways in which women stayed in the *jia* and came outside it, and the ways in which their coming outside was and was not regarded as transgression by the men who wrote the records that tell us about the lives of these women. She sometimes seems a bit haunted by the relative richness of women's writings in the Ming-Qing period. But she makes good use of both physical objects (or the traces of physical objects)—inscriptions on gates, means of transportation—and the writings of men to evoke the everyday in women's lives.

Readers interested in gender in Chinese history should read both of these books. McMahon provides much food for thought in terms of the integration of gender into the imperial institution and change over time. Xu helps us think about ways in which women negotiated the strictures on their mobility, physical and otherwise. Both books are filled with lively anecdotes which would enliven any lecture. The McMahon book is almost encyclopedic. One sometimes wishes he'd spent more time interpreting the sources, helping us to think about the stories he tells. The pleasure of scandal (whether based in fact or not) is an interesting phenomenon, and scandals about court women are an important underside of political discourse in imperial China. McMahon's book has provided a framework for thinking about it and the ways in which gender and the lure of imperial charisma play into scandal.

Both authors are to be commended for not being put off by the fact that sources for their topic are relatively scarce. In McMahon's case, they may be deliberately scarce. The behavior of royal women is, after all, none of our business. The issue for Xu is a bit different: Women in the Song wrote very little, at least very little that has been preserved. And many material objects, such as textiles, which might have provided more information about women's lives, have not survived. Both authors have done commendable jobs of laying out what we do and do not know. For that reason, each of the volumes would be methodologically useful for students. Both authors do an excellent job of addressing the question of "How do we know what we know?" And both of them leave the reader wanting to know more.

Forging the Golden Urn: The Qing Empire and the Politics of Reincarnation in Tibet

By Max Oidtmann. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. xvii + 330 pp. $65.00 (cloth).

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In 1995, officials of the Chinese Communist Party gathered at the holiest temple of Tibetan Buddhism, the Jokhang, to officiate an elaborate ceremony that had not been