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Cover illustration A memorial from the chief eunuch Bian Dekui — “The Legal and Social Status of Theatrical Performers in Beijing During the Qing” by Ye Xiaoqing, see p.81.

THE ORIGINS OF HAN-DYNASTY CONSORT KIN POWER

史 Bret Hinsch

The extraordinary position of imperial consort kin (*waigi* 外戚) stands out as one of the most distinctive features of Han 漢 dynasty government. Although consort kin also enjoyed powers and privileges in other eras of Chinese history, during the Han their position was particularly high and their influence strongly felt over long periods.¹ We need to explain how consort kin obtained their impressive power in order to appreciate the mechanics of early imperial government.

Han-dynasty observers themselves openly acknowledged that consort kin privilege was as an important characteristic of their system. Most notably, Ban Gu 班固 stressed that consort relatives were exceptionally important members of the political élite. However, Ban did not consider this system unique to the Han. He believed that consort kin power dated far back to high antiquity. Ban asserted that consort kin had already attained an important place in government as long ago as the Xia 夏 and Shang 商 dynasties. In his view Han practices were simply following very ancient precedents.²

Ban Gu was correct to point out that the Han did not invent consort kin privilege. However, marital and maternal relatives of the Han ruling house were indisputably far more important than under the Zhou 周 system. As Michael Loewe sums up the situation in the *Cambridge History of China*, “For very often the chief functionaries of government were the grandfathers, fathers, or brothers of an imperial consort; their political fortunes and the fate of their policies were at times closely related to the degree of favor enjoyed by their near kin in the palace.”³ The kinsmen of empresses dowager, empresses, and even favored consorts of lesser rank routinely occupied the highest civil and military offices, enjoyed enormous wealth and prestige, and were ennobled as kings and marquises. Because so many Han emperors were young or weak, their consort kin were China’s true rulers for much of the

¹ For example, empresses and imperial in-laws were also extremely powerful under the Wei 魏 dynasty, to the extent that some said that China during the Wei was a “female country” (*nüguo* 女國). Wei Shou, ed., *Weishu* 魏書 [Records of Wei] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1974), 1:10, 13:322. However, the Wei was short and the Han extremely long. And in general, most dynasties after the Han were much better than the Wei at controlling the influence of empresses and consort kin.

² Ban Gu, *Hanshu* [Records of Han] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1962), 97A: 3933.

³ Michael Loewe, “The Former Han dynasty,” *The Cambridge history of China*, vol.1, *The Ch'in and Han empires 221 BC–AD 220*, ed. Denis Twitchett and Michael Loewe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p.104.

⁴ Mark Elvin, "Female virtue and the state in China," *Past and Present* 104 (1984): 111–52; Lisa Ann Raphals, *Sharing the light: representations of women and virtue in early China* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1998); Bret Hinsch, *Women in early imperial China* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), pp.121–8.

dynasty. Time and again, imperial in-laws parlayed their kinship ties with the ruling Liu 劉 line into immense power and wealth.

Expressions of consort kin power date to the beginning of the Han dynasty. Immediately after the death of the dynastic founder Han Gaozu 漢高祖, Empress Lü 呂 and her kinsmen pushed aside the weak Emperor Huidi 惠帝 and blatantly seized control of the state. For a time it seemed as if the Lü clique might even overthrow the house of Liu and usurp the throne. Only a bloody massacre returned control of the government to the Liu line.

This traumatic event so early in the dynasty's history set an important precedent. Under subsequent emperors, generation after generation of consort kin copied the Lü. A pattern had been established. Emboldened by customary privileges, a set of Liu in-laws would dominate the state and arrogantly flaunt their power and wealth until jealous rivals finally gathered sufficient strength to sweep them aside. Nor was consort kin power confined to times when a ruler's weakness opened up a power vacuum at the top of government. Consort kin sometimes even enjoyed remarkable privileges under relatively strong emperors. Moreover, the power of consort kin endured for the entire length of the dynasty, from the Lü who helped found it, to the Wang 王 who usurped it halfway through, to the Cao 曹 who announced its conclusion.

Han political customs cry out for explanation. Recently there has been an increasing amount of research into the powers of Chinese empresses and the ways elite women manipulated symbols of virtue to gain power.⁴ But the riches of feminist research should not blind us to the importance of the male relatives of the empresses, many of whom exercised considerable power in their own right. It is true that some empresses dowager held considerable power. However, this does not mean that all male consort kin depended entirely on the empresses for their power and legitimacy, as some scholarship has implied. Sometimes the empresses themselves were quite powerful and their kinsmen became high officials. But in other cases, strong male consort kin made an empress their pawn. In other times, a strong empress was matched with relatively weak kinsmen. The precise interplay of power between empresses dowager and their natal kin has yet to be fully explained.

Power and Kinship

There has been no shortage of research into Han-dynasty consort kin. This was already a major topic of historical and political investigation in antiquity. Ban Gu devoted two long chapters in his authoritative history of the Western Han 西漢 to the topic and subsequent scholars have built upon his research. Thanks to the cumulative efforts of so many generations of historians, we are extremely familiar with the basic facts of Han-dynasty consort kin rule. However, the reason why people of that era thought that consort kin were entitled to such extraordinary power remains somewhat unclear.

Before we try to understand the causes of consort kin power, we must first ask a basic question: exactly who were they? The privileged relationship between these men and the emperor was obviously the source of their power, rank, and wealth.⁵ But what was the precise nature of this bond? Most historians characterize the consort kin very broadly as a mix of empresses, empresses dowager, and their assorted male relatives. But on close inspection we find that the bonds between important male consort kin and the Han emperors were actually quite limited. Specifically, key male consort kin were either the fathers-in-law or maternal uncles of the emperors, or the descendants of these men.

As will be explained later, the exact nature of the kinship tie between the Han emperors and their influential male consort kin is extremely significant, and accounts for the origins and dynamics of this system. Before going on to analyze these bonds, I will first demonstrate that Han “consort kin” (*waiqi*) referred specifically to imperial fathers-in-laws, maternal uncles, and their descendants. Once this fact is established, we can begin to explore why the Han elite considered these particular kinship bonds so important and how they became so powerful in early imperial government.

In the popular imagination, it was the empresses dowager who dominated the state in early imperial China. This view has been popularized by a misogynistic historiographic convention, propagated by Sima Qian 司馬遷, Liu Xiang 劉向, and many others, that encouraged historians to blame imperial consorts for a dynasty's major problems.⁶ This viewpoint increased the visibility of imperial ladies, especially when critics of the government were looking for an easy target. But in many cases an empress was merely an accomplice or even just a passive symbolic tool of her male natal kin. Although some Han empresses dowager dominated the state more or less by themselves, in other cases their male relatives made the major policy decisions.

We do not have to see these men merely as fathers or brothers of an empress. These male consort relations held an important kinship bond with the ruler in their own right. They were the fathers-in-law or maternal uncles of an emperor, or the descendants of these men. Consort kin power came from the privileged kinship tie between male consort kin and emperor as well as the influence of empresses dowager. In other words, most consort kin were not just the creatures of the empresses; many could claim high office in their own right.

The custom of consort kin privilege began with the brothers of Empress Lü at the start of the Western Han dynasty. Although extremely important as the dynasty's first precedent for consort kin rule, this case was also unusual due to the extraordinary power of Empress Lü herself. Initially she enfeoffed her two older brothers Lü Ze 呂澤 and Lü Shizhi 呂釋之 as marquises. Compared with the clan's subsequent power, these initial titles seem relatively humble. One might argue that the strong and charismatic dynastic founder Han Gaozu wisely kept their ambitions in check. But alternatively, one could point out that the kinship bond between these two men and Han Gaozu was fairly

⁵ The degree of relationship between the emperor and his subjects was particularly important in determining the social position, wealth, and power of the Han-dynasty elite. The importance of one's relationship with the emperor was a novel aspect of the new imperial system. Xidao Dingsheng (Nishijima Sadao 西島定生), *Baibua Qin Han shi*, [Vernacular history of Qin and Han], trans. Huang Yaoneng (Taipei: Sanmin Shuju, 1998), p.64.

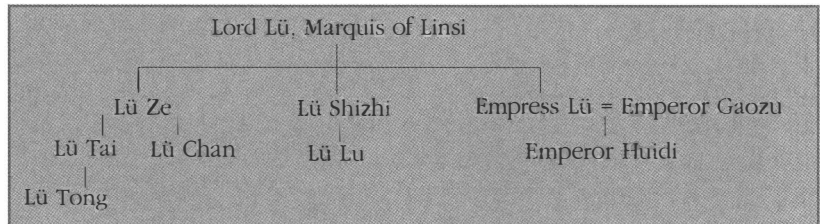
⁶ Hinsch, *Women in early imperial China*, pp.107–10.

⁷ In all I have counted at least seven marquises and five kings among these descendents of the original two marquises, Huidi's maternal uncles. Loewe, "The Former Han dynasty," p.137, counts only four Lü kings and six marquises. He seems to have missed some.

trivial. Both were merely the emperor's brothers-in-law, a fairly unimportant relationship in early Chinese kinship.

These two men had a very different kinship tie to Gaozu's successor. They were Emperor Huidi's maternal uncles (Diagram 1). As long as the Lü men were no more than the emperor's brothers-in-law, their tie to the ruling line was minor and their power limited. But as soon as they became maternal uncles of the new ruler, their fortunes enjoyed a rapid ascent. Lü Ze's two sons Lü Tai 呂台 and Lü Chan 呂產 each later achieved prominence under Huidi. Both were made generals and enfeoffed as kings, breaking Gaozu's prudent rule that only members of the Liu line should be kings. Lü Chan became chancellor of state (*xiangguo* 相國), the head of the civil service. Lü Shizhi's son Lü Lu 呂祿 also rose to prominence after the death of Gaozu, becoming general of the army (*shangjiangjun* 上將軍). Between them, these three sons of Huidi's mother's brothers held the highest aristocratic titles and dominated both the civil and military arms of government, establishing the preferred style of rule by Han-dynasty consort kin. They passed their privileges down to their children, the grandchildren of Huidi's maternal uncles. Eventually many of the Lüs used their kinship links with Huidi to gain power, wealth, and title.⁷

Diagram 1



The rise of the Lü marked the beginning of consort kin power during the Han dynasty. Significantly, this practice did not start immediately under Gaozu. Some would argue that their rise was due entirely to the extraordinary power of Empress Lü. Sima Qian was ideologically predisposed to blame a powerful woman for a dynasty's ills, and so emphasized the empress dowager's role in bringing the Lü to power. But was she the only reason why the Lü men could claim the highest office?

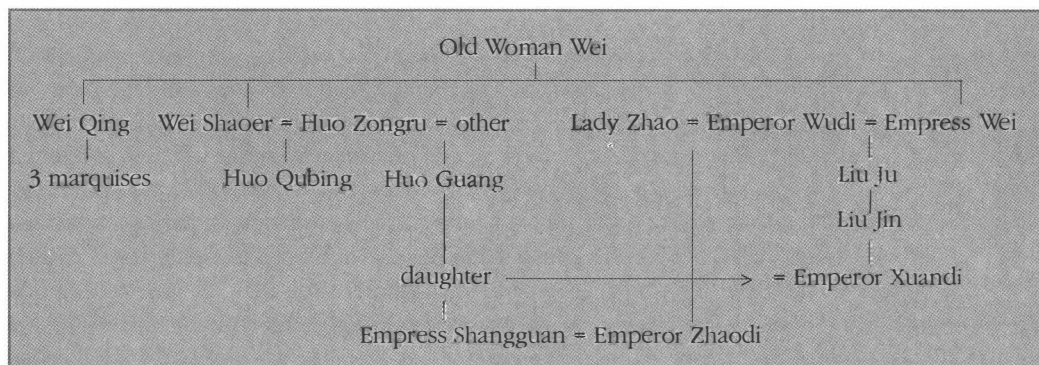
We could also argue that more than just Empress Lü's position changed with the death of Gaozu; the relationship of her brothers to the reigning emperor changed as well. As long as the Lü men were no more than brothers-in-law of the emperor, their status was held in check. After Gaozu's death in 195 BC, the kinship tie between the Lü men and the reigning ruler altered. They went from being mere imperial brothers-in-law of Gaozu to maternal uncles of the new emperor Huidi. When they assumed this new privileged kinship tie to the ruler, their rise began. After Huidi's death, Empress Dowager Lü adopted the next child ruler, making these men maternal uncles of the new titular Liu monarch as well.

In the end we are faced with two alternate explanations for the Lü men's power: the empress dowager's influence and their own kinship tie with the emperor. Of course these two explanations are not mutually exclusive. Empress Dowager Lü was unquestionably a formidable force in her own right. She was the strongest of the many Han dynasty empresses dowager. But the aura of her power should not blind us to the kinship ties with the emperor that her clansmen enjoyed. This kinship bond seems to have legitimized their lofty powers and eased the way for the Lü men to assume high office.

When we look at subsequent episodes of consort kin rule, we are usually faced with far less forceful empresses dowager. In these instances, the personality of the empress dowager does not seem sufficient to explain the power of her kinsmen. Observing later consort kin, it seems clear that an empress dowager's closest male kin, who were either maternal uncles of the emperor or their descendants, could legitimately claim the highest civil and military offices by virtue of their own kinship ties with the ruler. If the power of the empress dowager was the only reason for her kinsmen's high status, why did consort kin occupy high office under less forceful empresses dowager? It seems clear that something else about these men also accounts for their success. The kinship ties between consort kinsmen and the ruling monarch were an extremely important factor in their rise to power.

After the extermination of the Lü clan, consort kin were relatively weak until the reign of Emperor Wudi 武帝. For example the brilliant general Wei Qing 衛青, brother of Wudi's Empress Wei 衛, was maternal uncle to Wudi's original heir apparent (Diagram 2). But both Empress Wei and her son and heir apparent Liu Ju 劉據 committed suicide in the civil war of 91 BC, thwarting Wei Qing's rise to absolute supremacy.

Diagram 2



The next great consort clan was also allied to Wudi's Empress Wei. The empress' nephew (sister's son) was Huo Qubing 霍去病, a distinguished general who died in 116 BC. Huo Qubing's early death cleared the way for his half-brother Huo Guang 霍光, who was Huo Qubing's sibling by

the same father but a different mother. Huo Guang was half-brother to the maternal uncle of the grandfather of Emperor Han Xuandi 漢宣帝. Although not a blood relation of the emperor, through his half-brother Huo Guang seems to have been considered comparable to a great maternal uncle of the emperor. And Huo Guang was also the maternal grandfather of the consort of Han Zhaodi 漢昭帝. This made him Zhaodi's grandfather-in-law. Put more simply, Huo Guang was both maternal uncle and father-in-law to the ancestors of two emperors. On the strength of these two key kinship ties, Huo Guang began his rise.

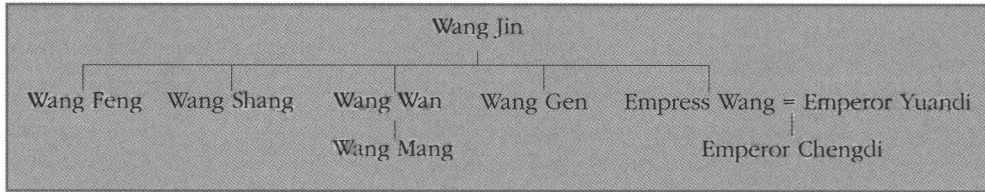
The case of Huo Guang highlights the fact that male consort kin were powerful in their own right and not just dependants of an empress or empress dowager. Their kinship ties to the emperors gave them a claim on high office. In this instance, Huo Guang's ascent was definitely achieved without reliance on an empress dowager. Empress Wei had died long before. So Huo Guang came to dominate government because of his own kinship ties with two emperors, as the maternal uncle and father-in-law of their ancestors.

When Huo Guang gained control over the government, he strengthened his ties to the ruling house by marrying his daughter to Emperor Xuandi. In doing so he became the monarch's father-in-law. So at this point Huo Guang was father-in-law or maternal uncle to the Liu emperors three times over. The nature of Huo Guang's claim to power seems quite clear. His position as imperial father-in-law and maternal uncle justified his power and privilege.

The Wangs were the final great consort clan of the Western Han (Diagram 3). Empress Wang 王 was consort of Emperor Yuandi 元帝. Following Yuandi's death, his son by Empress Wang came to the throne as Emperor Chengdi 成帝. At this point the rise of the Wangs began in earnest. Empress Wang's father, the father-in-law of Yuandi, was Wang Jin 王禁. His eight sons were all Chengdi's maternal uncles. They used this kinship tie to declare a series of regencies over Chengdi, had themselves enfeoffed as marquises, and obtained high office. At first Wang Feng 王鳳 served as regent. Next came his brother Wang Shang 王商. Afterwards his brother Wang Gen 王根 took his turn. Yuandi's final regent was Wang Jin's grandson the infamous Wang Mang 王莽. Each of these powerful men was either the maternal uncle or son of a maternal uncle of the emperor whose regency they oversaw. By means of this kinship tie, Wang Mang eventually gained sufficient strength to abolish the Western Han dynasty in AD 9 and reign as emperor in his own right.

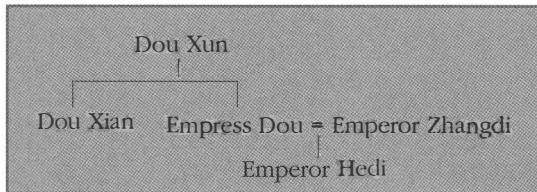
After the fall of the Wangs and restoration of the dynasty, the first emperors of the revived Eastern Han 東漢 dynasty kept a strong grip on power, thwarting consort kin ambitions. Eventually, though, the rise of powerful clans and the custom of taking empresses from the most important families further increased the power of consort kin. The imperial kinship connection of these men supplemented their own rural support base to make consort kinsmen an extremely formidable force in Eastern Han politics.

Diagram 3



Although imperial fathers-in-law jockeyed for privilege, no consort clan attained outright dominance until the child Emperor Hedi 和帝 was enthroned in AD 88. The young ruler's mother was Empress Dou 竇, consort of the deceased Emperor Zhangdi 章帝 (Diagram 4). This tie made the new empress dowager's eldest brother Dou Xian 竇憲 maternal uncle to the child emperor. Dou Xian accordingly assumed leadership over the government. Dou Xian's supremacy continued until Emperor Hedi reached his majority and had his oppressive maternal uncle exterminated.

Diagram 4



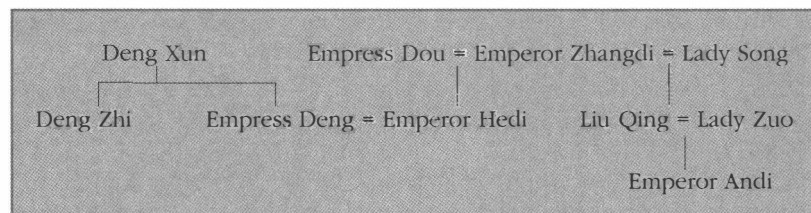
Following the death of Hedi in AD 106, his childless consort Empress Dowager Deng 鄧 controlled the government. Initially she chose an infant by one of Hedi's other consorts to be emperor. This child soon died, however, and Deng had to select another of one of Zhangdi's descendents to rule. The new child emperor was Andi 安帝 (Diagram 5). An interesting characteristic of Empress Dowager Deng's rule was the relative strength of this empress dowager in regard to her brothers. Usually an empress dowager's brothers stood in the foreground during a regency, but this time the empress dowager herself seems to have been in control. As Hans Bielenstein puts it, "she made use of her brothers but did not depend on them"⁸

When we look at the type of kinship ties between Empress Dowager Deng's brothers and the emperor, their relative weakness makes sense. Previously, powerful male consort relatives were either father-in-law or maternal uncle of an emperor, or their descendents. But Empress Dowager Deng's eldest brother Deng Zhi 鄧騭 was only distantly related to Emperor Andi. He was the emperor's father's half-brother's wife's brother. In other words, he was Andi's half-uncle's brother-in-law. This remote kinship tie was far

⁸ Hans Bielenstein, "Wang Mang, the restoration of the Han dynasty, and Later Han," *The Cambridge history of China*, vol. 1, *The Ch'in and Han empires, 221 BC-AD 220*, ed. Denis Twitchett and Michael Loewe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 283.

too tenuous to assert any claim on power. Deng Zhi was neither an imperial maternal uncle nor an imperial father-in-law nor the descendent of one. So even though Empress Dowager Deng's brothers managed to gain some power via their sister, their privileges were modest compared to previous consort kin. All power was consolidated in the person of Empress Dowager Deng herself, who ruled solely due to her status as empress dowager.

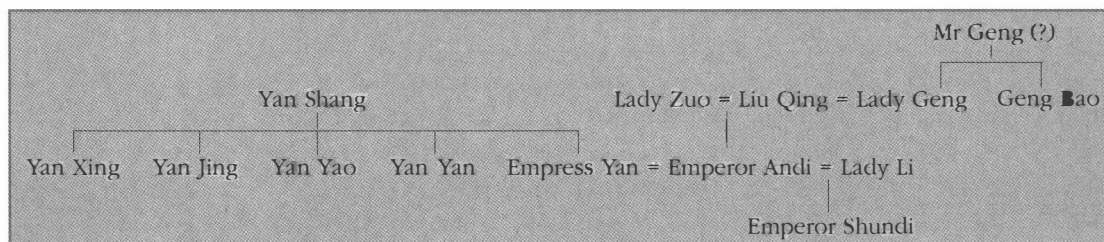
Diagram 5



The intriguing case of the Deng clan presents a useful counterpoint to the Lü and demonstrates the relative importance of the empress dowager's own power and her clansmen's kinship ties to the emperors. Empress Lü was a strong force in government, and her kinsmen held high office. Empress Deng was also very powerful personally, but her kinsmen were relatively unimportant. The difference between the Lü and Deng men was their very different kinship ties to the imperial line. When comparing these two cases, it seems clear that only a maternal uncle or father-in-law of an emperor had a clear claim on power. In the absence of a strong personal kinship tie to an emperor, an empress' kinsmen could not dominate the government in their own right. They had to content themselves with whatever privileges their well-positioned female relative could extract on their behalf.

Andi's consort was Empress Yan 閼. As was now customary, the sons of Andi's father-in-law soon assumed prominence in government (Diagram 6). To balance pressure from these in-laws, Andi appointed Geng Bao 耿寶 as regent. Geng was the brother of Andi's father's principle wife. In other words, he was equivalent to a maternal uncle of the emperor, a degree of relation called *yuanjiu* 元舅. So when threatened by domination by descen-

Diagram 6

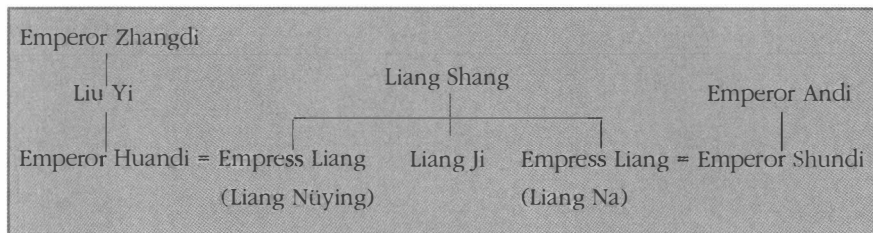


dents of his father-in-law, Andi countered by promoting a maternal uncle. The emperor's attempts to counterbalance relatives of his father-in-law with a maternal uncle show these two kinship bonds as both politically important and analogous.

The story of the Yan illuminates how consort kin power depended on direct kinship ties with the ruling line. When Andi died childless by Empress Yan, she chose the son of another consort to be the new monarch. Emperor Shundi 順帝 ascended the throne in AD 126. However, the Yan men lacked a strong kinship link with the new emperor. Henceforth their power came solely from their relationship with the empress dowager, not from any kinship bond with the reigning emperor. This being the case, the Yan hold on power quickly loosened and their enemies destroyed them. The Yan clique was so visibly weak compared to other consort clans because they lacked a direct kinship link to the new ruler. Because the Yan men were neither father-in-law nor maternal uncle to the new ruler, they were considered illegitimate members of the government and their opponents could easily sweep them aside.

Next the Liang 梁 rose to power during Emperor Shundi's reign (Diagram 7). The emperor's consort was Empress Liang (Liang Na 梁嬪). The emperor appointed his father-in-law Liang Shang 梁商 regent in AD 135. After Liang Shang's death six years later, his son (son of an imperial father-in-law) Liang Ji 梁冀 became regent. The Liang clan continued to dominate Shundi for the remainder of his reign. They also kept a hold on power over his two successors: a short-lived child ruler and Emperor Zhidi 質帝.

Diagram 7

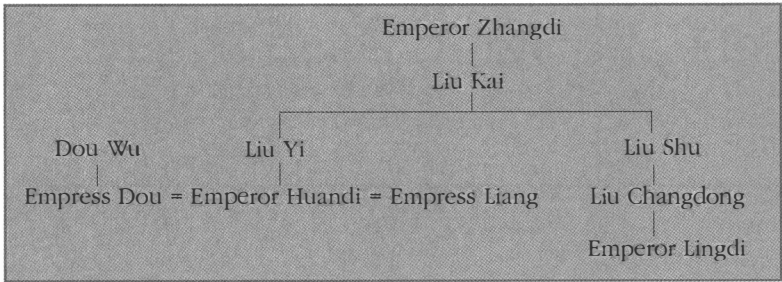


The next emperor was Han Huandi 漢桓帝. Liang Ji arranged for the ruler to marry Liang Nüying 梁女瑩, sister of Empress Dowager Liang Na and himself. This marriage reaffirmed a key kinship bond between Liang and Liu, and so Liang Ji extended his regency. But after the death of Huandi's consort, his direct link with the Liu line was broken. At this point the emperor arranged to have Liang Ji and his kin toppled.

After Emperor Huandi died without male issue, his consort Empress Dou was free to choose a successor to the throne. Empress Dou chose Huandi's paternal uncle's grandson, a boy known to history as Emperor Lingdi 靈帝 (Diagram 8). She then appointed as regent her father Dou Wu 竇武, Huandi's

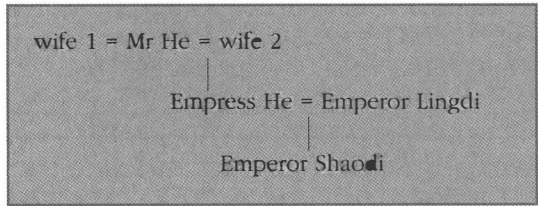
father-in-law. Despite this link, the kinship tie between the Dou and the current emperor was insufficient to justify their continued domination of government. Although Dou Wu was father-in-law of the previous emperor, he lacked any significant kinship tie to Lingdi. Accordingly, the Dou claim to power became very tenuous. These feelings of insecurity drove Dou Wu to take the unusual step of building an alliance with the officialdom, who were usually at odds with consort kin. But as the Dou lacked a significant kinship link to the new ruler, even this coalition could not keep them in power. The eunuchs recognized Dou Wu's weak claim to power and exterminated the Dou clan as soon as they threatened eunuch interests. This event ushered in a long period of catastrophic eunuch rule.

Diagram 8



After Lingdi's death, his empress chose Lingdi's son to ascend the throne as Emperor Shaodi 少帝 (Diagram 9). Empress Dowager He's 何 half-brother He Jin 何進, Shaodi's maternal uncle, now dominated the government. However, He Jin had to contend with the emboldened eunuchs. When the He clique secretly plotted to massacre their eunuch foes, rumors of the plan leaked out and the eunuchs struck first. He Jin and his relations were killed.

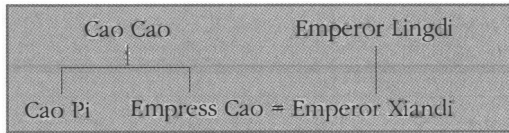
Diagram 9



In the final years of the dynasty, power shifted away from the court and into the hands of several warlords. Eventually Cao Cao 曹操 married his

daughter to the last ruler, Emperor Xiandi 漢獻帝 (Diagram 10). By becoming father-in-law to the emperor, Cao Cao paved the way for complete usurpation of the Han dynasty. His role as father-in-law gave him sufficient authority over the imperial house to arrange for its destruction. The father-in-law of the last emperor used this role to declare an end to the dynasty.

Diagram 10



I have gone through this bare-boned recitation of Han-dynasty consort kin history for a specific reason—to highlight the precise kinship links between the rulers and their consort kinsmen. These should now be very clear. When we look closely at exactly what sort of kinship ties existed between the emperors and their so-called “consort kin” (*waiqi*), we realize that the consort kin were not a random assortment of relatives of the empresses dowager. The kinship link between a successful consort kinsman and an emperor was quite specific. He was either an emperor’s maternal uncle or father-in-law, or the descendent of one of these two kinds of imperial relatives.

There is a good reason why two apparently different kinship positions carried similar authority. Although maternal uncle and father-in-law are entirely different concepts in English, ancient Chinese classified them as analogous degrees of kinship. Not only were father-in-law and maternal uncle considered to be the same degree of kinship, but both were called by the same name: *jiu* 舅. So consort kin power was rooted in the privileged bond between the emperors and their *jiu*. When an empress dowager’s male relatives were not linked to the reigning emperor as *jiu* or descendants of *jiu*, the consort clan was extremely weak. In such situations an empress dowager might still control the government on her own authority, as was the case with Empress Dowagers Yan and Deng. However, the male relations of such women had limited pretensions to power.

In most cases, the force behind consort clan power was not just the empresses dowager, but also the important kinship link between the emperors and their *jiu* (fathers-in-law and maternal uncles). Examining consort kin from the standpoint of the kinship ties between emperor and *jiu*, rather than just between these men and the empresses, gives us a fresh perspective on Han politics. The emperors’ *jiu* also happened to be related to an empress or empress dowager, but an independent claim to power stemmed from their kinship link to the emperors. In other words, the emperor’s *jiu* were not just handed power by the empresses dowager. They could claim it on their own.

Zhou-Dynasty Kinship

⁹ Liu Tseng-kui, *Handai bunyin zhidu* [The Han-dynasty marriage system] (Taipei: Huashi Chubanshe, 1980), pp.148–9.

¹⁰ Mou Jun-sun, “Hanchu gongzhu ji waiqi zai lishi zhong zhi diwei shishi” [A preliminary interpretation of the historical position of early Han princesses and consort kin], in *Fu guxiaozhang Sinian xiansheng jinian lunwenji* [Essays and papers in memory of late President Fu Ssu-Nien], ed. Guoli Taiwan Daxue Fu Guxiaozhang Sinian Xiansheng Jinian Lunwenji Bianji Weiyuanhui (Taipei: Guoli Taiwan Daxue, 1962), pp.1–20; id., “Chunqiu shidaimuxiyisu Gongyang zheng-yi” [Evidence and meanings of Chunqiu-era traces of matrilineal customs in the Gongyang commentary], in *Zhongguo funüshi lunji* [Articles on Chinese women's history], ed. Pao Chia-lin (Taipei: Daoxiang Chubanshe, 1978), pp.26–31.

¹¹ Zhao Yi, *Ersbiershi zhaji* [Reading notes on the twenty-two histories] (Taipei: Shijie Shuju, 1974), 2:21; Liu, *Handai bunyin zhidu*, p.79; Hsing I-t'ien, “Muquan, waiqi, rusheng: Wang Mang cuan Han de jidian jieshi” [Maternal power, consort kin, and Confucians: some interpretations of Wang Mang's usurpation of Han], *Lishi yuekan* 14.3 (March 1989): 37–8.

¹² Wang Zhankui, “Wangjia Yinwa mudi hunyin xingtai chutan” [A preliminary exploration of the forms of marriage at the Wangjia Yinwa cemetery], *Kaogu yu wenwu* (1996, 3): 31–9; David N. Keightley, “At the beginning: the status of women in neolithic and Shang China,” *Nan nü* 1.1 (1999): 18.

Although maternal and marital relatives played important roles in kinship and ritual during the Zhou era, they rarely translated these privileges into political dominance of a state. The transition from Zhou to Han clearly marks a major shift in the degree of influence that certain kin of the ruling line exerted on government. Although this change seems abrupt at first glance, on closer examination we can discern significant continuity between Zhou and Han customs. Some important Zhou and Han elite kinship customs were virtually identical, and in a few instances the consort relatives of Zhou rulers used their kinship bonds to obtain political supremacy. This being the case, it seems that the kinship customs underlying Han-dynasty consort kin power evolved out of certain Zhou conventions.

There has already been some useful research into the question of the origins of Han consort kin power. Some scholars in Taiwan have pointed to kinship rules as a probable explanation, suggesting that the Han had a unique kinship structure that shaped its political institutions and allowed consort kin to assume privileged political roles. Liu Tseng-kui 劉增貴 argues that maternal uncles held so much authority in the Han imperial kinship structure that this system can rightly be called an “avunculate.”⁹ Mou Jun-sun 牟潤孫 concurs that the kinship system among the Han imperial elite encouraged unusually strong respect for maternal uncles, which these men then parlayed into political power.¹⁰ Both scholars seem to see elite Han kinship customs as fundamentally different from the Zhou. They suggest that the Liu line observed different kinship customs from their Zhou predecessors and that these new practices allowed consort kin to emerge as a major force in Han politics.

Given Liu Bang's 劉邦 lowly social origins, it is not hard to imagine that he and his family could have altered elite kinship practices considerably. Liu Bang came from humble peasant stock. Because his kin were not part of the Zhou nobility, they probably felt little allegiance to many basic elite Zhou customs and felt free to change some values and conventions.¹¹ According to Liu and Mou, the new rulers raised the status of consort kin within the elite kinship structure, thereby giving these men considerable political authority. In sum, this theory holds that the Han elite adopted a new kinship structure that realigned political forces at court.

This interpretation has an important flaw—it overlooks the considerable continuity in elite kinship practices between Zhou and Han. The Han elite did not completely reorganize relations between the rulers and their consort kin. In some cases, the new imperial system allowed certain Zhou-era kinship customs to assume unprecedented political importance. The rise of consort kin within government took the form of evolution, not revolution.

There is some evidence that even as early as the Neolithic era, maternal uncles and sororal nephews shared an especially intimate bond. Wang Zhankui 王占奎 has interpreted evidence from Yangshao 仰韶 burials in Gansu 甘肅 to suggest that men in that society may have lived with their maternal uncles.¹²

If Wang is right, the bond between the mother's brother and sister's son was a major organizational principle in Yangshao society. Although the precise meaning of any archaeological evidence about kinship relations is certainly debatable, Wang's interpretation of the data fits what we know about early historic kinship relations.

Another piece of provocative evidence comes from the Shang dynasty. Oracle bone inscriptions repeatedly refer to royal relatives called *duosheng* 多生. This term has been interpreted in various ways. It seems to be a counterpoint to the similar term *duozi* 多子. But if *duozi* were the king's "myriad sons," who were the *duosheng*? David N. Keightley has proposed that in this case *sheng* should be read as a precursor to the homophone term meaning sororal nephew (*sheng* 甥).¹³ This would make *duosheng* the "myriad sororal nephews" of the king. Keightley's interpretation would give relations between mother's brothers and sister's sons a privileged place in the elite Shang kinship system. However, this linguistic evidence from the Shang is admittedly thin and certainly not beyond dispute.

Far more concrete information comes from documents written much later in the historic era. Although Zhou China was a patrilineal society, ritual and kinship rules recognized special links between a man and his marital kin. His sons inherited these ties, giving a man close relationships with certain maternal relatives. The Han elite maintained these Zhou kinship customs and the new political system of the Han dynasty amplified their importance. In particular, ties between the emperors and their *jiu* (fathers-in-law and maternal uncles) became a focal point for political power under the imperial system. These privileged kinship bonds justified such extraordinary powers for imperial *jiu* and their descendants that the Han political system soon became grossly distorted.

Kinship classification in ancient China was extremely different from the terminology normally used in English. The authority of male consort kin derived from the special way their kinship roles were classified. Long before the Han, both the mother's brothers (maternal uncles) and husband's or wife's father (father-in-law) were called *jiu*. The Han-dynasty dictionary *Discussions of Language* (Shuowen 說文) explains the matter succinctly. "A mother's older and younger brothers are *jiu*. A wife's father is *waijiu* 外舅."¹⁴ As the Qing philologist Duan Yucai 段玉裁 notes in his commentary, the wife's father was also called just plain *jiu* as well as *waijiu*. Duan based this analysis on the word's usage in ancient texts, so his interpretation is sound. These definitions show that in ancient times a man's mother's brothers and wife's father were seen as the same degree of kinship. Both were *jiu*. Over time, conventions gradually changed to the point that modern Chinese now consider the mother's brother and wife's father to be completely different degrees of kinship. But to ancient Chinese they originally seemed analogous.¹⁵

This seemingly minor detail about ancient kinship terminology is in fact the most vital clue for unraveling the origins of consort kin power. As has been demonstrated above, the most powerful imperial consort kin were either the father-in-law (or father's father-in-law) or mother's brother (or

¹³ Keightley, "At the beginning," p.49.

¹⁴ "Mu zhi xiongdi wei jiu, qi zhi fu wei wai jiu" 母之兄弟為舅。妻之父為外舅。Duan Yucai, ann., *Shuowen jiezi zhu* [Explanations of language and characters, annotated] (Shanghai: Guji Chubanshe, 1981), p.698 (13B: 49b).

¹⁵ By the Eastern Han dynasty, the scope of the term *jiu* had begun narrowing to cover only the mother's brother. This contracted usage has continued down to the present. Ding Fubao, ed., *Shuowen jiezi gulin buyi* [Explanations of language and characters, with multiple commentaries and addenda] (Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu Yinshuguan, 1959), 9: 6212–13; Feng Han-chi, *The Chinese kinship system* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1937, 1967), pp.31, 45, 545; Shirakawa Shizuka, *Setsumon shingi* [Explanations of language, with new meanings] (Kobe: Haku-kaku Bijutsukan, 1969–1974), 13:2800.

¹⁶ Zheng Xuan and Jia Gongyan, eds., *Yili zhusu* [Etiquette and Ritual, annotated] (Taipei: Yiwen Yinshuguan, 1955), (*Sangfu*) 33:390.

¹⁷ "Tianzi tongxing wei zhi shufu yixing wei zhi shujiu," 天子同姓謂之叔父異姓謂之叔舅. Zheng Xuan, Kong Yingda et al., eds., *Liji zhusu* [Records of Ritual, annotated] (Taipei: Yiwen Yinshuguan, 1955), (*Quli*) 5:89.

¹⁸ Feng, *The Chinese kinship system*, pp.45, 54–5; Melvin P. Thatcher, "Marriages of the ruling elite in the Spring and Autumn period," *Marriage and inequality in Chinese society*, ed. Rubie S. Watson and Patricia Buckley Ebrey (Berkeley and Los Angeles, Calif.: University of California Press, 1991), pp.39–41.

¹⁹ K. C. Chang, *Early Chinese civilization: anthropological perspectives* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), p.89. For a detailed discussion of marriage between cousins and other relatives in early China, see Kurihara Keisuke, *Kodai Chūgoku koninsei no rei rinen to keitai* [Ideals and forms of the rites of the ancient Chinese marriage system] (Tokyo: Tōhō, 1982), pp.479–525.

²⁰ Bernhard Karlgren, *The Book of Odes: Chinese text, transcription, and translation* (Stockholm: Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, 1950), p.58 (no.88).

²¹ Wan Sida, *Zongfalun* [On clan regulations] (Taipei: Guangwen Shuju, 1968).

father's mother's brother) of an emperor, or the descendents of these men. To modern readers these seem like very different kinship positions. But in the early Western Han, when consort kin dominance became dynastic custom, the emperor's father-in-law and mother's brothers were considered to have a virtually identical degree of relation to the ruler. Following ancient kinship rules, the emperor was considered a *sheng* 甥 (sister's son or son-in-law) to both types of *jiu*. This fusion of the two roles in ancient kinship rules explains why both imperial fathers-in-law and maternal uncles dominated the Han emperors. In the eyes of the ancients, these two kinship roles were roughly identical.

Etiquette and Ceremonial (Yili 儀禮) explains some relevant concepts as they applied to the apex of society.

Those who call me maternal uncle (*jiu* 舅), I call sororal nephew (*sheng* 甥). The older and younger brothers of one's father are called *shijiu* 世叔. The older and younger brothers of one's mother cannot be called *shijiu* as well, so they are called *jiujiu* 舅舅 to distinguish them.¹⁶

謂吾舅者吾謂之甥以其父之昆弟有世叔之名母之昆弟不可復謂之世叔故名為舅舅既得別名

Under traditional kinship rules, the Zhou king was supposed to call his maternal uncles *jiu*. As *Records of Rites* (Liji 禮記) records, "Those of the same surname as the son of heaven are called *shufu* 叔父 and those of different surnames *shujiu* 叔舅."¹⁷ This passage shows that the king carefully distinguished his relationships with paternal and maternal uncles, referring to them by different terms. There was no catch-all concept of "uncle" in ancient China. Maternal and paternal uncles were considered very different degrees of kinship.

Feng Han-chi has pointed out that the complex and intimate bond between *jiu* and *sheng* originated in the ancient custom of cross-cousin marriage.¹⁸ Cross-cousin marriage was the norm among the Shang elite and the custom continued into the Zhou.¹⁹ For example, a poignant verse from the *Classic of Odes* (Shijing 詩經) depicts a woman begging her uncles to let her marry the man she loves.²⁰ It might seem strange that she would plead her case to her uncles instead of her father. But this act makes perfect sense when seen in light of contemporary kinship customs that automatically betrothed her to her cousin. Only her uncle (her cousin's father) could release her from this obligation.

Because elite men of high antiquity routinely married their cousins, maternal uncles were also fathers-in-law. When seen in the context of ancient elite marriage customs, the conflation of mother's brother and father-in-law as *jiu* makes perfect sense; originally these two figures were often the same person due to cross-cousin marriage. As a result, the two roles became united under the rules of the Zhou kinship system known as *zongfa* 宗法.²¹ Becoming part of the conservative *zongfa* system allowed maternal uncle and father-in-law to continue being identified with each other long after cross-cousin marriage had declined.

A look at ancient customs not only shows how the roles of maternal

uncle and father-in-law were conflated but also why the role of *jiu* acquired an air of privilege. In the days of ancient cross-cousin marriage, a man's *jiu* represented his mother's lineage, his wife's lineage, and also his own ancestral lineage. Given the fact that these three important kinship identities devolved on one person, it is no wonder that the *jiu* demanded so much respect. The *jiu* held an extremely privileged position over his *sheng* within the all-important kinship system. Seen from this perspective, it is apparent why the emperors' *jiu* felt entitled to high office, wealth, title, and power during the Han.

If the Zhou élite already held the *jiu* in high esteem, why were *jiu* so much less important in Zhou politics than during the Han? The answer to this question lies in the very different structure of government during the two periods. Zhou political conditions were very unusual compared to the Han and subsequent dynasties. In most eras, rulers had no choice but to marry women of lower social status. Emperors did not seek empresses from neighboring countries. And a Chinese bride, however long her genealogy, was always socially inferior to the son of heaven. Even in the Eastern Han, when great clans rose to prominence and married into the Liu line, their women were seen as the emperor's social inferiors. So after China's unification, rulers had no choice but to take social inferiors as empresses.

The Zhou system was entirely different. As the Zhou realm decayed into a multitude of independent states, rulers could match their children with spouses from a similar social background. In fact, the Zhou ruling élite actively sought out spouses of similar social standing. Class endogamy became a crucial strategy for proving and maintaining élite status. The primary wife of a Zhou era ruler was almost certain to have come from the ruling line of another state.²² The aristocratic lineages ruling Zhou states regularly traded brides and grooms. For example, the heir to the throne of Qin 秦 might be matched with a daughter of the duke of Lu 魯.

Not only did this class endogamy reinforce the privileged status of the hereditary political élite, it also became a major foreign policy activity. Rulers routinely built new bonds with other states or reinforced existing alliances by uniting sons and daughters in marriage. The marriage of the legendary Shun 舜 to the two daughters of Yao 堯 in prehistoric times provided a respected precedent for these marriages of state. In some cases, the lineages ruling two states even practiced cross-cousin marriage down several generations, using kinship to reinforce a long-running diplomatic alliance.²³

Marriages of state linked two powerful kinship groups. A son born from a union of two ruling lineages was not only blessed with influential paternal relatives, but most likely had equally important kin on his mother's side. The social equality of paternal and maternal relations was a unique aspect of kinship among the Zhou ruling élite. A ruler's *jiu* (father-in-law or maternal uncle) was very likely the ruler of another state. In this respect the link between kinship and politics during the Zhou was very different from the subsequent imperial era.

Because of intermarriage among the Zhou ruling élite, kinship relations

²² Thatcher, "Marriages of the ruling elite in the Spring and Autumn period," pp.29–30.

²³ Feng, *The Chinese kinship system*, pp.43–6.

²⁴ Zheng and Kong, *Liji zhushu* (●uli), 5:90.

²⁵ For further discussion of this system, see Chang, *Early Chinese civilization*, p.90; Mou, "Chunqiu shidai muxi yisu," pp.26–9.

among ruling lineages became extremely important in diplomacy. A unique terminology, using kinship analogy as its central organizing principle, evolved for discussing the relations among states. Fictive kinship ties described different degrees of alleged relation among states. But these fictitious appellations were not just idle flights of fancy. Real kinship bonds between rulers often corresponded to the fictive ties binding states together.

Records of Ritual (Liji) describes the fictive kinship system of Zhou diplomacy.

During the audience ritual, the rulers of large states who have the same surname as the ruler are called *bofu* 伯父. Those with different surnames are called *bojiu* 伯舅. Rulers of small states who have the same surname as the ruler are called *shufu* 叔父. Those with different surnames are called *shujiu* 叔舅.²⁴

覲禮大國之君同姓謂之伯父異姓謂之伯舅此小者同姓謂之叔父異姓謂之叔舅

These four terms all meant uncle. So Zhou foreign policy was organized as a series of relations between different types of metaphorical "uncle states" and "nephew states."²⁵ Moreover, the type of avuncular relation was specifically classified according to whether the ruler of a neighboring state was akin to a paternal or maternal relation (decided by surname) and with reference to his country's relative political importance. Due to the prevalent custom of surname exogamy, relatives of the same surname would have been seen as *faux* paternal kin; those of different surnames would have corresponded to maternal relations. Fictive paternal kin ruling another state would have been rare, as relatively few rulers would have shared the same surname. So most of a country's "uncle states" were equivalent to maternal relations. Although it was possible for the rulers of two states to be true maternal uncle and sororal nephew, of course most of these so-called uncles and nephews were not close blood relatives. Zhou rulers extended kinship paradigms to non-relatives because it was convenient to organize diplomatic relations according to familiar kinship rules. This system encouraged relations among the Zhou era states to be more cordial and orderly.

It is extremely significant that the fictive kinship terminology used in Zhou court ritual to describe diplomatic relations simulated the relationship between *jiu* and *sheng*. Fictive kinship relations are not at all unusual in Chinese culture. In this case, however, the particular choice of fictive kinship bonds is intriguing. Instead of organizing diplomatic relations by using other (and perhaps more obvious) fictive kinship bonds such as father and son, older brother and younger brother, or two cousins, Zhou rulers preferred to regulate the relations among states according to the metaphorical bond of maternal uncle and sororal nephew. This choice confirms that the bond between *jiu* and *sheng* held a special place in elite Zhou thinking. The relation of *jiu* to *sheng* was no longer solely one of kinship; among the ruling

élite it had begun to assume major political overtones.

The fictive kinship relation of uncle states and nephew states even influenced Zhou court ritual. The Zhou kings regularly presented their supposed paternal and maternal uncles (in other words, the rulers of the various states) with ceremonial gifts of sacrificial meat.²⁶ Although the actual gift was deliberately humble, in symbolic terms it held profound significance. This rite reinforced a useful political bond through ritual formalities that mimicked kinship, tying the rulers of every state to the Zhou king by simulating the privileged bond between *jiu* and *sheng*. Significantly, the Zhou king did not seem to regard the role of nephew as demeaning. The bond of uncle and nephew was honorable and did not entail a loss of dignity on either side. So in rhetoric, ritual, and diplomacy, the fictive relationship of nephew and uncle helped bring a semblance of order to the chaotic world of Zhou politics. It also accustomed early Chinese to the idea that a ruler should maintain an especially close bond with his *jiu* and that his *jiu* should hold important political positions.

The Han élite did not invent the privileged bond between *jiu* and *sheng*. Nor were they the first to imbue it with political significance. Long before the Han, the relation of *jiu* and *sheng* had already become a basic bond in élite kinship, politics, ritual, and diplomacy. However, the direct influence of élite fathers-in-law and maternal uncles toward their sons-in-law and sororal nephews was limited during the Zhou period. Because Zhou rulers preferred to take their primary wives from other states, their maternal and marital kin often lived beyond the borders of their realm. As a result, Zhou consort relatives ordinarily lacked the opportunity to dominate reigning *sheng*. During the Zhou era, although the tie between *jiu* and *sheng* was already extremely intimate, geography restrained its influence on domestic politics. This relationship mainly affected foreign policy. But after China's unification, when an emperor's *jiu* lived in the capital nearby the ruler, this bond entered domestic politics to become a central feature of the Han-dynasty system of government.

This tie appears not just in the rarified realm of Zhou court ritual but also in more inclusive customs as well. For example, ancient mourning rules emphasized the importance of the bond between a man and his *jiu*. Because ideal mourning practices were so arduous, it was important to limit this honor to the most important kin. Otherwise people would have been too burdened by mourning obligations to live a normal and productive life. Therefore it is noteworthy that *sheng* and *jiu* were expected to mourn for each other.²⁷ This reciprocity meant that the *sheng* was considered as important to *jiu* as *jiu* to *sheng*. Mourning was not just a show of respect for superior age or generation; reciprocal mourning memorialized the bond itself. Mourning ritual highlights the basic importance of this kinship tie.

Nor was mourning limited to one's *jiu*. It also extended to his sons and daughters. One was expected to mourn for the son of a *jiu* just as one would the *jiu* himself. According to the ritual classics, this was because these rela-

²⁶ Zheng Yuan and Jia Gongyan, eds., *Zhouli zhushu* [Zhou Rites with annotations] (Taipei: Taiwan Kaiming Shudian, 1984), (*Dazongbo*) 18:278.

²⁷ Zheng and Kong *Liji zhushu* (*Tangong*), 9:165; Zheng and Jia *Yili zhushu* (*Sangfu*), 33:390; Mo Zhai 墨翟, *Mozi* 墨子, (*Gongmeng*), ann. Sun Yirang (Taipei: Huazheng Shuju, 1987), 48:418.

²⁸ Zheng and Jia, *Yili zhushu* (*Sangfu*), 33:390.

²⁹ “Xiongli shengjiu” 父兄甥舅. Zuo Qiuming, *Guoyu* [Conversations of the states], ann. Wei Zhao (Taipei: Liren Shuju, 1980), (Zhouyu), 2:57.

³⁰ “Liuji wei zhu fu you shan zhu jiu you yi zuren you xu kundi you qin shizhang you zun pengyou you jiu shi liuji ye,” 六紀謂諸父有善諸舅有義族人有敘昆弟有親師長有尊朋友有舊是六紀也. Zheng and Kong, *Liji zhushu* (*Yueji*), 39:691.

tives were considered one’s “inner elder and younger brothers” (*neixiongdi* 內兄弟).²⁸ So the descendants of a *jiu* inherited the privileged tie between *jiu* and *sheng*. This custom helps explain why the descendants of fathers-in-law and maternal uncles of the Han emperors often exercised as much power as imperial *jiu* themselves. According to ancient kinship concepts, this key relationship was inheritable. Although Zhou mourning rules were not regularly observed to the letter during the Han due to their arduousness, Han-dynasty scholars continued to look to these ancient mourning customs as normative rules. The relationships embodied by mourning obligations remained important kinship principles in the early imperial era.

Some ancient texts describe the closeness of *jiu* and *sheng* more specifically. For example, *Records of the States* (*Guoyu* 國語) speaks of the Zhou king’s “father, older brothers, *sheng* (sister’s sons or sons-in-law), and *jiu* (maternal uncles or fathers-in-law)” in tandem.²⁹ We should pay attention to the context of the *jiu/sheng* relation in this phrase. Sororal nephew cum son-in-law and maternal uncle cum father-in-law appear alongside the supremely important bonds to father and elder brother, demonstrating that the *jiu/sheng* relationship was considered one of the most important kinship ties. And *Records of Ritual* enumerates the fundamental “Six Relations” (*liuji* 六紀) of society as (in order): father, *jiu* (maternal uncle or father-in-law), clansmen (*zuren* 族人), elder and younger brothers, teachers and elders, and friends.³⁰ *Jiu* appears on this list before other key relations such as elder brothers. Most notably, paternal uncles are not even specifically mentioned, further emphasizing the exceptional importance of the *jiu* role. In fact, according to this reckoning of key relationships, a maternal uncle was second only to one’s father in importance.

In conclusion, maternal uncles and fathers-in-law, together termed *jiu*, indisputably occupied a highly privileged position within the kinship system of the ancient Chinese elite. Extraordinary political power gradually accrued to this privileged kinship role during the late Zhou and Han, as the system transformed to allow *jiu* to translate their privileged kinship position into political power.

Case Studies

Although the ritual classics demonstrate that the ancient Chinese elite revered the bond between *sheng* and *jiu*, these texts do not show how this relationship was actually conducted. A close examination of several case studies from the Zhou era can illuminate just how rulers interacted with key consort relatives. Although early sources mention many examples of these bonds, I have limited my selection to the state of Qin. The considerable institutional continuity between Qin and Han gives Qin precedents far more weight than examples from states with very different systems such as Chu 楚.

An early instance of *jiu* influence over Qin politics occurred far before

the founding of the Western Han. In 703 BC Duke Xian of Qin 秦憲公 died. He had two wives. Lady Lu 魯姬 was the daughter of the duke of Lu; Lady Wang 王姬 was daughter of the king of Zhou. When selecting the new duke of Qin, two traditional principles conflicted. The patrilineal rules of *zongfa* kinship favored the duke's eldest son. But according to Zhou feudal values, the daughter of the king of Zhou outranked the daughter of one of his lords, so her son ought to take precedence in the order of succession.

A choice between these conflicting bodies of rules had to be made. Duke Xian had preferred his eldest son, progeny of Lady Lu, and had made him heir apparent. But not everyone agreed with this decision. When Duke Xian died, senior officials unseated the heir apparent in a palace coup. In his place they enthroned a young son of Lady Wang known as Chuizi 出子 (a generic name for infant rulers later deemed to have held their position illegitimately). Because Chuizi was a minor, Lady Wang ruled Qin as regent. Five years later the unfortunate boy ruler was assassinated and senior officials restored Duke Xian's heir apparent, eldest son of Lady Lu, to the throne. He is known as Duke Wu of Qin 秦武公.³¹

This case is noteworthy because it shows that maternal kinship could determine a ruler's legitimacy even fairly early in the institutional history of the Zhou states. The real motivation for deposing the eldest son and heir apparent of Duke Xian and replacing him with a child remains unclear. Maybe the high officials thought they would have more power with a minor on the throne than under a strong adult ruler. Whatever their actual motives, it is significant that maternal kinship should provide the official principle for deposing their monarch. In terms of paternal kinship, both the future Duke Wu and Chuizi were equal. Both were sons of the same father. Had the *zongfa* rules of patrilineal kinship alone been considered, of course the eldest son ought to have been chosen. But in this instance, propinquity to consort kin became the decisive factor in choosing the new ruler. The king of Zhou was *jiu* (father-in-law) to the deceased duke and maternal grandfather of Chuizi. With two consorts, the deceased duke of Qin had two fathers-in-law. Obviously the king of Zhou held the higher rank between them. So we might possibly interpret the coronation of young Chuizi as an affirmation of the prerogatives due to senior consort kin.

This case reveals a provocative aspect of ancient Chinese kinship. Although Zhou dynasty Qin was a patrilineal society, consort kinship was already important enough among the elite to justify passing over the eldest son when determining succession. A man's links to his father's *jiu* could determine his own rank and legitimacy. In light of this very ancient precedent, the privileges of consort kin during the Han seem to continue Zhou era kinship values that revered the link between *jiu* and *sheng*.

A second and comparable case occurred centuries later in 387 BC upon the death of Duke Hui of Qin 秦惠公. His heir, a minor also known to posterity as Chuizi, was enthroned. Because Chuizi was an infant, real power went to his mother, known as Xiaozhu Furen 小主夫人 ("little ruler's lady"). At that time Qin politics were especially acrimonious and many influential

³¹ Takigawa Kamitarō, *Shiki kaichū kōshō* [Records of the Historian, annotated and corrected], reprint ed. (Taipei: Zhongxin Shuju, 1977), 5:16.

³² Lü Buwei, ed., *Lüshi chunqiu* [Springs and autumns of Mr Lü] (Taipei: Zhongzheng Shuju, 1988) (*Bugoulun* 4), 24:1611.

³³ Takigawa, *Shiki kaichū kōshō*, 5: 64.

³⁴ "Shao yu zhi tong yi, zhang yu zhi tong che," 少與之同衣, 長與之同車. Takigawa, *Shiki kaichū kōshō*, 71:22.

people openly opposed her regency. Gongzi Lian 公子連, a rival claimant to the throne of Qin, took advantage of this discord to invade Qin with troops provided by his hosts in neighboring Wei 魏. An army sent out by Xiaozhu Furen to counter the invasion ended up defecting to Gongzi Lian and marching on the capital. Xiaozhu Furen committed suicide when confronted with this rebellion. Gongzi Lian dethroned Chuizi and was recognized as Duke Xian of Qin 秦獻公.³²

Like the female regency more than three centuries earlier, this dowager and her infant son also ended up swept away by an adult claimant to the throne. The cases of Lady Wang and Xiaozhu Furen remind us of the limits to consort kin power for most of the Zhou. Han-dynasty consort kin repeatedly seized control of the state, especially when the ruler was a minor. It seems that few people questioned the legitimacy of this arrangement. Those who opposed consort kin rule during the Han usually did so out of self-interest rather than principle. But during the earliest two female regencies in Qin, there seems to have been widespread opposition to a dowager ruling the state through her puppet infant. However much the Zhou ruling élite stressed the importance of marital and maternal kinship in principle, it had yet to reach its full political potential.

A third case of female regency reveals that attitudes had shifted significantly by the time the Zhou era approached its end. The political potential of the *jiu* at last became fully realized late in the history of Qin. King Wu of Qin 秦武王 died without an heir in 307 BC, plunging the country into chaos as his younger brothers fought over the succession. King Wu's mother was already dead, so there was no senior figure in the royal lineage to decide the contest. Eventually one of King Wu's brothers by his father's concubine ascended the throne. This was King Zhaoxiang of Qin 秦昭襄王. King Zhaoxiang's mother, a woman originally from Qin's arch-enemy Chu, was honored as Queen Dowager Xuan 宣太后. The late King Wu's queen was sent back home to Wei.³³

Although King Zhaoxiang was already twenty years (*sui* 歲) old, his mother declared a regency. This reign was notable not only for the declaration of a female regency over a mature ruler but also because so many of King Zhaoxiang's maternal kin obtained important positions. Sima Qian described their extraordinary privileges by complaining that "the younger ones wore the same clothing and the older ones rode in the same carriage" as the king.³⁴ Wei Ran 魏冉, a half-brother of Queen Dowager Xuan, headed the government as grand counselor (*chengxiang* 丞相) and was enfeoffed with the largest landholding in Qin. In cooperation with his sister, Wei Ran treated King Zhaoxiang as a symbolic pawn and dominated Qin outright for more than thirty years. During this time he refused to draw his key officials from among the Qin nobility, as was customary, and instead used his own kinsmen for the most important positions. His competence and innovations were good for Qin. Wei Ran was a highly skilled statesman who strengthened and expanded his state, facilitating China's eventual unification.

The career of Wei Ran served as a direct precedent for the privileges of

Han-dynasty consort kin. His unquestionable success as a leader showed that consort kin rule could be highly effective and benefit the state. And significantly, this precedent occurred not too long before the unification of China. Wei Ran was the maternal uncle (*jiu*) of King Zhaoxiang and this kinship role justified his extraordinary power. So on the eve of China's unification, the key kinship tie of *jiu* and *sheng*, long exalted in kinship regulations and ritual, became fully translated into ultimate political power. Although the titular regent of this reign was the king's mother, histories of the period make it clear that Zhaoxiang's maternal uncle was the real force behind the throne. The *jiu* role had become a major factor in politics. So when the brothers and nephews of Empress Dowager Lü took over the government of the Han dynasty, not only did they have kinship custom and ritual rules on their side, they also had a high-profile historical precedent in the recent past to justify their authority.

Why did the partnership of Queen Dowager Xuan and Wei Ran succeed where the two previous female regencies of Qin failed? Of course a number of political conditions had changed in the interim, making it difficult to assign Wei Ran's success to just one cause. But an important fact is certain—whereas early records describe the two previous cases as dowager regency, in this final instance Wei Ran held power. In other words, direct dowager rule failed twice while rule by a king's *jiu* succeeded. By the late Warring States era, political changes allowed *jiu* to use their privileged kinship position to gain concrete power. The success of Wei Ran where two female regents had failed suggests that “consort kin” power stemmed largely from the privileges of the *jiu*, not just the dowagers. The example of Wei Ran shows that the *jiu* kinship role had become a major source of political power in Qin, a custom perpetuated by the Han dynasty.

Anthropological Perspectives

Historians unfamiliar with anthropology might be tempted to see the ancient Chinese kinship system, which featured privileged links between *jiu* and *sheng*, as unique. In fact this kinship pattern is fairly common. Kinship systems around the world privilege the relationship between maternal uncle (mother's brother) and sororal nephew (sister's son). The only unusual aspect of the ancient Chinese system was the extension of this privileged link from maternal uncle to father-in-law. As explained above, the roles of maternal uncle and father-in-law were conflated in ancient China due to the elite custom of cross-cousin marriage. However, the core of the relationship between *jiu* and *sheng* was the bond between sororal nephews and their maternal uncles. The privileges held by imperial fathers-in-law seem to have accrued from close association with maternal uncles. This can be seen from the respect that many societies accord the bond between maternal uncle and sororal nephew. Ancient Chinese customs were just one local expression of

³⁵ Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown, *The Andaman islanders* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1948), pp.79–80 describes an opposite extreme. A male Andaman islander owes similar duties to all older men who are roughly the same age as his father. In other words, all men of that age are equivalent to uncles, and his true maternal uncles are shown no special deference or even recognition.

³⁶ Robin Fox, *Kinship and marriage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), pp.230–2; Jack Goody, "The mother's brother and the sister's son in West Africa," *Comparative studies in kinship*, ed. Jack Goody (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1969), pp.56, 78.

³⁷ Meyer Fortes, "Time and social structure: an Ashanti case study," *Man makes sense: a reader in modern cultural anthropology*, ed. Eugene A. Hammel and William S. Simmons (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown, 1970), pp.104–25.

³⁸ Marcel Mauss, *The gift: forms and functions of exchange in archaic societies*, trans. Ian Cunnison (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1954), p.7.

³⁹ M. Ember, "The conditions that may favor avunculocal residence," *Behavioral Science Review* 9 (1974): 203–9; Fox, *Kinship and marriage*, pp.108–9; William F. Keegan and Morgan D. Maclachlan, "The evolution of avunculocal chiefdoms: a reconstruction of Taino kinship and politics," *American Anthropologist* 91.3 (1989): 613–30.

⁴⁰ These matrilineal customs persisted up through at least the Chenla period (AD 550–800). Eventually the Angkor élite used Hindu ideology to justify a switch to patrilineal inheritance of royal title. Charles Higham, *The civilization of Angkor* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, Calif.: University of California Press, 2001), pp.49–50.

⁴¹ Bernard Faber, *Comparative kinship systems: a method of analysis* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1968), p.20.

⁴² Roger M. Keesing, "Shrines, ancestors, and cognatic descent: the Kwaio and Talensi," *American Anthropologist* 72.4 (1970): 755–75.

⁴³ Goody, "The mother's brother," p.79.

a very widespread kinship pattern.

To be sure, this kinship pattern is not universal. Not all societies imbue the maternal uncle's role with special meaning.³⁵ But many societies nevertheless consider the relationship between mother's brother and sister's son very important. In some places a maternal uncle expresses this special bond by showing unusual indulgence toward his nephew.³⁶ But this close tie can involve more tangible matters as well. For example, the Ashanti of west Africa base inheritance rules around this relationship. A man inherits property from his mother's brother instead of his own father.³⁷ And a Samoan child is not raised by his parents but rather by a maternal uncle who calls the child *tonga* ("feminine property").³⁸ Moreover, in the many avunculocal societies, a groom moves in with his mother's brother after marriage and becomes a permanent member of his maternal uncle's household.³⁹

Although these are a few classic anthropological examples, we should not conclude that strong links between the mother's brother and sister's son have been limited to small-scale societies in Africa and the Pacific islands. This form of kinship organization could be the organizing principle for a large, prosperous state. A prime example is the civilization of Angkor, centered on what is now Cambodia. The earliest Angkor élite was matrilineal, so title and power passed down from maternal uncle to sororal nephew. The political system of Angkor developed around this central custom, gradually evolving into a sophisticated bureaucratic monarchy ruling over a large state. Of course the very strong kinship bonds between uncle and nephew created unique tensions and possibilities within this social system. The example of early Angkor shows that special kinship bonds between maternal uncle and sororal nephew could even persist in a large, prosperous, complex state.⁴⁰

The special bond between mother's brother and sister's son, the kinship tie that justified the power of so many Han-dynasty consort kin, was certainly not unique to ancient China. To the contrary, this is an extremely common kinship pattern that appears in many societies throughout the world. Outside of China, this bond has frequently been the organizational principle for important practices such as residence and inheritance. When we view the Han-dynasty custom of consort kin power from an anthropological perspective, it does not seem at all startling or unusual. The Han system was merely the particular political expression of a common kinship pattern. During the Han dynasty, this kinship pattern assumed such grand ramifications merely because of the unusual size and sophistication of the early imperial Chinese state.

It is not hard to fathom why people in so many places honor the bond between mother's brother and sister's son. Although a man's primary kinship identity usually comes from his father's line, in many societies he also maintains a strong link to his mother's natal family.⁴¹ In fact, in virtually all societies structured primarily around kinship, a man's most important social relationship outside his own patrilineal line is with members of his mother's lineage.⁴² And the most significant relationship between members of two different patrilineal descent groups, aside from husband and wife, is usually the bond between the mother's brother and sister's son.⁴³ In some societies

this bond is even more important than marriage. After all, while marriage is a ceremonial union, the maternal uncle and sororal nephew share a blood bond. In many societies around the world this bond has been imbued with so much importance that it has become a major focal point for organizing social relations.

Some anthropologists have tried to determine the specific causes for the close bond between mother's brother and sister's son in so many places. Because Han-dynasty consort kin power grew out of this custom, understanding the origins of this convention would take us back to some of the primary causes of the Han system. Unfortunately, there is no consensus among anthropologists on why maternal uncles and sororal nephews have a special bond in so many societies. Several competing theories have been put forward for consideration.

Some anthropologists stress the idea that a married woman retains residual membership in her own descent group. Although she also becomes a member of her husband's family, she still retains close ties to her natal line. She then passes these ties down to her children. Her children inherit special ties with all of their mother's natal kin. Because a woman's relationship with her brothers is especially close, the bond between maternal uncle and sororal nephew becomes the strongest expression of this tie.⁴⁴

An alternate interpretation points out that a mother is the primary giver of care and affection to men in any kinship group. A son will always have especially intense reciprocal feelings for his mother. He then extends these emotions to include fondness for all her natal kin, particularly her brothers.⁴⁵ Being of the same generation and usually a similar age, and remaining within the same patrilineal group as the mother's natal family, a mother's brothers are the clearest secondary targets for a loving son's maternal affection. This theory seems bolstered by the fact that men in some societies refer to their mother's brothers in maternal terms. For example, the men of the LoDagaa of Ghana refer to a mother's brother as *madeb* ("mother male").⁴⁶ From this expression it seems that they see the mother's brother as a surrogate mother.

A third view emphasizes the importance of marriage in creating an alliance between two lineages. Few ceremonies are more highly regarded than marriage. In some places the marital bond is so highly honored that, as a byproduct, it gives the children of this union especially intimate bonds with their maternal relatives. According to this view, this relationship should not be seen as one between a sister's son and his mother's brother. Such an explanation would interpret the relationship as a blood bond. Instead, according to this theory, the bond is best expressed as a ceremonial tie between a sister's husband's son and his father's wife's brother. In other words, the relationship is based primarily on marriage rather than blood, and takes its importance from the prominence of the institution of marriage in certain societies.⁴⁷

In modern China we can still find examples of intense uncle/nephew bonds. Anthropologists have described special relationships between maternal uncles and sororal nephews that evoke earlier customs of the Han imperial line. For example, in some parts of China the mother's brother is

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.85.

⁴⁵ Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown, "The mother's brother in South Africa," *Structure and function in primitive society*, ed. A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, E. E. Evans-Pritchard and Fred Eggan (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1952), p.36.

⁴⁶ Goody, "The mother's brother," p.52.

⁴⁷ Fox, *Kinship and marriage*, pp.232-5; Louis Dumont, *Affinity as a value: marriage alliance in South India, with comparative essays on Australia* (Chicago, Ill.: Chicago University Press, 1983).

⁴⁸ Hsiao-t'ung Fei, *Peasant life in China: a field study of country life in the Yangtze valley* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1962; reprint ed.: New York: AMS Press, 1976), p.87; Bernard Gallin, "Hsin Hsing: a Taiwanese agricultural village" (PhD diss., Cornell University, 1961), p.639.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.636-40.

given a seat of honor on the ritually significant occasion of his nephew's wedding.⁴⁸ And Chinese men today often deliberately cultivate close ties to their mother's kinsmen, including her brothers, for practical reasons. These relationships can bring valuable benefits, such as the opportunity to share economic resources and increase influence within the community.⁴⁹ It does not take much imagination to picture how similar forces could have forged intense ties between maternal uncles and sororal nephews in ancient times, giving rise to the kinship customs that shaped Han-dynasty government so dramatically.

Conclusions

⁵⁰ Chen Shou, *Sanguozhi* [Treatise on the Three Kingdoms] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1959), 2.58, 80.

The end of the Han also marked the decline of that dynasty's distinctive system of consort kin power. Although other dynasties such as the Wei also saw powerful consort kin, the institution was never again this important over such a long period. The relative eclipse of consort kin in the political history of later periods raises an intriguing question. If consort kin were so powerful under the Han, and if consort kin were sometimes able to exercise power in later eras, and if a close bond between Chinese men and their maternal and marital kin has continued all the way down to the present, then why was consort kin dominance of government so much less common after the fall of the Han?

With a new dynasty came new political customs and institutions. Chinese statesmen were avid students of history, and the founders of subsequent systems learned many important lessons from the terrible mistakes of the Han. Immediately after annihilating the remnants of the Eastern Han, Cao Pi 曹丕 declared that henceforth empresses, empresses dowager, and consort relatives would be strictly forbidden from participating in affairs of state.⁵⁰ Moreover, subsequent scholars routinely excoriated the excesses of the Han system and warned officials and rulers against the dangers of consort kin privilege. Although the resolve to keep the fathers-in-law and mother's brothers of the emperors out of government often wavered, never again was consort power such an important institution. However much emperors might respect their maternal and marital kin, the history of the Han dynasty imparted disturbing lessons that subsequent generations took to heart. Later statesmen learned from the mistakes of the Han and created superior institutions that were far more effective in keeping the ambitions of consort kin in check.

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