SCOTT PEARCE

Nurses, Nurslings, and New Shapes of Power in the Mid-Wei Court

Denis Twitchett taught me many things in the years during which I studied under his direction. Perhaps the most important was the historian's charge to look beyond the elaborate structures of depiction and justification that all humans, ancient and modern, concoct in their thinking and writing, and to seek instead the reality that lies behind the facade. We share as a species certain very basic wants and needs that drive individuals as they move through the particular cultural arrangements of the world in which they dwell. And these things too must be seen and described.

This paper looks at something very basic in human society – the need of the infant and child for a protecting, nurturing, mothering figure, and the complex unfolding relationships this can plant within – and impose upon – a heart, a home, and if that home is the palace at the center of a monarchical state, an entire realm. Within a nursling, even when he has grown into a man, or lord of men, is a *yin*-like tendency to reach out to his former nurturer. And in the nurse is a sort of *yang*, a will to shape and govern the nursling, an object of both care and control. Here we see two basic human wants: the desire to be nurtured and protected; and the itch for power, for the ability to establish a preferred order in the world. These basic actions both of reaching out and controlling are seen in a particularly unusual and troubling context during the early Northern Wei (386–534) – namely, the practice of forcing suicide on the mother of the selected heir to the throne. One response to this, in the mid-fifth century, was elevation by emperors of their wet nurses to the exalted status that their mothers would have occupied had they not been impelled to die.

Within these particulars lies a distinct variant of larger historical issues of power and gender that are currently of interest to scholars working in different fields.[1] Interesting work on this issue with regards to Northern Wei has already been done by Li Ping 李凴, Tian Yuqing 田余慶, and Song Qirui 宋其蕤, and in English, by Jennifer Holmgren.[2] Drawing upon this secondary work, while applying careful and detailed reexamination to primary sources, I seek to broaden the framework within which we address these issues, while providing a detailed account of the events for nonspecialists and for those beyond the field of Chinese history. In doing so, my wish is to present the realities of the situation without resorting to the moralizing or invidious caricaturizing (on the basis of gender, or "level of civilization") that so often entangles discussion of these issues.

Very well known is the comment supposedly made to the Han 漢 founder Liu Bang 劉邦, that one could win but not rule the empire on horseback. As is the case with many sayings, there is some truth in this; though it would need to be pointed out that the final collapse of the Han regime came when the center lost control over armies. Subsequently, the reconstruction of empire that was centered on the rich agrarian lands we call China was eventually successfully completed by militarized fratries of horsemen, a process that began in earnest in the late-fourth century with Northern Wei, which had grown out of a militarized Inner Asian nation that originally took shape in the grasslands of Inner Mongolia. The core of this nation, at least, was drawn from among the Särbi (Chin.: Xianbei 鮮卑), ancestors of the Mongols. Under Northern Wei, most of these people dwelt in and around the Wei capital of Pingcheng 平城 (modern Datong 大同, Shanxi), a political and military center in the transitional highlands that lay between the steppe and the Chinese farmlands to the south.

---

[1] See the excellent study by Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal Court* (Oxford: Cambridge U.P., 2005).

[2] Li Ping 李凴, *Bei Wei Pingcheng shidai* 北魏平城時代 (Beiing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2000), chaps. 3–4; idem, "Bei Wei Wenchengdi chunian de san hou zhi zheng" 北魏文成帝初年的三后之爭, in his *Beichao yanjiu cun gao* 北朝研究存稿 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2006), pp. 137–61; Song Qirui 宋其蕤, *Bei Wei nüzhu lun* 北魏女主論 (Beijing: Xinhua shudian, 2006); Jennifer Holmgren, "The Harem in Northern Wei Politics, 398–498 AD," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 26 (1983), pp. 71–96; idem, "Women and Political Power in the Traditional T'o-pa Elite: a Preliminary Study of the Biographies of Empresses in the *Wei-shu*," *MS* 35 (1981–1983), pp. 33–74. See also the article by Valentin C. Golovachev, "Matricide among the Tuoba-Xianbei and Its Transformation during the Northern Wei," *Early Medieval China* 8 (2002), pp. 1–41; and my rebuttal to it, in *Early Medieval China* 9 (2003). Tian Yuqing 田余慶, "Bei Wei hougong zi gui mu si zhi zhi de xingcheng he yanbian" 北魏後宮子貴母死之制的形成和演變, in his *Tuoba shi tan* 拓跋史探 (Beijing: Shenghuo, dushu, xinshi sanlian shudian, 2003), pp. 9–61, has in more sophisticated detail come to much the same conclusions as the author did in the *Early Medieval China* 9 piece.

As is so often the case with the construction of empire, the Wei armies came from the periphery. But the struggle of the early Wei monarchs was not only outward, in leading their armies to subject the lands to the south. It was also inward, in the efforts to establish absolute authority of the monarch over his own generals and aristocrats.[3] And with the consolidation of power at the center, in the Inner Court that the historian Yan Yaozhong 嚴耀中 has so trenchantly described as a complex institution, drawing on the traditions of both China and the steppe,[4] came an increasing power of the women of that Inner Court.

This eventually led during the Wei to the rise of power of the dowager empresses Wenming 文明 (d. 490) and Hu 胡 (d. 528); and later reached an even more dramatic state of development during the successor Tang 唐 regime, with Wu Zetian 武則天, the only woman in Chinese history to take for herself the title *huangdi* 皇帝, which we generally translate as "emperor." These were not genuine matriarchies.[5] They were, however, examples of some women who were under certain circumstances able to appropriate power resting on and derived from armies, which in these societies were unambiguously male institutions. This ability lay in the authority the women held within the palace – the family structures – around which grew up the great political and military centers of Pingcheng, Luoyang 洛陽, and Chang'an 長安. Translation of a woman's familial authority into power over the realm rested, in turn, on several things. An obvious one would be acceptance by those who mattered of the notion of the realm as possession of a ruling house. Related to this would be the support – or indifference – that a woman who had become the effective head of that house received from the leaders of the armies that maintained control over the realm. And the male occupying the Wei throne needed to be one who could be persuaded or compelled by the words of a female authority figure within his household.[6]

[3] This process culminated, of course, in appropriation of his rendition of the structures of the old empire by the Wei emperor Gaozu 高祖 (Xiaowen 孝文; r. 471–499).

[4] Yan Yaozhong 嚴耀中, *Bei Wei qianqi zhengzhi zhidu* 北魏前期政治制度 (Changchun: Jilin jiaoyu chubanshe, 1990).

[5] Jennifer Jay, "Imagining Matriarchy: 'Kingdoms of Women' in Tang China," *JAOS* 116.2 (1996), pp. 220–29.

[6] Suasion versus coercion is of course a fundamental question regarding the nature of these women's power; I won't attempt to resolve that issue in this paper. Also, here I will generally use the temple names of the Wei emperors because in most cases the names that come down to us are secondary Chinese names; though scattered examples of transcription survive, their original names in Särbi (Xianbei 鮮卑) have not come survived in consistent or usable form. Furthermore, the Wei emperors did not use as a Chinese-style surname the name of their lineage, Tuoba 拓跋 (or as we derive from the Turkish, Tabgatch), and so it is straining credulity to call an individual "Tuoba X"; and it would be highly anachronistic the use the surname

It is frequently suggested that the power of some women in medieval China derived from Inner Asian links. This is a complex issue, with elements of truth in it.[7] But in the opinion of this writer, at least, what is clearly not true is that forced suicide of the heir's mother somehow derived from the nomadic origins of the Northern Wei rulers, the Tabgatch (Chin.: Tuoba 拓跋). Although isolated examples of this can be found in both Inner Asia and the first Chinese empire, it was a practice set in place in the first years of Northern Wei under particular circumstances by a particular individual, namely, Taizu 太祖 (Daowudi 道武帝; r. 386–409), the Wei founder who first led the regime's cavalry forces down into the farmlands of northern China.[8] Though successful in war, Taizu's regime was in some ways a fragile entity, a militarized nation constructed on the basis of forced incorporation of previous Inner Asian rivals. Taizu displayed power over these groups by making the daughters of conquered leaders into his own consorts.[9] But he feared that such princesses might act within his court as agents for the conquered, and take control of the regime away from his own lineage. Thus, when he finally chose his heir, he also decided to eliminate the heir's mother, to deprive her of access to power through control of the son. Forcing the mother's suicide was an *ad hoc* action motivated by Taizu's suspicion of her powerful and distrusted Xiongnu family.[10] In later generations, this *ad hoc* decision was institutionalized by different people, for very different ends, being used by powerful women within the Wei court to remove female rivals. Internal dynastic factionalism had changed profoundly.

---

later created by Gaozu, i.e., Yuan.

[7] Northern Wei, with its high degree of female involvement in court politics, did emerge from the "Inner Asian frontiers" of the Chinese farmlands. At the same time, there are many examples of the power of women in ethnic Chinese dynasties, e.g., the wife of the Han founder, empress Lü. See Liensheng Yang, "Female Rulers in Imperial China," *HJAS* 23 (1960–61), pp. 47–61. See also Jay, "Imagining Matriarchy"; and discussions of Wu Zetian in various works, including N. Harry Rothschild, *Wu Zhao: China's Only Woman Emperor* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2008).

[8] Golovachev, "Matricide," believes that the emergence of female, state power has origins in Xianbei roots, but my published reply (see n. 2, above) was that his position must be qualified by the important facts of the Wei succession crisis, as outlined here.

[9] This is an innovation made by Taizu during a time of rapid growth of his regime, changing earlier patterns of prescribed marriage with nomad neighbors. See Golovachev, "Matricide," p. 5 (drawing on Holmgren).

[10] Tian, "Bei Wei hougong"; Li, *Bei Wei Pingcheng shidai*, pp. 71–73. In a study that is fascinating and very useful, but sometimes a bit too speculative, Song (*Bei Wei nüzhu lun*, p. 101) pushes this even further, suggesting that the practice of killing the heir's mother derived from a desire by Taizu to avoid for his son and heir, Taizong, the domination he had received from his own mother, a woman of the Helan 賀蘭 tribe. The point is also made in Golovachev, "Matricide."

WET NURSES IN THE FAMILY POLITICS OF NORTHERN WEI: MADAM DOU AND MADAM CHANG

As one would expect, the forced death of his mother, madam Liu 劉, was a devastating emotional experience for Taizu's seventeen-year-old heir:[11]

> The mother of the [future] emperor, precious lady (Guiren 貴人) Liu, was commanded to commit suicide. Taizu declaimed to the [future] emperor, [his son,] that "Formerly emperor Wu of the Han 漢武帝 was going to establish his son [as heir] and killed his mother. He would not give charge to the woman later to become involved in the government of the state, or allow the in-laws to cause disorder. You will succeed me. For this reason, I have from far off followed the course of emperor Wu of the Han, and made a plan that will long go on."[12] The [future] emperor was by nature very filial,[13] and cried with grief, unable to control himself. Learning of this, Taizu summoned him once again. The emperor wished to enter, [but his] attendants said, "In serving the father, the filial son can take it if it's a small beating, but if it's a big one he gets away from it. His Highness is now very angry. If you enter, you don't know what will happen; you (emperor) may be sucked down by [your father's] wrongful actions. If you don't do this, [and instead] go out [of the city] and wait for his anger to disperse and then go in, it won't be too late."

With the boy having fled from the capital, the father now chose another heir, Shao 紹. Shao's mother, of the recently subdued rival Helan 賀蘭 nation, was then locked up, in anticipation of her forced despatch. Unwilling to suffer this fate, she secretly sent word to her son, asking him "How are you going to save me?"[14] The response of the boy (just sixteen *sui* old) was to kill the father. Interestingly, this set off just what the father had feared, perhaps caused by his own actions: a regathering of the Helan against their recent conquerors.[15] Eventually, at any rate, madam Liu's son returned from the wilds to eliminate his half-brother and take the throne for himself. This was the second Wei monarch, Taizong 太宗 (Mingyuandi 明元帝; r. 409–423).

---

[11] *Wei shu* 魏書 (Zhonghua shuju edn.; hereafter, *WS*) 3, p. 49; *Bei shi* 北史 (Zhonghua shuju edn.; hereafter, *BS*) 1, p. 26. For another translation, see Golovachev, "Matricide during the Northern Wei," pp. 24–25.

[12] I would agree with Tian ("Bei Wei hougong," p. 12) that it is absurd to suppose that Taizu based his choice of action on the precedent set 500 years before by Han Wudi. We might even wonder whether he was aware of that episode, or if instead the reference was added by his Chinese scribes. As said above, I equally reject the view that this type of forced matricide came from the steppe.

[13] In this phrase, 帝素純孝, we see some of the fundamental difficulties of examining through Chinese text people who had emerged from a different language and culture. For here, of course, we see the use of the term *xiao* – with implications and associations broad and deep within the Chinese tradition – to describe a young man, who loved his mother in a way experienced in all societies, but whose conceptualization of those feelings had certainly not been fundamentally framed within the Chinese world of discourse.

[14] *WS* 16, p. 390; *BS* 16, pp. 589–90. The discussion given of these events by Golovachev, "Matricide," p. 17, seems a bit confusing: the point of the story is that having chosen another

Underlying Taizu's choice is a fundamental fact of at least most premodern societies: that impressed into another patriline, a key source of authority for women was the male child, whom they had borne (or not) and raised as a counterpart to the power of the husband. Use of this access to power by mother (and of course by her kinsfolk as well) is not something seen only in China; it has manifested itself in different forms in many societies. Taizu's intention in forcing madam Liu to die was to deprive the woman (who despite an intimate relation he obviously saw as a threatening "other") of control after his death over the son, whom he wished in some sense to be a continuation of his own self. Here we see the beginning within this evolving court of a radical split between a barren title-bearing empress – if any such title was given at all – and a soon-despatched mother of the heir.[16]

But the key skill of the human is our capacity to adapt – and across the generations we see a series of women who appropriated and adapted the practice of killing the heir's mother in order to ascertain their own power within the regime. The most notable of these is, once again, the empress-dowager Wenming, who though she was not his mother established herself as caretaker of the child who become the emperor Gaozu 高祖 (Xiaowendi 孝文帝; r. 471–499), going on to exert enormous power during his reign. But preceding her, and having their own interest, were the wet nurses of the earlier reigns of Shizu 世祖 (Taiwudi 太武帝; r. 424–452) and his heir and grandson, Gaozong 高宗 (Wenchengdi 文成帝; r. 452–465).

A key point made by Jennifer Holmgren in her discussion of the role (and fate) of women in these happenings is the question of succession. During the early Wei, there was an ongoing struggle over this issue. Some preferred a model taken from the steppe – lateral succession – in which power would pass from brother to brother, bringing to

---

son, Shao, as his successor, he then plans the death of Shao's mother.

[15] *WS* 16, p. 390; *BS* 16, p. 590. See the discussion by Tian on the connection between forced suicide of heirs' mothers and the disbanding by Taizu of certain powerful steppe rivals: "Bei Wei hougong," pp. 31 ff.

[16] Holmgren, "Harem in Northern Wei Politics," p. 81.

the throne seasoned war leaders.[17] Others wished to regularize power transfer by adopting primogeniture (the model typically preferred in the Chinese empires). Holmgren's point here is that some women within the palace – those with connection, of course, to the eldest son – naturally preferred the latter, because this would bring to the throne a more malleable and manipulable individual than the sort that would or could take the throne by force. It is clear that Taizu had in some sense designated the future Taizong as his heir, since if not, why kill the mother? Perhaps still reeling from his own experiences, however, Taizong does not seem to have clearly designated as his heir the future Shizu; it seems that Shizu's mother, who died in 420 – when the future Shizu was about twelve years old – died of natural causes.[18]

Although Shizu's mother seems not to have been forcibly eliminated, it seems she was not deeply involved in raising the boy. The lack of closeness between them is described in the evaluation of Shizu at the end of his *Wei shu* 魏書 annals, where we are told that "when born he did not live up to" his mother's expectations 生不逮密太后.[19] He would be raised by another woman, a madam Dou 竇氏, the future emperor's wet nurse.

Wet-nursing was widespread in early China.[20] Under Northern Wei, however, this pervasive habit of the upper classes took on a different tone, since within the ruling house it involved not just a choice of the mother to forego the joys of child-rearing, but was at least in some cases specifically tied to efforts of the father to prevent bonding of mother and child. The nurse assigned to take on the burden of the future Northern Wei emperor, madam Dou, was like most wet nurses of this age of unfree status, having entered service in the palace after her husband's family was implicated in a crime and executed.[21] Her ethnicity is not known; and it should be noted that there were important Inner Asian lines identified in our texts by the common Chinese surname Dou.[22] Be this as it may, ethnic origin – so focused upon in modern studies of Northern Wei – was not the only way that people were defined in the Wei capital at Pingcheng. What mattered more was involvement in and loyalty to the court, which was very much a hybrid cultural entity.[23] Whatever the set of manners to which she conformed, we are told that madam Dou was a person of real integrity who comported herself well.

---

[17] Ibid., p. 84. Andrew Eisenberg suggests a more complex picture of this in chap. 2 of his *Kingship in Early Medieval China* (Leiden: Brill, 2008); see my forthcoming review of this book in *Early Medieval China*.

[18] *WS* 13, p. 326; *BS* 13, p. 493. (Her death is not reported in the *Wei shu* or *Bei shi* annals.) See comments on this by Holmgren, "Harem in Northern Wei Politics," p. 74. With a contrary view, Li Ping argues (*Bei Wei Pingcheng shidai*, pp. 77–87) that the future Shizu was designated heir. And Song Qirui assumes that the mother's death was planned: *Bei Wei nüzhu lun*, p. 102.

[19] *WS* 4B, p. 107; *BS* 2, p. 62. Shizu's mother's posthumous title was empress-dowager Mi. The phrase *sheng bu dai* is a bit difficult to figure out here. One anonymous reviewer of this manuscript suggested that it meant that "the parent (i.e., the mother) died when the child was little." But this is certainly not the case, since we clearly know that Shizu's mother lived until he was twelve. *Bu dai* also, however, means "not up to," "not worthy of," which translation I will accept until I hear better suggestions.

[20] See Jender Lee, "Wet Nurses in Early Imperial China," *Nan Nü* 2.1 (2000), pp. 1–39.

[21] Her biography, the source for the following, is in *WS* 13, p. 326; and *BS* 13, p. 494.

Among nursemaids of this age, suckling was expected to last, it seems, for at least the first two years. Many examples, however, can be found in our sources showing the wet nurse as far more to the child than simply a source of milk; they also played an active role in shaping the child in his critical early years.[24] This is no doubt the reason why Taizong, having confirmed madam Dou's integrity, chose her for the baby. There are also, in the literature of this age, various stories describing nursemaids saving their wards.[25] Although madam Dou seems never to have needed to save the future Shizu, as we shall see, below, this seems to have occurred dramatically with the nurse of the next emperor, madam Chang 常氏. Needless to say, the relationship of nursemaid to nursling was a complex one: not only had they (at least potentially) transferred deep maternal feelings to their assignment, their social status and material well-being also depended upon the relationship they had thus forged and maintained.

Being that which the child enjoys, and depends upon, as it moves from the pre-conscious into the conscious state, the relationship with the nurturing maternal figure can be of a depth and immediacy not seen in other ties, self-consciously crafted at later stages of development. According to Yang Xiong 揚雄, a famous thinker of the Han period, when children yearn for their mother it is due to affection, but yearning for the father comes from respect. In the context of Buddhism, an apocryphal Chinese text describes an encounter between Siddhārtha and his mother, in which she says, "If this is my son, Siddhārtha, may my milk enter his mouth," whereupon the milk miraculously traveled through space to him. He later repaid the "milk debt" by helping her escape *samsara*.[26]

---

[22] See Yao Weiyuan 姚薇元, *Beichao huxing kao* 北朝胡姓考 (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 1958), pp. 175–80.

[23] Jennifer Holmgren, "Race and Class in Fifth Century China: The Emperor Kao-tsu's Marriage Reform," *Early Medieval China* 2 (1995–1996), p. 86; and "The Composition of the Early Wei Bureaucratic Elite as a Background to the Emperor Kao-tsu's Reforms (423–490 AD)," *Journal of Asian History* 27 (1993), pp. 109–75.

[24] See Lee, "Wet Nurses," p. 18, where she goes on to say that, "children could still be attended by a wet nurse for up to five years, relying on her to gather their toys, prepare their meals, or instruct and protect them through the process of growing up."

[25] Ibid., pp. 21–22.

Madam Dou, her biography tells us, was by nature loving and "nurtured (the future emperor Shizu) as she would her own." She worked hard at guiding and shaping the boy, and as we see with other individuals of this age, Shizu was deeply moved by her "kindness and training 恩訓."[27] After he took the throne in 424, one of the ways in which Shizu attempted to requite his "milk debt" was, in the very next year, to bestow upon madam Dou the anomalous title *bao taihou* 保太后, meaning something like "dowager protectress." Seven years later she was raised to the more orthodox title of "empress-dowager 皇太后," giving her full authority over the running and organization of the inner palace.[28] Her brother was given the title prince of Liaodong 遼東王.[29]

Though she is said, in her biography, to have been a quiet individual, with few demands, she is also put forth as a strong personality, who "taught and managed those (in the) Inner Court and those in the outer," forcefully stating her directions. Her biography tells of one incident when the Rouran 柔然 – a new power of the steppe – raided into Wei territory. Shizu being off on campaign, as he so regularly was, madam Dou herself ordered the commanders to assemble the troops and drive them back.

On another occasion, in 429, she is depicted as having a leading role in palace discussions on the advisability of taking the offensive against the Rouran, arguing strongly against her former nursling's wish to lead the Wei armies up into the northern grasslands. But, it must be added, she was on the losing side. With the support of his regular facilitator, Cui Hao 崔浩, Shizu rejected the urgings of the "dowager protectress" (and most of the rest of the court), and pushed through his aggressive policy.[30] It is important to point out the complexity of the relationship between Shizu and madam Dou, and the mixed motives that may have lain behind his elevation of her to the status of empress-dowager. Genuine affection almost certainly played a role; but he may at the same time haven been using her to block the rise of other strong women within his court.[31]

---

[26] Miranda Brown,"Sons and Mothers in Warring State and Han China, 453 BCE–220 CE," *Nan Nü* 5.2 (2003), p. 147; Alan Cole, *Mothers and Sons in Chinese Buddhism* (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1998), pp. 65–66.

[27] For other examples of this in early China, see Lee, "Wet Nurses," pp. 25–26.

[28] See the discussion of women's ranks in the palace in Song, *Bei Wei nüzhu lun*, p. 110.

[29] *WS* 4A, pp. 70, 80; *BS* 2, pp. 42, 47. For her brother, see the mention in her biography: *WS* 13, 326; *BS* 13, 494.

[30] *WS* 35, p. 815; *BS* 21, p. 779. Cui Hao, as was often the case, was the sole major figure who agreed with the emperor on this military offensive.

Shizu's nurse lived to the age of sixty-three *sui*, dying in the year 440.[32] Showing love for the woman who had raised him, the emperor now decreed three days of public mourning. But although we do not see in Northern Wei the debates of earlier dynasties in which scholars discussed the seemliness of honoring wet nurses, nevertheless, madam Dou's inclusion in the imperial family could only go so far.[33] At some earlier time, before her passing, we are told that she had climbed Guoshan 崞山, which lay southeast of Pingcheng, on the road to Lingqiu 靈丘, and said, "I mothered the emperor's body, [while] honoring the gods and caring for others. If I do not completely disappear when I die, I will certainly not be a lowly spirit. Still, I have no place among the former emperors; we cannot violate ritual to accompany [them into the imperial] burial park. I can in the end be laid to rest on top of this mountain."[34] And so it was in this place that she was buried when she died, and not the "golden tumuli 金陵" of the ruling house that lay north of Pingcheng at Yunzhong 雲中. To honor her, the emperor ordered the building of a special shrine and placement of a stele praising her virtues.

Despite signs of her active involvement in policy and defense matters, madam Dou, whatever her own inclinations, was like everyone else at court overshadowed by the strong personality of Shizu. But under madam Chang, the elevated nursemaid of Shizu's successor, Gaozong, we see such an individual coming forth to play a powerful role within the court.[35]

Madam Chang came originally from the northeastern territories of Northern Yan 北燕, conquered by Shizu in 436; Song Qirui has made the plausible suggestion that she was an attendant of a princess from the Northern Yan ruling house of Feng 馮 who was sent by her father in an attempt to make peace with Wei (we will see this princess, below, under the moniker "Madam Feng the Elder").[36] In the late 430s, we are told in her biography, she was made a servant within the palace on account of some unspecified crime.[37] Such figures in the Wei state are in some studies called "slaves,"[38] which has in it an element of truth but misses the complexity of the elaborate structures of subordination that existed within this regime; from the point of view of the monarch, at least, all were his serviles.[39] At any rate, described in her biographies as being loving, easy-going, and obedient, madam Chang was chosen by Shizu for his grandson, the future Gaozong. She worked very hard, it is said, to take care of the child.

---

[31] Marginalization of women by Shizu may be a factor as well in the paucity of information contained in the biographies of his two empresses; see *BS* 13, p. 494; *WS* 13, p. 326. See also Jennifer Holmgren's discussion of the paucity of appointed consorts, in general and for Shizu in particular, in "Harem in Northern Wei Politics," pp. 76 ff.

[32] This would, of course, mean that she was born in 378, during the interim years between Northern Wei and the original Tabgatch regime, Dai 代 (315–376), which never made deep incursions into the Yellow River plains and was in 376 destroyed by the Former Qin.

[33] For these earlier debates, see Lee, "Wet Nurses," p. 10.

[34] *WS* 13, p. 326; *BS* 13, p. 494.

[35] And this was not the first time a wet nurse had risen to power in the empires based on the agrarian lands of northern China. During the reign of the Later Han emperor Andi 安帝 (r. 106–125), the emperor's nursemaid first had the family of the late empress-dowager destroyed, and then fearing a rivalry with the nursemaid of the heir-apparent, denounced and destroyed her as well (see Lee, "Wet Nurses," pp. 26–27; it should not, of course, be assumed that this represented a direct continuation of policies or politics).

And that is good, since Gaozong grew up in difficult circumstances. Whereas Shizu had taken the throne with little difficulty, the accession of Gaozong some thirty years later was not so smooth. In 432 Shizu had formally designated as heir his eldest son, with the Chinese name Huang 晃 (we do not know his Särbi name), when the child was five *sui*. The mother had apparently died around the time of his birth.[40] Shizu, the "great warrior emperor (Taiwudi)," seems to have had little interest in staying at home to care for mundane administration, and frequently charged his son to care for such matters while he was on campaign, carrying on the practice first put in place by Shizu's father, Taizong. In this case, however, it did not work very well. Although the facts are difficult to interpret, it seems that having chafed under his father, Huang built up a major following of his own within the heir's palace. In 451, the powerful palace eunuch Zong Ai 宗愛 engineered the death of various members of Huang's following (probably at the behest of his master, Shizu). The twenty-four-year-old responded with a rising against his father. Unsuccessful, the young man was quickly captured and put to death.[41] Huang's son, the future Gaozong, would have been eleven years old at this time. Shizu is said later to have felt deep grief for Huang, and fearing that the emperor would turn on him next, Zong Ai despatched Shizu on March 11, 452.

---

[36] Song, *Bei Wei nüzhu lun*, pp. 96–98; *WS* 97, p. 2128.

[37] *WS* 13, pp. 327–28; *BS* 13, p. 495.

[38] E.g., Song, *Bei Wei nüzhu lun*, p. 96.

[39] See the author's "Status, Labor and Law: Special Service Households under the Northern Dynasties," *HJAS* 51.1 (1991), pp. 89–138. And for an example from the later Mongol period, see the chapter by Tatyana Skrynnikova, "Relations of Domination and Submission: Political Practice in the Mongol Empire of Chinggis Khan," in David Sneath, ed., *Imperial Statecraft: Political Forms and Techniques of Governance in Inner Asia, 6th-20th Centuries* (Bellingham, Wash.: Western Washington University Center for East Asian Studies, 2006). I also have some trouble with Tian Yuqing's assertion that these captives were incorporated into the rear compartments of the palace to build ties with the conquered populations, since the murders of some of them would have antagonized their kin and former subjects: see his "Bei Wei hougong," p. 46.

[40] *WS* 4B, p. 107; *BS* 2, p. 63. For the mother's death, see *WS* 13, p. 327; *BS* 13, p. 494. It is not clear whether Shizu forced her death, having already chosen that his eldest son would be his heir.

THE SUCCESSION CRISIS OF 452

These events set off a stream of tumultuous events centering on the overlapping issues that characterize all monarchies, and all political systems: power, its possession, and since all human beings are mortal, the question of how power should be transferred to the next generation from those already habituated to its possession. Before proceeding further, it must be stated that the depiction of the crisis that we find in the historiography of the period should in some respects be treated as the position paper of a specific group, in fact the winning faction. As such, it was built around a particular set of interests and assumptions.

Heretofore, the Northern Wei regime had been led by strong war leaders – Taizu and Shizu. The death of the latter left a power vacuum, and the beginnings at the Wei court of a new phase of political history in which women for the first time would play an important role. It was apparently not clear to the larger court how the emperor had died, which is understandable; Shizu had already lived to the relatively old age of fifty-four. Not immediately releasing the information, certain key figures of the Inner Court began to bicker about the succession. One among them, a key advisory figure of the privileged Inner Court (*shizhong* 侍中), the Särbi He Pi 和疋, advocated lateral succession, stating that the eleven-year-old son of Huang was too young and that an adult lord was needed to lead the armies. To this end, he promoted Huang's brother, the third son of Shizu whose Chinese name was Han 翰. (He Pi may not have been acting on his own here. Although the accounts of the Tabgatch in the southern histories are not necessarily reliable, being based to a great extent on rumor and slander, it is interesting to note that *Song shu* 宋書 states that after the death of Huang and shortly before his own death, Shizu had himself been inclined to choose Han as his heir because of the young man's military skills.)[42]

---

[41] The unreliable *Wei shu* account of these events was that the young man "died of grief." See Li, *Bei Wei Pingcheng shidai*, pp. 124–29. I agree with Li Ping's assessment that although they may be garbled, in this case at least the southern accounts are more correct than *Wei shu*, where we see an effort to suppress the true story. See also this author's forthcoming article, "The Role of the Guard in Early Wei Politics."

[42] *Song shu* (Zhonghua shuju edn.) 95, p. 2353; Han being in this text the transcription

On the other side, a figure named Xue Ti 薛提 (perhaps ethnically Chinese, but at any rate lauded in the histories as a loyalist) insisted that the throne should be passed from eldest son to eldest son, and thus to the eleven-year-old. As we have seen, primogeniture had been adopted with mixed results by the early Northern Wei monarchs. For not quite the same reason, it also served the interest of some women in the inner palace. The texts do not tell us of any clear linkage between Xue and the women, but we are told that the men's debate in the Inner Court quickly degenerated into a stalemate. Willing to act, and wishing to forestall the appointment of a potentially strong, independent figure (the imperial prince Han), the eunuch Zong Ai now called upon the authority of the empress-dowager, madam Helian 赫連氏, but an authority that the histories state was "falsely 矯" claimed.[43]

Madam Helian was a classic trophy wife of the early Wei, a daughter of Helian Bobo 勃勃, Xiongnu 匈奴 monarch of the Xia 夏 regime in the Ordos loop area. When Shizu defeated her brother (Bobo's heir) and conquered the region in 427, she and two sisters were taken to Pingcheng to join the young conqueror's harem. Apparently not having had any children – perhaps she never received the attentions of Shizu – she was within this system a perfect candidate to be raised to the status of empress. It is not clear how much power she had within the palace. Li Ping suggests that she was a weak figure without a strong backing; although her brother, Bobo's heir, was taken to Pingcheng as well after the conquest, and initially treated well, he was later executed on the charge of conspiring to rebel.[44] Under this interpretation, madam Helian was used by Zong Ai and the party of which madam Chang formed a part, and then quickly became irrelevant.

Here we do need to step back to ask, "who were the other key figures in the Inner Palace, those arranging things their way within the power vacuum occurring after the death of Shizu and his original heir, Huang"? The paucity of sources on women's involvement in politics makes it difficult to say with certainty: perhaps the key decisions were made by Gaozong's nursemaid, madam Chang; on the other hand, in the early stages at least, they may have been made by a woman of more lofty birth, the youngest daughter of the lord of Northern Yan, Feng Wentong 馮文通, whom he had sent to Pingcheng in the mid-430s in an

---

from Särbi, Wuyigan 烏弈肝. This passage also states that Han shared with Huang control of the administration, and that there was a rivalry between the two princes.

[43] *BS* 13, p. 494; *WS* 13, p. 326.

[44] *WS* 95, p. 2059; Li, "Bei Wei Wenchengdi," pp. 140–42.

attempt to forestall the inevitable destruction of his state by Shizu.[45] This daughter of the Feng line – whom we shall from this point onward call madam Feng the Elder – later rose within Shizu's harem to the second-highest rank, that of senior lady of bright deportment 左昭儀. As mentioned above, Song Qirui has suggested the possibility that madam Chang was an attendant who accompanied this woman to Pingcheng; but even if we do not take up her suggestion, there still must have been some relationship between these expatriates from the same land. It may, in fact, have even been madam Feng the Elder who suggested to Shizu that madam Chang take over the care of his grandson.[46]

At this point, another individual must be considered; this was the brother of madam Feng the Elder who had also come over to Wei after Northern Yan's fall. He was one of the key figures in the inner palace who rose to prominence somewhat later than those already mentioned. Posted as inspector in the Wei River Valley, he was later found guilty of a crime and executed. At this point his daughter, niece of madam Feng the Elder, the future Wenming empress-dowager (whom I shall refer to in this paper as madam Feng the Younger), entered the palace as well, where, we are told, the aunt treated her with strong "motherly virtues, and nurtured and tutored her."[47]

All four of these women would have witnessed the succession struggle that broke out at the Pingcheng court following Shizu's death. In this, Zong Ai sought support from several groups. At one point, we are told that he had thirty arms-bearing eunuchs supporting him.[48] And, whether the orders issued in her name were forged or not, Zong Ai clearly did use the authority of Shizu's barren empress, madam Helian, one-by-one to summon Han and his followers to the palace, where they were killed.[49] It was also on her authority that in Han's place was enthroned the sixth son of Shizu, Yu 余, with whom Zong Ai was said to have better ties.[50] For her service, madam Helian was now given the title of empress-dowager, while Zong Ai took a series of impressive titles, asserting (if not actually gaining) control over the administration and the army.

Zong's power did not last long. To the extent that we can rely on the descriptions given by histories of those who have lost political battles – and sometimes they are true – Yu was a drunkard and wastrel, who knowing he was not the proper selection for the throne (under either vertical or lateral succession) squandered its treasure to buy off the support or acquiescence of officials and military men. More dangerously, Yu began efforts to curb Zong Ai's power. Shortly thereafter, he became the third member of the imperial family to be killed by the eunuch (the fourth, in fact, if we hold Zong Ai responsible for the death of Huang).

---

[45] She has no biography, and is only briefly mentioned in *BS* 13, p. 495; *WS* 13, p. 328, the biography of her niece, the future Wenming; and *BS* 80, p. 2677; *WS* 83A, 1819, the biography of Wenming's brother.

[46] Song, *Bei Wei nüzhu lun*, p. 112.

[47] *BS* 13, p. 495; *WS* 13, p. 328.

[48] *WS* 94, p. 2012; *BS* 92, p. 3029.

[49] I agree here with Song, *Bei Wei nüzhu lun*, p. 113.

[50] *Zizhi tongjian* (Zhonghua shuju edn.; hereafter, *ZZTJ*) 126, pp. 3973–74; *WS* 4B, p. 106; *BS* 2, p. 62; *WS* 94, p. 2012; *BS* 16, p. 605; *WS* 18, p. 418.

Hereupon, in 452, the passivity of the court males ended, and leaders of the Inner Court – and especially the guard units – stepped in to seize control of the palace and eliminate Zong Ai. During these tumultuous events, as protection against the eunuch, Huang's son had been taken into hiding in the rugged territory of the imperial deer park north of the palace. In a dramatic rescue, acclaimed in *Wei shu* 魏書,[51] the minister of the south Lu Li 陸麗 rode out to collect the boy, galloping in with him through a gate opened by a commander of the guard. Huang's son was immediately set on the throne, on October 31. As for the question of who it was who sheltered the twelve-year-old in the deer park, although no direct evidence is provided, through the process of elimination it has been suggested that this would have been his nurse, madam Chang, and that this is the merit referred to in the comment in her biography that she had "given her all to protect [the boy] 劬勞保護之功."[52]

After his enthronement, defense gave way to offense and purges. About a month later, *Wei shu* gives laconic mention of the deaths of the young emperor's last two surviving uncles, putting an effective end to realistic possibility of lateral succession in the Wei regime. On the next day, the emperor's birth mother, the Rouran princess madam Yujiulü 鬱久閭, died.[53] Two and a half weeks later the late father (Huang) and just-deceased mother were honored with posthumous titles; at the same time, madam Chang was elevated to that irregular title of dowager-protectress.[54] The deaths of various other male figures would follow, as rivalries and grudges were worked out; what we see here may well be not one power struggle but several.[55] Though all of these will not be listed, mention should be made here of a kinsman of a long-dead consort of Taizong, a palace attendant charged with treason in purported collusion with two imperial princes. He and virtually every member of his affinal family were put to death.[56] Three weeks after this, madam Chang was raised up from dowager-protectress 保太后 to the more lofty and conventional title of empress-dowager 皇太后.

---

[51] *WS* 41, p. 920; *BS* 28, p. 1024. For a fascinating description of the deer garden, see Li, "Bei Wei Wenchengdi," pp. 151–53, in which he tentatively suggests that the place that Gaozong hid might have been the same place his son, Xianzu, set up his retired emperor's headquarters.

[52] Song Qirui and Li Ping agree on this suggestion: see Song, *Bei Wei nüzhu lun*, pp. 107–8; and Li, "Bei Wei Wenchengdi," pp. 149–53. In the same text, on p. 155, Li Ping makes the very good point that whoever it was who was protecting the boy would have been in communication with Lu Li and the others; otherwise, how would the minister of the south gallop out and quickly collect the boy? For other aspects of these events, see the author's forthcoming "The Role of the Guard in Early Wei Politics."

[53] *WS* 5, p. 111; *BS* 2, p. 65. The Rouran were, of course, the group that had taken power on the steppe after relocation of the Tabgatch into Chinese territory.

Two months after the completion of madam Chang's rise to the apex, we are told that the emperor and his entourage set off to visit Guoshan mountain probably sometime in the winter of 452–453. Little is known about this brief progress – they were gone for just six days – and we are never clearly told that madam Chang was even on this trip, though women did go on such tours, as we have already seen in the story of madam Dou's visit to Guoshan. Nevertheless, Li Ping has put forth an interesting theory about the trip, suggesting that it may have been organized by madam Chang for the purpose of taking her thirteen-year-old ward to pay honor to the tomb of madam Dou – the former wet nurse turned empress-dowager – who had died in the year of the boy's birth.[57] A month and a half after return of the court party from its journey to Guoshan, the so-called grand empress-dowager 太皇太后, madam Helian, passed from the world. No claim is made in *Wei shu* of unnatural cause.[58] In death, however, she was denied most of the honors given to an imperial lady, with no mention of bestowal of a posthumous title, or of inclusion in the sacrifices made at the imperial family's ancestral shrine.[59]

[54] *WS* 5, pp. 111–12; *BS* 2, p. 65.

[55] See for instance the struggle between Yuan Shoule 元壽樂 and Zhangsun Kehou 長孫渴侯, who immediately after Gaozong's enthronement were appointed key posts in the military and administration. Within a few weeks, "the two men were at each other's throats" 二人爭權 and were ordered to commit suicide: *WS* 5, p. 111; *BS* 2, p. 65.

[56] *WS* 5, p. 112; *BS* 2, p. 66; *ZZTJ* 127, p. 3986. This would be Du Yuanbao 杜元寶, a nephew of Taizong's empress madam Du 杜氏. For the biographies of him and his kinsmen, see *BS* 80, p. 2674; *WS* 83A, p. 1815.

[57] Li, "Bei Wei Wenchengdi," pp. 159–61.

[58] *WS* 5, p. 112; *BS* 2, p. 66. Our texts give no overt statement on how she died, and several scenarios have been proposed. Li Ping suggests ("Bei Wei Wenchengdi," pp. 138–42) that whether it was by natural causes or not, the authority of this powerless women had been used by others: by Zong Ai to eliminate Han and his supporters; and then by madam Chang to eliminate a clear rival to her position within the court, the still-living mother of her charge, madam Yujiulü. Song Qirui (*Bei Wei nüzhu lun*, p. 105) does not see in madam Chang such a calculating mind, and suggests that Helian was an active competitor in the struggles at court (if in the end a loser). Song (p. 111) also points out that Helian was never formally raised to grand empress-dowager 太皇太后 under Gaozong, and that this was a "blot on her record."

[59] *BS* 13, p. 494; *WS* 13, p. 327.

A few months after these events, we gain insight into the nature of the court in a fascinating story describing the unfolding of the young lord's sexuality. Shortly after enthronement (we are not told precisely when), madam Feng the Younger was established as a precious lady in Gaozong's court, no doubt on account of the sponsorship of madam Chang and/or madam Feng the Elder. Being but ten *sui* (nine in Western years), the girl cannot have been very attractive to Gaozong.[60] In the year 453, the thirteen-year-old stumbled upon something that excited him much more.

Back in 450, before Shizu's death, the imperial prince of Yongchang 永昌王 had followed him on campaign down south into Song territory. Seeing *en route* a pretty woman of the Li 李 family, the prince seized her and took her with him back north.[61] When the prince was transferred to Chang'an, madam Li went with him. Years later, this prince of Yongchang was involved in a purported rebellion, apparently with a relative of the late madam Yujiulü.[62] This was squashed, and in the seventh month of 453 the affine was executed, and the prince was commanded to take his own life. Madam Li was then sent from Chang'an north to Pingcheng; it would have taken her a month or more to make the trip, and Li Ping has estimated that she arrived there in about the ninth month of this same year.[63] Shortly after her arrival in the Tabgatch capital, around the time the teenaged emperor was reviewing the troops in the southern suburbs, he ascended the White Tower 白樓,[64] and looking down laid eyes on madam Li. "Is this woman lovely?", the naive young man asked his attendants. "She is," they replied. He thereupon descended from the tower to take her into a government storehouse, where he apparently made her pregnant.

Two or three months later, the swelling belly began to show, and the empress-dowager, it seems, was not pleased. Apparently waiting until the emperor was out of the capital, on a trip down into the Central

---

[60] *BS* 13, p. 495; *WS* 13, p. 326. Note the correction of the dating by Li, *Bei Wei Pingcheng shidai*, pp. 181–82.

[61] *WS* 4A, p. 104.

[62] *WS* 5, p. 112; *BS* 2, p. 66. For the biography of the prince of Yongchang, see *WS* 17, p. 415; *BS* 16, p. 603. The affine, Lü Ruowen 閭若文, does not have a biography.

[63] See this account in the biography of madam Li: *WS* 13, p. 331; *BS* 13, p. 498; and in the biography of an "adopted" brother, *WS* 89, p. 1918. And see also the efforts to reconstruct the chronology of these events by Li, *Bei Wei Pingcheng shidai*, pp. 177–81, on which my discussions in this section heavily draw. Li also insists that the child born of madam Li some 9 or 10 months later was indeed the child of the 13-year-old (p. 178, note 4).

[64] This was an earthen platform to the west of the main palace, in an area with shrines, astronomic observatories, etc. See *Nan Qi shu* 南齊書 (Zhonghua shuju edn.) 57, p. 986.

Plain to "observe the customs of the natives,"[65] madam Chang pressed the young woman for information. "I was blessed by the emperor," replied madam Li, "and thus became pregnant." Unconvinced, the empress-dowager sought to confirm the woman's claims with other sources of evidence. She was in the end persuaded, it seems, by the testimony of the storehouse's caretaker, who had showed his interest in the royal tryst by secretly writing down details of it on the wall.

Gaozong returned to the capital in the twelfth month of 453. Remaining there for six months, he then took his very pregnant lover up north into his dynasty's old stomping grounds, the Yinshan 陰山 mountains, for the traditional Särbi springtime practice of "putting off the frost"; perhaps he did this to remove her from the machinations of the empress-dowager.[66] There, in the seventh month of 454, she gave birth to the future Xianzu 顯祖 (Xianwendi 獻文帝; r. 466–471, d. 476). Upon this occasion she was honored with the title of precious lady, the third highest of the ranks within the harem.

If there was joy at this time, it did not last long. Two years later, in the first month of 456, madam Feng the Younger was elevated from precious lady to empress. Two days later, the imperial offspring was officially designated heir-apparent.[67] Although the histories do not locate this precisely in time (*Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 states that it was before formal establishment of the heir),[68] we are also told that at this time the empress-dowager came forth to order that the so-called "ancient practice" – death of the birth mother – must be adhered to. Here we see "invention of tradition" in full-fledged form, as madam Chang appropriated Taizu's *ad hoc* decision to murder his wife, converting it into an institution based on the fabricated tradition of long-standing practice. The killing four years before of Gaozong's mother, madam Yujiulü – by Helian, or Feng the Elder, or madam Chang – certainly falls within this category, but it was much more a rushed action in a turbulent time. No effort was made to legitimize it as continuation of dynastic practice. It is with madam Chang's insistence in 456 that "ancient practice" be

[65] *WS* 5, p. 113; *BS* 2, p. 66. Again, for a plausible reconstruction of the chronology, see Li, *Bei Wei Pingcheng shidai*, p. 179. For more information on a later trip he made down into the Yellow River Plain in 461, drawn from a recently recovered stele in the region of Lingqiu, Shanxi, see Shanxi sheng kaogu yanjiusuo 山西省考古研究所 and Lingqiu xian wenwuju 靈丘縣文物局, "Shanxi Lingqiu Bei Wei Wenchengdi 'Nanxun bei'" 山西靈丘北魏文成帝南巡碑, *WW* 1997.12, pp. 70–80; and Zhang Qingjie 張慶捷, "Bei Wei Wenchengdi 'Nanxun bei' beiwen kaozheng" 北魏文成帝南巡碑碑文考證, *KG* 1998.4, pp. 79–86.

[66] A suggestion of Li, *Bei Wei Pingcheng shidai*, p. 179.

[67] *ZZTJ* 128, p. 4025; *WS* 5, p. 115; *BS* 2, p. 68.

[68] Li Ping suggests this as well: *Bei Wei Pingcheng shidai*, p. 181.

followed that we see its true institutionalization, in hands very different from those that committed the first misdeed. Taizu had wished to forestall the rise of power in the women's quarters; madam Chang used this practice firmly to establish the power of one woman in particular, to wit, herself. The death of madam Li is especially heart-rending. For some reason, the empress-dowager had commanded that she write to all her brothers in the south. In her final hours, she said their names out loud, convulsing in sorrow with each one.[69] And then she died. We are not told how exactly she took her own life.

The death of madam Li opened a new chapter of Wei history. With the establishment as empress of madam Feng came the solidification of the power of the northeasterners who two decades before had come to Pingcheng as spoils of war. Men such as the new empress' brother, Feng Xi 馮熙, and other connections (discussed below), certainly played important roles in the regime and on the field of battle. But the major military conquests had been made; within this increasingly centralized and institutionalized and mannered state, power lay more and more in the hands of women. And although Shizu's madam Feng the Elder may have been this group's original prime mover, it seems that the originally more lowly born madam Chang had truly become the dominant figure in the court.

Her connections within the palace, which must have been extensive, are seen especially in the figure of the eunuch Lin Jinlü 林金閭. He was, we are told, "favored by empress-dowager Chang; in office he rose to minister, and duke of Pingliang 平涼公."[70] He is also recorded sixth on a stele in the town of Lingqiu 靈丘 with a long list of names of those who accompanied Gaozong on a progress into the Central Plain in 461.[71] Another sign of his power is that when later indicted for his participation in the power struggle that followed the death of Gaozong in 465, the very prominent official assigned the case washed his hands of the matter, sending the eunuch out to take up the plum position of inspector of the province of Dingzhou 定州 (with its seat at modern Dingxian 定縣).[72] Although he subsequently was killed (by his erstwhile ally Yi Hun 乙渾), a niece later became a wife of Gaozu.

---

[69] She then passed the letters to an adventurer of the same surname, Li Hongzhi 李洪之, who had become like an adopted brother; see *WS* 89, pp. 1918–20; *BS* 87, pp. 2895–97. Her brothers later came north to Pingcheng, where Li Hongzhi told them her tale. Li did well in Pingcheng – being referred to as "Xianzu's uncle" – but under Gaozu was commanded to commit suicide for his corruption. See a translation of this in Golovachev, "Matricide," p. 20.

[70] *WS* 13, p. 332.

[71] Shanxi sheng kaogu yanjiusuo and Lingqiu xian wenwuju, "Nanxun bei," p. 72.

[72] Li, *Bei Wei Pingcheng shidai*, p. 188; and see Song, *Bei Wei nüzhu lun*, p. 128.

The careers of madam Chang's kinsmen even more impressively show the former nursemaid's power. Posthumously invested as a prince, her father was reburied in Liaoxi 遼西, with a stele and a shrine, and one hundred households assigned to tend the grave.[73] Madam Chang's half-brother, Chang Ying 常英, was over time raised to be prince of Liaoxi 遼西公 and in 457 given the prestigious offices of grand preceptor 太師, arbiter of the affairs of the Secretariat 評尙書事 , and judge of the Inner Court 內都大官.[74] High offices and titles were also given to various of her sisters, brothers, and cousins.

Something of the empress-dowager's use of and feelings about family are conveyed in anecdotes recorded in *Wei shu*. At one point, her mother, madam Song 宋氏, was complaining that during the travails in Manchuria attending the fall of the Yan regime she had been better attended to by a son-in-law, Wang Du 王睹, than by her step-son, Chang Ying, who was born of the primary wife. "Why not make Du a prince," asked mother, "and dismiss Ying?"[75] To this the empress-dowager replied,

> "Ying is my eldest brother, and the leader of our household. If little things haven't gone right in the family, what's the use in fussing about it? Although Du exhausts himself, he is after all of another family.[76] Why raise him above Ying? It suffices to repay him with [the title of inspector of] his own province, and duke of a commandery."

The empress-dowager, who would die later in this same year, perhaps hoped that mother would be satisfied with the title she had been give the year before, dowager-consort of the prince of Liaoxi.

This interest in family is also seen in madam Chang's pursuit of marriage alliances, one of which seems to confirm ties with the Feng family. Continuing the inter-generational linkage of the Feng with the imperial family, a daughter of Wenming's brother, Feng Xi, was married to Gaozu. Her mother, we are told (with no explicit reference to empress-dowager Chang), was a woman of the Chang clan, who "originally of humble circumstances, had found favor with [Feng] Xi."[77] By this time, of course, madam Chang and her family were doing quite well. Still, the point of this statement could be a reminder that madam Chang had originally been a servant for the Feng clan, a reflection of aristocratic hauteur toward *nouveau riche* allies.[78]

---

[73] See discussion of this in the biography of Chang Ying in the affine sections of the histories: *BS* 80, pp. 2675–76; *WS* 83A, pp. 1817–18.

[74] For this last title, see Yan, *Bei Wei qianqi zhidu*, pp. 136–40.

[75] *BS* 80, pp. 2675–76; *WS* 83A, pp. 1817–18.

[76] I thank an anonymous reviewer of this article for suggestions that improved the translation of this passage.

[77] *BS* 13, p. 499; *WS* 13, p. 332.

With deep ties with the eunuch community, precipitous promotion of kinsfolk to high office and noble rank, and apparent use of marriage politics, madam Chang was also, as Li Ping has so well put it, "extending her antennae out into the outer court."[79] The most notable figure with whom she built these alliances is a shadowy but important figure, mentioned above, by the name of Yi Hun, who after the death of Gaozong in 465 (and long after the death of the empress-dowager) would attempt to seize power. He was in the end eliminated by madam Feng the Younger.[80]

The full form of the surname Yi is Yifu 乙弗, and Yi Hun is usually thought to be from a western branch of the Särbi bearing that name, who had originally resided in the Qinghai 青海 region. Li Ping has, however, pointed out that another group, from Koguryó 高句麗, also used Yifu to transcribe their name into Chinese, and that a part of this population had in earlier times moved into the northeastern Yan territories.[81] If that is the case, it might suggest previous connections of the Yifu, or Yi, with the Feng and the Chang, before all of these groups in the northeast were transported, which continued to develop within the Pingcheng court.

Another basis for suggesting a link between madam Chang and Yi Hun is Lin Jinlü; Lin, explicitly described as a favorite of the empress-dowager, was initially in 465 a close ally of Yi Hun in the struggles that broke out with Gaozong's death. Furthermore, the rise of Yi Hun was very precipitous. Unlike Lu Li, who referred to him as a "base servant of the crown 奸臣,"[82] and other prestigious figures of aristocratic background, Yi Hun does not appear in any historical source before 460, suggesting that he too became a favorite of a powerful individual, and was quickly drawn by that patron up the ranks.[83]

---

[78] See the discussion of this in Song, *Bei Wei nüzhu lun*, p. 130; and her transcription of a funerary stele for a Chang 常 girl, with clear reference of her relationship with madam Chang, who had married a Wei prince (citing Zhao Chao 趙超, *Han Wei Nanbei chao muzhi huibian* 漢魏南北朝墓誌彙編 [electronic version], p. 98).

[79] Li, *Bei Wei Pingcheng shidai*, p. 176.

[80] Yi Hun's connections with madam Chang are discussed in Li, *Bei Wei Pingcheng shidai*, pp. 189–93; Song, *Bei Wei nüzhu lun*, p. 129.

[81] Li, *Bei Wei Pingcheng shidai*, pp. 191–92. Though this is speculation, one compelling argument made in this connection is that there is no discernable relationship between Yi Hun, and a fellow named Yi Huan, who clearly was of Qinghai origin.

[82] See the comment made to Lu Li by his attendants during the power struggle against Yi Hun in 465, *WS* 40, p. 908; *BS* 28, p. 1015. Cited by Li, *Bei Wei Pingcheng shidai*, p. 191. On the next two pages, Li goes on to cite circumstantial evidence of Yi's commoner heritage.

One final point to make regarding Yi Hun is that although madam Feng the Younger would thrive for another twenty-five years after the death of her original patron, madam Chang's family did not. Following the fall of Yi Hun in 466 there was a clear decline in their standing: execution of one kinsman for corruption charges; exile of her half-brother Chang Ying to Dunhuang 敦煌 on similar charges. Although Chang Ying was recalled to office in 476, upon the death of Xianzu and the rise of Wenming to full power, the Changs would never figure so prominently again. This slide after his elimination would again suggest some sort of alliance with Yi Hun.[84]

Despite the family's later decline, during her life madam Chang rose to a powerful position within the Wei court. Her death, in 460, when she was perhaps around forty, was marked by great honors, in stark contrast with madam Helian seven years before.[85] Official mourning was ordered for three days, and to her was assigned the posthumous title of Zhao 昭, the "bright one." She was buried, as was her will, on Crying Chicken Hill 鳴雞山 in Guangning 廣寧 (northwest of modern Huailai 懷來, Hebei 河北 province). And following the precedents laid down two decades before for madam Dou, a stele was set up to mark the site, along with a special shrine dedicated to her alone. Two hundred families were assigned to tend the site.

CONCLUSION

In the events surrounding the rise to power of the nursemaid madam Chang appear some of the most basic of human instincts and inclinations, unfolding across a very particular historical and cultural tableau. Most basically, we see the depth and complexity of the relationship between nurturer, madam Chang, and the nurtured, the boy who would become the emperor Gaozong. This relationship changed over time, as nurturer grew into matriarch, and as the lust of the budding youth came to threaten the matriarch's power. Her response – the killing of madam Li – involved her invention of a tradition, in this case guaranteeing a woman's power by using as precedent a man's earlier *ad hoc* decision to kill his wife.

---

[83] See the presence of Yi Hun in the "Nanxun bei" stele, Shanxi sheng kaogu yanjiusuo and Lingqiu xian wenwuju, "Nanxun bei," p. 72, under the transcription of "一弗步". Also, note that the dating of 462 for Yi Hun's entitlement as prince of Taiyuan and general-in-chief of chariots and cavalry is incorrect

[84] Li, *Bei Wei Pingcheng shidai*, pp. 190–91. Golovachev ("Matricide," p. 29) is wrong here in his stating the Chang family had full control of the court, and particularly in saying that their role in the government ended with madam Chang's death.

[85] *BS* 13, p. 495; *WS* 13, pp. 327–28.

Here we see also a stark distinction between the power of father and mother: when the father Taizu had decided, some fifty years before, to kill his boys' mothers, the future Taizong fled, while the younger son Shao killed Taizu to protect his mother. But whatever feelings Gaozong experienced as the lovely lady he had spotted from the White Tower died, he neither killed nor fled; the nursling yielded to his nurse. And despite the wish to view nurture as originating only in unselfish love, clearly underlying all these actions was madam Chang's itch for power, for the ability to regulate for the sake of herself and her family the realm into which she had been inserted as punishment for a crime.

Pursuing the theme of adaptability, these actions of madam Chang, and of the Fengs, Elder and Younger, took place within a context of increasing centralization and of increasing institutionalization. At the same time, however, in the decades following Shizu there was a vacuum at the center, uncertainty as to who would control the boy who sat on the throne. The men were regularly away, on campaigns, on hunts, or as we are regularly informed in our texts, deep into their cups. Drawing on these possibilities, with networks of relationships bypassing formal institutions, a series of women – physically occupying the center and emotionally dominating the young symbol of power – organized and for a time at least were able to exert significant control over the court and the empire.[86] This is, of course, according to Confucian tradition, not the proper way to run a state. But in a volatile and creative age, the teachings of the Master were not taken terribly seriously, at least not by those who ran the state.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BS	*Bei shi* 北史
WS	*Wei shu* 魏書
ZZTJ	*Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑

[86] I disagree with the suggestion by Golovachev, "Matricide," pp. 32–33, that a "system" had emerged here – what we see over several generations is response to the vacuum and seizure of power.