

Women in Palace: Institutional Norms and Personal Agency

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Abstract: One major understanding of late imperial Chinese and Japanese palace ladies is that they were powerless victims excluded from the outside world. Though not without their truth value, these beliefs only turn out to be biased. By a close reading of primary courses in Chinese and Japanese, and a critical reading of relevant secondary materials, this paper argues that palace women in late imperial China and early modern Japan were in no way the passive, powerless victims that people used to believe them to be. Instead, they were left with much room to maneuver.

Keywords: Palace lady; China; Japan; Power

1. Introduction

From the ancient history to the modern world, women's rights have always played a crucial role in the society. Many people tend to have a social stereotype that women share no authorities and have been underestimated by men in the patriarchal society. Looking back to the past hundred years, what kind of stories did the beauties behind the curtains leave to us? How were the rights and responsibilities of palace ladies different in late imperial China and those of Ooku ladies of Edo Japan? Historical facts always bring surprises, and our journey begins with the hidden lives.

2. Palace Ladies in Ming China

According to the official record of Ming History, the central government and administration, or in general, the leading trends have been strict and rigorous toward women. Although the empress and concubines play a motherly role for the empire, they don't have the obligation and rights for interfering the governmental issues. Excessive grace from the emperor to the concubines would result in the disorder of the superiors, and they would take advantage of master's indulgence for the reason of being haughty. Since the duties of the palace ladies have been specified, and the institution and the system have been highly restrained, the obligations owned by every individual are standardized rigidly.

History of the Ming Dynasty, the official history compiled by later Qing scholars, showed a complicated, if not self-contradictory attitudes towards the agency of palace women. The very beginning of the chapter on palace women imposes a series of institutional restrictions on them. Although the empress and concubines played a motherly role for the empire, they did not have the opportunity to participate in state affairs. Concubines who re-

ceived favor from the emperor shall not be haughty because of the imperial favor. As for the palace ladies, most of them had such specified obligations that there was not much room for them to maneuver.

Despite the fact that those moral criteria are clearly articulated in History of the Ming Dynasty, this official history has a completely different standard when it comes to the evaluation of specific palace ladies. In reality, the ladies who are celebrated by History of the Ming Dynasty are not the ones who strictly obeyed the moral standard it prescribed. Though History of the Ming Dynasty does not allow imperial ladies to involve in politics, it nonetheless praises palace ladies for their political involvement. One example would be Empress Ma, the wife of the founding emperor Zhu Yuanzhang. Whenever Zhu Yuanzhang was enraged over the governmental issues, Empress Ma would advise him. Once, Zhu Yuanzhang wanted to kill Guo Jingxiang's son, who was accused of murdering his father. Empress stopped him by suggesting that Jingxiang's son might have been framed. Here, Empress Ma had clearly contravened the restriction against women's involvement in political affairs by interfering with justice procedures and influencing the Emperor's decision. However, it is because of her interference that the son did not suffer a sentence he did not deserve, and emperor did not make wrong decisions. As a result, History of the Ming Dynasty gives her a positive comment for her endeavor.

The example of Guo Jingxiang's son is not the only one. Song Lian's case shows History of the Ming Dynasty's attitudes toward Empress Ma even more clearly. There was a time when the well-known Scholar Song Lian was arrested and sentenced to death because of his grandchild Song Shen's crime. Empress Ma reasoned to the emperor that since Song Lian had retired, he must have no idea of Song Shen's crime. However, the emperor refuses to

listen. Thus, the empress consumed no wine or meat when dining with the emperor. When the emperor asked why, she replied that she abstained from wine and meat because she was praying for Scholar Song Lian. The emperor was so touched that he exonerated Song the other day. In this example, Empress Ma also interfered with the governmental issues, however, History of the Ming Dynasty praises her for the benefits she brought to the nation. In another word, History of the Ming Dynasty evaluates women based on the positive influence of their contribution, instead of whether they interfered with governance or not.

The author of History of the Ming Dynasty surely knew that Empress Ma had interfered with politics, and thereby had a discussion of this issue in her biography. One day, the empress asked the emperor: ‘is all under heaven safe now?’ The emperor replied: ‘it is not suitable for you to ask (about it).’ The empress replied: ‘your majesty is the father of the whole world, and I serve as the mother of all under heaven, why is it improper for a mother to ask about her children?’ The author clearly understood that she was constantly involving in politic affairs, which was not appropriate for a palace lady, but the author was still positive about her. In fact, Empress Ma is not the only person to whom the author of History of the Ming Dynasty shows contradictory attitudes. Empress Xu of the Yongle emperor, who frequently commented on political issues, was also praised by the very author who forbade women from political involvement. Empress Zhang of the Renzong emperor serves as a similar example. Empress Zhang never hesitated to give suggestions to her son, even after he assumed the throne. [1] In sum, although much restrictions had been put on palace ladies in this period, there was still much room for them to maneuver. It is true that they were restricted by institutional norms and moral obligations, but that does not suggest that they cannot achieve anything due to them.

3. Palace Ladies in Qing China

Compared to the History of Ming Dynasty, the social value of Qing dynasty which recorded by History of Qing Dynasty restricted women in different ways. In reality, a huge decrease in women’s dynamism which imposes the possibility of women controlling occurred in that era. Compilers of History of Qing Dynasty illustrated how women were restricted in different ways in the Qing Dynasty. In fact, the rules and restrictions became so strict that women’s agency were seriously undermined according to History of Qing Dynasty. Based on the case of Qing Dynasty, women were limited not that much by moral rules but by the social status they were born into.

At the very beginning of History of Qing Dynasty, the compiler made clear that the caste of palaces ladies was not based on beauty or morality, but on family background. This is not to say that morality did not matter. In

fact, the compiler of the History of Qing Dynasty was proud that the favored concubines did not threaten the governance of the empire. Instead, the palace ladies’ morality was taken for granted—it was something they had to have, and when it became something they had to have, it had nothing to do with agency.

What also undermined their agency is the fact that the palace ladies in the Qing palace did not share the rights as their counterparts in the Ming Dynasty. There is not much record of their life events. Even their own biographies barely mentioned their character. Instead, what was emphasized was the character of the emperor, or the unconditional enforcement of his will.

Even when the empresses eventually had a part in court politics, their deeds were recorded to emphasize the respect and filial piety on the part of the emperor. An example is the Empress Dowager Xiaozhuang, the mother of the Shunzhi emperor. In her biography, there was not much condemnation of her political involvement or celebration of that involvement. Instead, the biographer highlighted that although the Empress Dowager did not interfere with the governance, the emperor was so filial that he would ask her about her opinions.

In the same biography, the compiler restated the filial piety of the emperor, who immediately returned from his trip when he heard that the Empress Dowager’s sickness. In contrast to other Qing palace ladies, Empress Dowager Cixi was actively involved in late Qing governance. For several decades, she attended to state affairs behind a bamboo curtain, and she enthroned several emperors, such as the Guangxu Emperor, after her own son died without an heir. She was also responsible for the Sino-French War from 1884 to 1885, and she was able to promote or descend high officials. [2] All of these tell us that Empress Dowager Cixi actively participated in politics. However, even a woman as powerful as she had to issue the letters to announce the political involvement did not come from her own will, probably because of the prevailing prejudice against palace women’s political involvement in the Qing dynasty.

Despite that the compiler of the History of Qing Dynasty spoke against The Empress Dowager’s political involvement by quoting herself, if we switch our perspectives, it is not difficult to find that Empress Dowager enjoyed much agency in her political and personal life.

For instance, in his *Celestial Women: Imperial Wives and Concubines from Song to Qing*, Keith McMahon argued that she was a very capable politician. And if she lost several wars against foreign powers, that was only because she could only mobilize a limited number of resources back in her time. McMahon also noted that she was a charming and personable lady. He quoted ambassadors and their wives that “she was charming and full of good will,” and that she was “a beautiful woman who

looked much younger than her years and who was likeable, smart and capable.” [3]

This view is also shared by the author of *Secrets of the Qing Palace*. With detailed archival support, Li Guorong proves that imperial concubine selection was in no way beauty or talent hunting. Instead, the emperor usually brought in the girls with proper family background. One proof is that the emperor chose his concubines first from the eight banners. Even after the selection, the status of the concubines was determined by their family background. For example, the daughter of a general may be a “consort”, but the cousin of the emperor may be a “noble consort.” As a result, the selection itself is the reproduction of existing aristocracy. During this process, very little room was left for women to maneuver.

However, the author also points out the fact that this marriage system emphasizes the family background does not mean that all high-status palace ladies came from the emperor are from the upper class. This point has been proved by a couple of stories in the *History of Qing Dynasty*. For instance, both Consort De of Kangxi emperor and Royal Noble Consort Ling of Emperor Qianlong came from humble origins. Nevertheless, they rose to very high positions of the palace. Eventually, their sons became the next emperors.

Efforts to restrain Empress Dowager Xiaozhuang’s power can also be seen in her son’s resistance against her manipulation of the imperial harem. Li Guorong implies that Empress Dowager Xiaozhuang attempted to control the imperial harem by manipulating the imperial concubine selection. For example, Consort Jing of Shunzhi Emperor and Empress Xiaohuizhang were the Empress Dowager’s relatives. In reality, by ignoring these concubines, Emperor Shunzhi weakened his mother’s authority in the political area on purpose. [4]

4. Palace Ladies in Classical and Late Imperial Japan

Compared to those in China, women’s rights in premodern Japan was more complicated. In early classical Japan, the country had transformed from a gender equal society to a patriarchal society, and this shift was heavily influenced by China. In this process, women’s status became lower and lower, and they grew to have less agency in the meantime. [5]

The agency and authority of women, especially palace ladies, had been limited, but it does not mean that they did not share any rights during Edo period. If we take the Ooku ladies as an example, we can notice they were physically stuck in the palace. The “Ooku” in Japanese means “the inner chamber.” Since women were mostly in charge of the domestic sphere in imperial China and Japan, “Ooku” gives a vivid description of the condition of women. However, the problem is whether it was possible for the palace ladies to influence the outside world. [6]

It is undeniable that there were institutional rules to limit the authority of the palace ladies. In fact, Ooku itself kept the ladies inside the palace for their entire lives. More surprisingly, palace officials even eavesdropped in the ladies’ bedrooms just in case they might influence the general’s decisions on political affairs. Besides, very little room was left for power maneuver when the ranking of the ladies was determined by their family background. In this way, it is very difficult for the women born in poor families to earn a place in palace.

However, the hardship of those palace ladies gave rise to two misunderstandings of their positions. One is that they were completely separated from the outside world, and the other is that they could never gain power. On the one hand, as power trickled down from the center to the periphery of the palace, the more inside one was, the more power one had. On the other hand, most of the ladies could get the opportunity to communicate with outside world by several methods.

First, the upper-class female officials shared the most power to access to the outside and have control over power. For example, Otoshiyori are palace ladies in charge of the documents. They could visit the temples and mobilize people. Although they do not have too many chances to go outside the palace personally, they could receive the latest news from the people they met because of their job responsibilities, news that they would usually share with midaidokoro. Moreover, the way they passed and interpreted the information could also affect the decisions of the general. By managing the titled ladies, they would have a lot of chances to get in touch with the information which would never be reached in palace.

Secondly, lower-class female officials could also contact the external world. In fact, the palace often used them to influence the society. The lower-class female officials had regular holidays during their tenure and they could leave the palace when they retired. They could spread the imperial culture and served as a news broadcast after their retirement or during the holidays.

For female officers with the lowest status, they did not have much power. However, they had the freedom to access to the outside. They could learn a lot and know some influential people by working in Ooku palace, and their experience would become their political capital and raise their status in the society. Meanwhile, working in Ooku palace is a chance to earn money. The upper-class palace ladies could save their own money, and finally achieve economic independence. For the lower-class female office worker, the money they saved when working in Ooku palace could help them to support their family and give them more power in their family.

Even the women who did not have the opportunity to get out could use several methods to have presence outside the palace. C. S. Seigle has mentioned in “Gift Exchange

In Edo Castle” that some palace ladies were not able to be present in some special occasions, but they could make a symbolic appearance by giving out gifts. In this way, they sent out the presents to the people outside of the palace in order to communicate with the external world. By doing so, they could achieve their social purpose and raise their social statuses, and reach out to the world beyond the palace. However, Seigle also mentioned that such opportunities did not suggest absolute freedom from institutional restraints. That is because it was the general himself that decided who could give what gift to whom. For example, people from lower class could only select gifts that were neither expensive nor rare. [7]

Similar to gift-giving, these palace women also sought to increase their influence by collecting works of art and making exhibitions of them outside the palace. Although these ladies were not able to be physically outside the palace, the artworks that embodied their taste, wealth and status were out in their stead and enhance their influence among commoner viewers. [8]

5. Conclusion

Although palace ladies in ancient time did not share the authority to actively participate in state affairs, they could possibly find a way to enhance their social and political

status. The family background, moral codes and other main factors directly embody and affect their personal agency. In the ancient patriarchal society, women’s rights are directly restricted and somehow depended on their husband. Every hero fails to pull through the beauty pass, but is that really the main reason why women’s personal agency is restricted? There are still questions left us to explore in those aspects.

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