The Power of the Phoenix Crown:
Imperial Women and Material Culture in Late Ming China

by

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Abstract

My thesis holds that Ming imperial women used political opportunity and agency to formulate a strategy of building relationships with male officials and inner court residents. Other than feminine virtues, the extent to which they succeeded in the strategy decided their reputations in the historical records.

My project presents Empress Dowager Li (1545-1614) and Imperial Concubine Zheng (1565-1630) as representative cases of Ming imperial women. Through a scrutiny of both official and private records, I present their life cycles and examine their political opportunity, agency, social relationships and social activities. In addition, I present evidence of material culture and daily life in the Ming court, a perspective not seen in the official records. Material evidence illuminates a fuller picture of imperial woman's life. Through their clothes we are able to look at their creativity in court fashion. The material evidence and records of their social activities reveal the everyday life of imperial women and the variety of ways in which social and political communication took place between men and women of the inner court.

In analyzing the life of Empress Dowager Li and Imperial Concubine Zheng as daughters, wives, and mothers, we observe them as individuals and as women making connections with male officials in the outer court and female residents in the inner court. The course of their lives shows both opportunity and restrictions imposed on Ming imperial women.

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Notes on Conventions

1. All ages given are counted by using particular years minus the year of birth. Therefore the ages that appear in this thesis are in Western rendering, instead of Chinese rendering that assumes a person to be one year old (*sui*) when born.

2. To avoid confusion, imperial women are recognized in this thesis by their highest rank. For example, Empress Dowager Li is the title used even though she had been a chambermaid, a concubine, and a senior concubine. One exception is Empress Dowager Xiaojing, who is referred in the thesis as "Chambermaid Wang," the first position she held in the court. This is so, to distinguish her from Empress Wang (Xiaoduan), the principal wife of their husband Wanli.

List of Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in the footnotes:

HMZX Zhu Yuanzhang, *Huangming zuxun* 皇明祖訓 (Ancestral Instructions of the August Ming). In *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 (Complfete library of the four branches). Edited by Ji Yun and Lu Xixiong et al. Jinan: Qilu shushe, 1996.

MS Zhang Tingyu, *Mingshi* 明史 (History of the Ming). Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974.

SZSL Wen Tiren et al., *Ming Shenzong shilu* 明神宗實錄 (Veritable Records of Ming Shenzong). Nangang: Zhongyang yanjiu yuan lishi yuyan yanjiu suo, 1966.

YHB Shen Defu, *Wanli Yehuo bian* 萬曆野獲編 (Gathered and Edited in the Country during the Wanli Period). Beijing: zhonghua shuju, 1959.

ZZZ Liu Ruoyu. *Zhuozhong zhi* 酌中志 (An Enlightening Account of Life in the Imperial Palace). Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1985.

Introduction

The term "imperial women"[1] refers to women in the palaces who had a relationship with the emperor such as empress dowager, empress, imperial concubine, senior concubine, concubine and princess. These women, along with court servants such as eunuchs and maids, populated the "inner court" and ideally reflected the "inner" (*nei* 内) component of the harmony and peace of the "outer" (*wai* 外) court—the government and bureaucracy. Since Imperial women lived in the inner chambers of the emperor, known as "the son of heaven" (*tianzi* 天子), their morality should ideally mirror that of the state, or all under heaven (*tianxia* 天下). The disaster of the state was often blamed, unfairly, on the violation of rituals (*li* 禮) and the immorality of one "*femme fatale*" (*hongyan huoshui* 紅顏禍水) in the emperor's harem.

In 1368, when the Hongwu Emperor (洪武, r. 1368-1398) replaced the alien Yuan 元 (1271-1368), his administration reestablished the rituals that had been neglected by the Mongol rulers. This policy was successful in the inner court. Indeed, the Ming had the most obedient and self-disciplined imperial women, as compared to those in previous dynasties.[2] They were also known as being remarkably excluded from the exercise of political power.[3]

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[1] Ellen Soulliére uses the term "imperial women" in her article Soulliére, "Women in the Imperial Household at the Close of China's Ming Dynasty: 1573-1644," *Asia Pacific Perspectives* Fall/Winter (2013-14): 34-60.). Hui-shu Lee uses the term "Imperial women" to refer to "women of the imperial palace" that included empresses and concubines and also female officials and maids. See her *Empresses, Art, and Agency in Song Dynasty China* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2010.

[2] Zhang Tingyu, *Mingshi* 明史 (History of the Ming) (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1974, hereafter cited as *MS*), *juan* 113, 3504.

[3] Ellen Felicia Soulliére, "Palace Women in the Ming Dynasty: 1368-1644" (Phd diss., Princeton University, 1987), 385.

The *Mingshi* historians summarized the Ming inner court as purified with the best and strictest household regulations when compared to preceding dynasties.[4]

In general Ming imperial women were highly valued for their feminine virtue and some stood out in history for providing psychological support to their powerful spouses. For example, Empress Ma 馬皇后 (1332-1382) (Hongwu's principal wife), is described as virtuous for assisting him and addressing daily concerns as a caring wife and offering timely advice as a wise minister. She also educated the inner court residents.[5] Official historians and their readers have neglected and ignored such demonstrations of agency and personal sentiments of imperial women. My study is concerned with two other cases in point: Empress Dowager Li 李太后 (1545-1614), Wanli's 萬曆 (r. 1573-1620) biological mother, and his favorite concubine, Imperial Concubine Zheng 鄭皇貴妃 (1565-1630). Both were natives of Beijing, came from humble origins, and made contributions to the education of feminine virtue. Although their biographies in the standard histories are relatively more detailed, other than feminine morality, their experience as wives and mothers in the court has barely been recorded. The reputation of the two women differed. Empress Dowager Li is praised as "sage mother 聖母" for her feminine morality and social influence. She is known as a *de facto* regent who collaborated with the powerful official—Grand Secretary (*shoufu* 首輔) Zhang Juzheng 張居正 (1525-1582). Imperial Concubine Zheng is known as a *femme fatale,* whose ambition to rise to designation as empress

[4] *MS*, 114. 3504.
[5] Yonglin Jiang, "Legislating Hierarchical yet Harmonious Gender Relations in the Great Ming Code," *Ming Studies*, 69 (May 2014): 30.

plunged Wanli and his court officials into more than ten years of dispute over the imperial succession in 1586 to 1601.

My study takes Empress Dowager Li and Imperial Concubine Zheng as extreme cases of Ming imperial women. I use official biographies and private records in conjunction with material objects to construct their life cycles in order to examine Ming imperial women's political opportunity, agency, and daily life. Material objects such as robes, jewelry, ornament, and gifting and social activities are employed as historical evidence to track how imperial women presented their power and established social relationships between men and women in the inner court. I argue that Ming imperial women had more political opportunity and agency than we previously imagined, and their reputations were partly decided by their strategies of developing relationships with officials in the outer court and women in the inner court.

Empress Dowager Li and Imperial Concubine Zheng were linked to the life of the Wanli Emperor, who ruled for 48 years, the longest reign among the 16 Ming emperors. It was a half-century of glory in culture, fashion, consumerism, especially in some rich regions in late 16th century China. The publication of books and the size of readership grew. Popular novels such as *Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅 (*The Golden Lotus*) and *Xiyou ji* 西遊記 (*A Journey to the West*) and Li Shizhen 李時珍 (1518-1593)'s *Bencao gangmu* 本草綱目 (*The Compendium of Materia Medica*) were published in this period. Philosophers such as Li Zhi 李贄 (1527-1602) and political activists such as the Donglin Faction (東林黨) offered alternative ideologies. Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), the Italian Jesuit and the first missionary allowed to visit Beijing's Forbidden City, was attracted by what he saw as the

mysterious and splendid China. His Catholicism and western science attracted Chinese officials in Wanli's court. The Minister of Rites, Xu Guangqi 徐光啟 (Paul Xu, 1562-1633), converted and helped translate western scientific texts into Chinese, thereby supporting the cultural contacts between China and Europe. In the economy the Ming court adopted Zhang Juzheng's Single-Whip tax reform (*Yitiaobian fa* 一條鞭法). This policy collected taxes in the form of silver, increased the state income, and provided more capital to support the extravagant life of imperial elites. On the political side, the continual emphasis on rituals and morality of the Ming court finally resulted in the rigidity of the Ming emperorship during the Wanli reign. The Ming court relied heavily on ideology to govern and the Ming emperor had to take all the burden of his action to prove his virtue.[6] As Ray Huang observed, everything was running normally but the downward trend of the Ming was already foreseeable six decades before the dynasty collapsed in 1644.[7]

In a situation where the emperor's power was limited, it was uncommon for imperial women like Empress Dowager Li and Imperial Concubine Zheng to participate effectively in political disputes. The way they survived the palace life, developed relationships, engaged in sponsorship, and presented themselves through material culture was outstanding. Such interesting episodes of their life enable us to enrich our knowledge of imperial women and the inner court of late Ming.

Sources and Literature Review

[6] Scarlett Jang, "The Eunuch Agency Directorate of Ceremonial and the Ming Imperial Publishing Enterprise" in *Culture, Courtiers, and Competition: The Ming Court (1368-1644),* ed. David M. Robinson. (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2008), 165-166.
[7] Ray Huang, *1587, A Year of No Significance* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981).

In 2008, the Harvard University Asia Center published a collection of studies on the Ming court. But the research is limited, especially on Ming imperial women. In dealing with the Ming court and emperorship, scholars tend to first look at the emperor's relationship with literati officials,[8] while seldom addressing the women, whether imperial women or court servants. Even the research on art history is male-dominated because women are almost invisible in Ming court paintings.[9]

To date, Ellen Soulliére and Bao Hua Hsieh have written the most relevant works on Ming imperial women.[10] They both mainly focus on the first half of the Ming, so the life of women living in the important Wanli era remains little researched in detail. Their research concentrates on interpreting Ming palace women's upward mobility by emphasizing their humble origins. Soulliére concludes that the humble origins of Ming imperial women explain why Ming empresses and concubines often behaved in the norm and had limited political power.[11] Lin Yanqing draws the same conclusion as Soulliére in his study on Empress Dowager Li's political participation.[12] Without detailed analysis on imperial women's life cycle, Lin and Soulliére's conclusion came from their general observation of the historical records. My project examines the life cycles of two

[8] David M. Robinson, "The Ming Court" in *Ming Court*, ed. Robinson, 32. And see David M. Robinson, *Bandits, Eunuchs, and the Son of Heaven: Rebellion and the Economy of Violence in Mid-Ming China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001).

[9] See Robinson, "The Ming Court and the Legacy of the Yuan Mongols" in *Ming Court*, ed. Robinson, 365-421; Robinson, *Martial Spectacles of the Ming Court*, (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2013). See also court paintings like "The Xuande Emperor Hunting with Bow" 宣宗狩獵圖, a 15th century hanging scroll, ink and colors on silk, in Palace Museum, Beijing. "The Chenghua Emperor's Pleasures"憲宗宮中行樂圖, a 15th century hand scroll, ink and colors on silk in Palace Museum, Beijing.

[10] Bao Hua Hsieh, "From Charwoman to Empress Dowager: Serving-Women in the Ming Palace," *Ming Studies* 42 (2000): 59.

[11] Soulliére, "Palace Women", 385.

[12] See Lin Yanqing, "Li Taihou yu Zhang Juzheng gaige,"李太后與張居正改革 (Empress Dowager Li and Zhang Juzheng's Reforms) *Nankai xuebao* 5(2005): 54-60. Lin Yanqing, "Li Taihou yu guoben zhizheng," 李太后與國本之爭 (Empress Dowager Li and the Dispute on Imperial Succession) *Dongyue luncong* 29 (2008): 118-121.

representative cases of Ming imperial women. By presenting their roles as daughter, wife, mother, and as imperial wife and concubine, I argue that they had multiple identities other than that of imperial women, and as such, they were individuals with emotions, thought, and agency in building social relations.

Some gender studies have interpreted women's agency in late imperial China. It has been possible for some women to change their roles from the inner chamber to the outer world through such means as talented writing,[13] body and virtue shaping,[14] and family support.[15] The authors argue against the stereotypical image of Chinese women's subordinate position in a male and ideologically dominated society, or Dorothy Ko's so called "May-Fourth construction."[16] But much of their research is based on the life of elite families and commoners. The self-disciplined women living in the Ming inner court harem were considered evidence for the "decline in the position of women in society as a

[13] See Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-century China* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994). Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997). See also *The Inner Quarters and Beyond: Women Writers from Ming through Qing*, ed. Grace S. Fong and Ellen Widmer (Leiden Boston: Brill, 2010).
[14] See Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2005). And Weijing Lu, *True to Her Word: The Faithful Maiden Cult in Late Imperial China* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2008).
[15] See Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: Europe, China, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 98-106. Li Bozhong, "Cong "fufu bingzuo" dao "nan geng nü zhi": Ming-Qing jiangnan nongjia fuNü laodong wenti tantao zhiyi" 從夫婦並做到男耕女織：明清江南農家婦女勞動問題之一 (From husband and wife work together to men plowing, women weaving: The Issue of Women Farmers' Work Load in Ming-Qing Jiangnan Region), *Zhongguo Jingji shi Yanjiu*, 3(1996):99-107. And "'Nangeng Nüzhi' yu 'funü banbian tian' juese de xingcheng—Ming Qing jiangnan nongjia funü laodong wenti tantao zhi'er" 男耕女織與婦女半邊天角色的形成：明清江南農家婦女勞動問題探討之二 (The Building Character of "men plowing, women weaving" and "women can hold up half the sky": study on the issue of female farmer's work load in Ming-Qing Jiangnan region). *Zhongguo jingji shi yanjiu,* 3(1997): 10-22. Francesca Bray, *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
[16] See Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers.* Dorothy Ko firstly named the thoughts in the early 20th century that seeing Chinese women as victims and burdens to the modernization of the society as "May Fourth construction of the victimized women in old China".

whole"[17] because their political contribution seemed insignificant relative to that of remarkable counterparts in other dynasties.[18] The current limited knowledge on Ming imperial women's life and experience accounts for this misconception. This study uses two cases of Ming imperial women, through interpreting their life cycles in order to examine their political opportunity and agency.

To construct the life cycles of Empress Dowager Li and Imperial Concubine Zheng, my project employs their official records in *Mingshi* 明史 (*History of the Ming*) and *Ming shilu* 明實錄 (*Veritable Records of the Ming*) as well as notebook jottings such as Shen Defu's 沈德符 (1578-1642) *Wanli yehuo bian* 萬曆野獲編 (*Gathered and Edited in the Country During the Wanli Period*)[19] and the court eunuch Liu Ruoyu 劉若愚 (1584-1642)'s *Zhuozhong zhi* 酌中志 (*An Enlightening Account of Life in the Imperial Palace*).[20] My project seeks to give a well-rounded picture of their lives, as evaluated by official histories and contemporary eyewitness observations. The didactic works sponsored by Empress Dowager Li and Imperial Concubine Zheng provide imperial women's thoughts through their own writing. Other research on Ming palace women is concentrated on the regulation of the inner court, palace women's selection criteria,[21] and their religion and

[17] Soulliére, "Palace Women", 385.
[18] For examples of powerful imperial women, see Lien-sheng Yang, "Female Rulers in Imperial China," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 23 (1960-61): 47-61.
[19] Shen Defu, *Wanli yehuo bian* 萬曆野獲編 (Gathered and Edited in the Country during the Wanli Period) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959, 3 vols., hereafter cited as *YHB*).
[20] Liu Ruoyu. *Zhuozhong zhi* 酌中志 (An Enlightening Account of Life in the Imperial Palace) (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1985, 2vols, hereafter cited as *ZZZ*).
[21] See Ch'iu Chung-Lin, "Yinqi yuji—Ming dai gongren de caixuan yu fangchu" 陰氣鬱積－明代宮人的採選與放出 (The Selection and Discharge of Royal Palace Maidservants in the Ming Dynasty), *Taida lishi xuebao*, 50 (2012): 33-107. And Ch'iu Chung-Lin, "*Ming dai linxuan hou fei jiqi guizhi*" 明代遴選后妃及其規制 (The Imperial Concubine Selection System during the Ming Dynasty), *Ming dai yanjiu*, (11): (December, 2008):1-58.

literacy.[22] This writing provides useful information for formulating a more realistic and detailed research on imperial women's life cycle.

If anything else is missing from the literature mentioned above, it is the neglect of material culture as evidence. Only Soulliére published an article on a birthday over-vest of Empress Dowager Li as visual evidence.[23] With the current interest in applying material cultural analysis into historical research, art historians are using paintings and archeological discoveries to visualize Tang 唐 (618-907)[24] and Song 宋 (960-1279) inner court life to show the agency of the imperial women in art and fashion contribution.[25] Noting the rise in consumerism, Ming historians used material cultural analysis to examine the life-style and fashion of the gentry and elites[26] and the changing consumption habits of commoners.[27] But studies on the material culture of the Ming court are limited. This project is going to flesh out Ming imperial women's life by employing material culture analysis.

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[22] See Chen Yu-Nü, "Ming Wanli shiqi Cisheng huangtaihou de chongfo: jianlun fo dao liang shili de duizhi," 明萬曆慈圣皇太后的崇佛：兼論佛道兩勢力的對峙(Empress Dowager Cisheng's Worship of Buddhism during Ming Wanli reign: Associated with the Study on the Dispute between Buddhism and Daoism) *Cheng Kung daxue lishi xuebao* 23 (1997):195-245. Wu Meifeng, "Mingdai gongting huihua shi wai yizhang: cong Cisheng huangtaihou de huizao tanqi" 明代宮廷繪畫史外一章：從慈圣皇太后的繪造談起 (A Note on Ming Dynasty Court Painting History: Beginning with the 'Painted and Made' Inscription by the Empress Dowager Cisheng)" *Gugong xuekan* (2013): 266-310.

[23] Soulliére, "Women in the Imperial Household."

[24] See Buyun Chen, "Dressing for the Times: Fashion in Tang Dynasty China (618-907)" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2013).

[25] See Hui-shu Lee, *Empresses, Art, and Agency*.

[26] See Timothy Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Cambridge: Policy Press, 1991).

[27] See Wu Jen-shu, *Pinwei shehua: wan Ming de xiaofei shehui yu shidafu* 品味奢華：晚明的消費社會與士大夫 (Taste and Extravagance: Late Ming Consumer Society and the Gentry) (Beijing: zhonghua shuju, 2008); and *Youyou fangxiang: Ming Qing jiannan chengshi de xiuxian xiaofei yu kongjian bianqian* 優游坊廂：明清江南城市的休閑消費與空間變遷 (Urban Pleasure: leisure Consumption and Spatial Transformation in jiangnan Cities during the Ming-Qing Period) (Taipei: Institute of Modern History, Academic Sinica, 2013). Antonia Finnane, "Yangzhou's 'Modernity': Fashion and Consumption in the Early Nineteenth Century," *Positions* 11 (Fall, 2003): 395-425.

In spite of numerous Ming objects well protected by museums around the world, the material objects used by Ming imperial elites, especially emperors and imperial women, are little represented in the collections. Ming Dingling 定陵, the tomb of the Wanli Emperor and his wives, Empress Xiaoduan 孝端 (1564-1620) and Chambermaid Wang (Empress Dowager Xiaojing 孝靖, 1565-1611), is the only one among thirteen Ming imperial tombs that has been excavated.[28] The objects discovered from the tomb offer valuable information for visualizing the everyday life of Wanli and the imperial women in his reign and open a window for analyzing material objects relating to contemporary political and social activities. Since 1958 museum visitors have looked at the Dingling artifacts[29] and art historians have studied them.[30] The studies on burial ritual and the Dingling artifacts by Ann Paludan, Liu Yi, and Xiaoneng Yang provide an archaeological

[28] *New Perspectives on China's Past: Chinese Archaeology in the Twentieth Century*, *Volume 2: Major Archaeological Discoveries in Twentieth-Century China*, ed., Xiaoneng Yang (New Haven and London: Yale University Press with Kansas City: The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2004), 545.

[29] Capital Museum 首都博物館, "Huiwang da Ming: zoujin Wanli chao," 回望大明—走進萬曆朝 (In Retrospect of Ming Dynasty—Approaching Wanli Period), exhibited from August 9, 2011 to April 15, 2012 in Beijing and January 19th to April 14th, 2013 in Suzhou Museum.

[30] See Wang Xiuling, "Ming Dingling chutu dihou fushi zhiyi,"明定陵出土帝后服飾之一 (Raiment of Emperor Empresses from Ding Mausoleum I) *Shoucang jia* 9 (2009): 17-24. "Ming dingling chutu dihou fushi er,"明定陵出土帝后服飾二 (Raiment of Emperor Empresses from Ding Mausoleum II) *Shoucang jia* 10(2009): 9-17. "Ming dingling chutu dihou fushi san,"明定陵出土帝后服飾三 (Raiment of Emperor Empresses from Ding Mausoleum III) *Shoucang jia* 11(2009): 29-36.

perspective on elite culture.[31] However, the Dingling objects have seldom been used to contextualize the life of the imperial women in their inner court.

My project uses the Ming artifacts to examine the material privilege of the Ming imperial court. These objects include Empress Dowager Li's birthday over-vest, jewelry, phoenix crown, buttons, robes, and hairpins. It seeks to observe the creativity of imperial women's clothing by comparing Empress Dowager Li's over-vest with Wanli's ceremonial robe (*gunfu* 袞服) and examining the exotic decorative ornaments on jewelry. My material cultural analysis will not be limited to merely interpreting material objects. It also refers to people's activity and feelings related to the material objects themselves. I also reflect on the sentiments and intentions of the women wearing the ornaments, buttons, and the kingfisher feather phoenix crown. Attention is paid to the objects involving social activities such as gifting and regular flower appreciation events that provide space to imagine how imperial women communicated with men and women and how they entertained themselves in daily life.

My first chapter presents the life cycles of Empress Dowager Li and her daughter in-law Imperial Concubine Zheng. My thesis argues that imperial women had multiple identities that included daughter, mother, wife, and imperial wife and concubine. They

[31] See Ann Paludan, *The Ming Tombs* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1991). Liu Yi, *Mingdai diwang lingmu zhidu yanjiu* 明代帝王陵墓制度研究 (A Study on Ming Imperial Tomb system) (Beijing: Renmin chuban she, 2006). Xiaoneng Yang, "Archaeological Perspectives on the Princely Burials of the Ming Dynasty Enfeoffments," *Ming Studies*, 65 (May 2012): 93-118. Xiaoneng Yang, ''Ming Art and Culture from an Archaeological Perspective – Part 1: Royal and Elite Tombs,'' *Orientations* June (2006): 40–49. ''Ming Art and Culture from an Archaeological Perspective – Part 2: The Imperial Mausoleum and Elite Burial Practices,'' *Orientations* September(2006): 69–78; ''Ming Art and Culture from an Archaeological Perspective– Part 3: Textiles and Ceramics,'' *Orientations* January/February (2007): 69–80; ''Ming Art and Culture from an Archaeological Perspective – Part 4:Paintings, Calligraphy, Furniture and Tomb Figures,'' *Orientations* October (2008): 73– 80; ''Ming Art and Culture from an Archaeological Perspective– Part 5: Works of Art in Gold, Jade, and Other Media,'' *Orientations* June (2008): 58–65.

construct different phases of the life of imperial women. Examining their experience through these phases, aside from interpreting the experience as imperial elites, yields a fuller picture of their lives. I argue that they, as imperial wife and concubine, exercised the political opportunity and agency with more power and authority than previous scholarship has presented in their construction of moral and powerless imperial women in the Ming.

The second chapter employs material evidence such as Empress Dowager Li's birthday over-vest and the Dingling jewelry and ornaments to examine how Ming imperial women adorned their bodies and hair. More importantly, by interpreting the meaning of the patterns on those materials, it illuminates the power of their owners and imperial women's influence on court fashion and design. The Southeast Asian decorated elements on Ming court jewelry shows the openness of the Ming court and the aesthetical and trade connections between China and Southeast Asian states during the 16th century. Through their material objects, Ming imperial women demonstrated their power and their influence and creativity in court fashion design. This chapter also investigates the gifting practice of Empress Dowager Li and entertainment activities of imperial elites. It argues that imperial women's agency and opportunity characterized the social and political communications taking place between men and women in the Ming imperial palaces.

Chapter 1. "Sage Mother" and "*Femme Fatale*": Life Cycles of Empress Dowager Li and Imperial Concubine Zheng

This chapter presents the life cycles of two imperial women—Empress Dowager Li and Imperial Concubine Zheng. Using their official biographies in *Mingshi* and *Ming shilu* and the records from private notes, it reconstructs their life experience of daughterhood, wifehood, and motherhood and examines their political opportunity and agency. I argue that imperial women were individuals with personal thought, agency, and social relationships in their multiple identities other than as imperial wife and concubine. The social relationships of Empress Dowager Li and Imperial Concubine Zheng among men and women resulted in their different reputations in history.

Imperial Women of Ming

In the dynastic histories, women in the highest rank, such as empresses, empress dowagers, and favoured concubines who gained imperial favour or gave birth to imperial descendants are recorded in the group biography of "empresses and concubines" (*houfei zhuan* 后妃傳).[32] This tradition started from the Han 漢 dynasty (206BC-220AD), and the *Mingshi* written by scholars in the early Qing 清 (1644-1912) continued it. The *Mingshi houfei zhuan* contains the biographies of 43 imperial women, who were variously empress dowager, empress, imperial concubines, and concubines to the 16 Ming emperors (See Appendix). The ranks of imperial women below senior concubine (*guifei* 貴妃) are concubines (*fei* 妃) and consorts (*pin* 嬪). These lower ranks were not strictly processed as higher ranks in the Ming. But as long as there were women being selected to enter the

[32] Soulliére, "Palace Women", 3.

palace, their lives were seriously controlled by the court rules. Only upon the reports from The Palace Service (*shanggong* 尚宮) and permit from the Directorate of Inner-Palace Eunuchs (*neishijian* 內使監) could they obtain their clothing, food, and income. If some in the lower ranks got sick, they could not meet in person with the doctor from the inner court. Court servants reported their symptoms to the doctor who prescribed suitable medical treatment.[33]

Imperial women in the higher ranks lived under the strict household regulations of the inner court and they shouldered the responsibility of educating the female residents. In 1374, concerned about the potential threat women could bring to the palaces,[34] the founding emperor instructed his officials including Song Lian 宋濂 (1310-1381) to edit the *Huang Ming zuxun* 皇明祖訓 (*Ancestral Instructions of the August Ming*),[35] regulations of the Ming imperial family that intended to educate imperial descendants.[36] *Ancestral Instructions* has a separate category for imperial women. It prescribes that qualified candidates should come from "good families" (*liangjia* 良家)[37] and be well-educated with feminine morality and without powerful and political family backgrounds. This regulation

[33] *MS*, 114. 3504.
[34] Jiang, "Legislating Hierarchical," 29.
[35] See Shun Li, "Huang ming zuxun: yibu chuanshou zhiguo zhidao de huangshi jiaxun,"皇明祖訓：一部傳授治國之道的皇室家訓 (Ancestral Instructions of the Great Ming: An Imperial Household Instruction for Ruling the State) *Zhongguo xingzheng guanli* 3(1994): 31-33. Xu Zhenxing, "Lun Ming taizu de jiafa: Huang Ming zuxun," 論明太祖的家法：皇明祖訓 (An Analysis on the Household Regulation of Ming taizu: Ancestral Instructions of the Great Ming) *Ming Qing shi jikan* 3 (1997): 69-96. Edward L. Farmer, "Social Order in Early Ming China: Some Norms Codified in the Hung-wu Period, 1368-1398," in *Law and the State in Traditional East Asia: Six Studies on the Sources of East Asian Law*, ed. Brain E. Mcknight. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 1-36.
[36] Hui Chun Hing, "Huang Ming zuxun yu Zheng He xia xiyang,"皇明祖訓與鄭和下西洋 (Ancestral Instructions of the Great Ming and Zheng He's Voyages to the Western Oceans) *Zhongguo wenhua yanjiu suo xuebao* 51(2010): 76-77.
[37] Zhu Yuanzhang, *Huang Ming zuxun* 皇明祖訓 (Ancestral Instructions of the August Ming), 29. In *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 (Complete library of the four branches) *shibu* 史部 (Histories), edited by Ji Yun and Lu Xixiong et al., (Jiannan: qilu shushe, 1996, hereafter cited as *HMZX*), 246. 179.

made the Ming unique from the previous dynasties where imperial marriage was seen as a strategy to cement the imperial family with powerful political or military families.[38] Ming imperial princes usually married ladies from common backgrounds in order to avoid the interference of imperial relatives in court affairs. To reduce competition among princes and the emperor's women the primogeniture inheritance system designated the eldest son of the empress as the crown prince. The *Ancestral Instructions* also orders imperial women to stay away from court affairs[39] to assure the separation between inner and outer courts.[40]

The Ming inner court published titles to encourage female virtue. Usually, only the principal wife or the mother of the emperor might have the honor of editing or sponsoring the publication. In 1407, Empress Xu 徐皇后 (1362-1407) published *Neixun* 內訓 (*Inner Instructions for Female Conduct*) and *Quanshan shu* 勸善書 (*Book of Exhortations*). In 1530, Empress Dowager Jiang 蔣太后 (d. 1538) published *Nüxun* 女訓 (*Instructions for Women*). In the same tradition, Empress Dowager Li edited and published *Nüjian* 女鑒 (*A Mirror for Women*) in 1578. She also ordered the Grand Secretary Zhang Juzheng to edit the *Nüjie zhijie* 女誡直解 (*Vernacular Version of Lessons for Women*). In 1595, her daughter-in-law Imperial Concubine Zheng, in the position of imperial concubine, unprecedentedly sponsored the re-publication of *Guifan tushuo* 閨范圖說 (*Stories of Model Women for the Inner Chambers, Illustrated and Explained,* hereafter refer to as *Guifan*).[41]

[38] Soulliére, "The Imperial Marriages of the Ming Dynasty," *Papers on Far Eastern History* 37 (1988):15.
[39] *HMZX*. 29.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Lü Kun. *Guifan tushuo* 閨范圖說 (Stories of Model Women for the Inner Chambers, Illustrated and Explained) (Shanghai: shanghai guji chubanshe, 1994).

Beyond what is praised as their outstanding moral contributions, we hardly know more about Ming imperial women's life from their official biographies. The biographies are very short both in length and in revelations of their life. Official historians usually only record imperial woman's honorific title (*huihao* 徽號[42] literally, banner name), family name, the date of promotion, and the date of death. The duty of historians in traditional China was recording daily events in the court. They wrote the history of the previous dynasty to let the current emperor and officials learn the lesson and experience of their precedents to avoid making the same mistake. This didactic purpose of history writing filtered out activities from the biographies thought as out of the norm. For example, the power and legacy of Song imperial women were actually an important part of their life, but the *Songshi* 宋史 (*History of Song Dynasty*) historians overlooked these aspects.[43] The *Mingshi* is not an exception. The writing of Ming imperial women's biographies is "disappointingly thin" and the subjects are portrayed as either virtuous or remarkably wicked.[44] Among the 43 imperial women recorded in the *Mingshi*, most were seen as moral, as in the cases of the subject of our study Empress Dowager Li. Only three have negative portrayals as wicked women using imperial favour to break the norms and restrictions. They include Imperial Concubine Wan 萬皇貴妃 (1428-1487) and Concubine Li (d.1674), along with the other subject of our study, Imperial Concubine Zheng.

In sum, the official biographies used feminine virtue as the only criterion for evaluating imperial women. It either criticized and did not record the daily experience or

[42] More about honorific title see Endymion Wilkinson, *Chinese History: A New Manual* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2013), 269.
[43] See Lee, *Empresses, Art, and Agency*.
[44] Soulliére, "Palace Women," 4.

political ambitions that were thought as out of norm. What is more, because of the high status of imperial women—as wives or the mothers of the emperor— historians were required to keep their respectable front. Historians preferred to make their biographies concise instead of making political or historical mistakes by saying too much. They used such strategies to "cover up the truth to maintain a respectable front" (*wei zunzhe hui* 為尊者諱)[45] and used "few words with much concealed meaning" (*weiyan dayi* 微言大義).[46] Such caution resulted in the omission of daily experience and political ambitions of imperial women from the official biographies. To fill the gap in records and to see a more comprehensive picture, it is necessary to reinterpret their life cycles from other sources. Thus, in this chapter, aside from official biographies of Empress Dowager Li and Imperial Concubine Zheng, I also use their records in *Wanli yehuo bian* and *Zhuozhong zhi*.

In terms of morality, Empress Dowager Li and Imperial Concubine Zheng are judged to be opposites of each other. Empress Dowager Li was a self-disciplined "sage mother" who collaborated with the Grand Secretary Zhang Juzheng to support the Wanli Emperor. Historians highly praised her as the ideal image of the "paragon of motherhood for the empire," or *muyi tianxia* 母儀天下. But they considered her daughter in-law, Imperial Concubine Zheng, as a *femme fatale* who wanted Wanli Emperor to choose her son (the third son of Wanli) as crown prince, thus plunging the emperor into over ten years of dispute with his bureaucracy. Thus, Empress Dowager Li and Imperial Concubine Zheng could be seen as two extreme cases of imperial women with high ranks and with political influence. Although judged differently, they shared similar political ambition and

[45] Shengqing Wu, "Gendering the Nation: The Proliferation of Images of Zhen Fei (1876-1900) and Sai Jinhua (1872-1936) in Late Qing and Republican China," *NAN NÜ: Men, Women And Gender in China* 11 (2009): 6.
[46] Ibid., 5.

agency. Empress Dowager Li got involved in court affairs as a *de facto* regent while Imperial Concubine Zheng tried to get promoted to empress in manipulations to put her son on the throne.

Empress Dowager Li and Imperial Concubine Zheng both made a similar contribution in the education of the inner court through publication of didactic works. Empress Dowager Li edited and published *Nüjian* in 1578; she also ordered the Grand Secretary Zhang Juzheng to edit the *Nüjie zhijie*. In 1595, Imperial Concubine Zheng sponsored the re-publication of *Guifan tushuo*. She was the only one who published didactic works from a position lower than that of empress, and she was also the only one to publish despite a wicked reputation.

They were also similar in the place of origin and their upward climb to social mobility. Like most of the Ming imperial women, they came from "good families" instead of powerful official and military families, in accordance with the regulation in the *Ancestral Instructions* that required imperial princes to marry virtuous ladies from "good families". The exceptions took place in the early Ming, as in the case of Empress Xu, the principal wife of Yongle 永樂 (r. 1402-1424) and the daughter of a powerful official, Xu Da 徐達 (1332-1385). The preference for Chosŏn women from Korea existed in the early Ming court.[47] The custom of marrying Korean women in Yongle, Xuande 宣德 (r. 1425-1435), and Zhengde 正德 (r. 1505-1521) reigns followed Yuan practice tracing back to Khubilai Kaghan (r. 1271-1294).[48] The phenomenon of an imperial prince marrying a daughter from a powerful family and the custom of marrying Chosŏn women ceased in the

[47] Robison, "The Ming Court and the Legacy of the Yuan Mongols," 382-86.
[48] Ibid., 385.

second half of the Ming. Imperial women in the late Ming were mostly selected from humble families.[49]

The majority of them, such as the subjects of our study, Empress Dowager Li and Imperial Concubine Zheng, came from counties near the capital Beijing. Empress Dowager Li first served in the court as a palace maid. Imperial Concubine Zheng was selected into the court as an imperial consort candidate (*Xuanshi* 選仕), which was the lowest rank among imperial consorts. Those lucky enough to win the imperial favor, as did Empress Dowager Li and Imperial Concubine Zheng, had the most possibility of giving birth to imperial descendants, a situation that propelled an upward mobility rarely seen in imperial women in other dynasties. According to the statistics, 64 percent of imperial women (192 out of 300) were promoted from chambermaid in the Ming court.[50] Empress Dowager Li and Imperial Concubine Zheng were two cases among them, and they were ultimately promoted to the very top of the hierarchy in the inner court. Soulliére attributes the upward mobility of Ming imperial women to their humble origin.[51] Without seeing the full picture of their efforts, her explanation is not documented by adequate evidence.

The difference and the similarity between Li and Zheng made them two extreme but also representative cases of imperial women in the late Ming court. I intend to study their life cycles to illuminate the opportunity, agency and social relationships of Ming imperial women.

Empress Dowager Li (1545-1614)

[49] Hsieh, "From Charwoman to Empress Dowager," 47.
[50] Ibid., 47.
[51] Soulliére, "Palace Women," 382-385.

Empress Dowager Li was the biological mother of the Wanli Emperor and served as co-regent in the first decade of his reign. She is also known as Empress Dowager Cisheng 慈聖 or Xiaoding 孝定 under her horrific title, for the 42 long years during which she enjoyed a prestigious and respectful life that came with political opportunity. Recognized as a strict mother in educating the Wanli Emperor, she forbade her natal family relatives from getting political advantages. Buddhism was popular in and outside the palace during the Wanli reign. She was a devout Buddhist and she glorified herself by claiming to be the reincarnation of the "Nine Lotus Bodhisattva" (*jiulian pusa* 九蓮菩薩).[52] Wanyan Yunzhu 完顏惲珠 (1771-1833), the Qing anthologist of women's writings, compared her morality and kindness to the sage-kings Yao 堯 and Shun 舜 in her *Langui baolu* 蘭閨寶錄 (Precious record from the maidens' chambers).[53] These images form what we know about her as a moral empress dowager, but to better observe her life as an imperial woman we need to re-read her life from the beginning.

Empress Dowager Li came from a meager merchant family from Huo County 漷縣 in Beijing. In 1560, when she was 15, her father Li Wei 李偉 (d. 1584) sent her to be selected as a palace maid. She was recruited as a chambermaid for the Longqing 隆慶 Emperor (r. 1567-1572) and in 1567 she got recognized as Senior Concubine Li. There is no record of her personal name. Not having a recorded personal name was a usual situation for imperial women in history. For the imperial wife and concubine, the combination of

[52] See Chen, "Ming Wanli shiqi Cisheng huangtaihou," 196.
[53] Wanyan Yunzhu, *Langui baolu* 蘭閨寶錄 (*Precious record from the maidens' chambers*) comp. 1831, Hongxiangguan edition 紅香館刻本, McGill and Harvard Yenching Library, Ming Qing Women's Writings Digitization Project, accessed April 6, 2015. http://digital.library.mcgill.ca.login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/mingqing/search/details-poem.php?poemID=6855&language=ch

their family name with the imperial rank was the way to recognize them in the official record. Those in higher ranks such as Empress Dowager Li were recognized by the honorific name. Usually, their honorific names use the characters that refer to female virtue, for examples, *xian* 賢, worthy; *shu* 淑, virtuous; *zhuang* 莊, dignified; *jing* 敬, respectful; *hui* 惠, chaste; *shun* 順, obedient; *kang* 康, healthy; *ning* 寧, peaceful.[54] In the Ming inner court, since most of the imperial consorts and chambermaids were selected from humble families, they probably did not have formal given names. Personal names were restricted to girls from elite families. In the palace, only princesses who lived to adult age had their personal names recorded. For example, Empress Dowager Li gave birth to 4 princesses. The eldest one was honored as Princess Taihe 太和 (d.1560) but because she died at a very early age, her personal name is not recorded. The other three who grew up and got married have their personal names recorded as Zhu Yao-e 朱堯娥 (1565-1590), Zhu Yaoying 朱堯嫈 (1567-1594), and Zhu Yaoyuan 朱堯媛 (1573-1629). Names for princesses all shared the imperial surname of Zhu 朱 and the generational given name—*yao* 堯, the name of the legendary sage-king Yao[55] who lived before the Xia 夏 dynasty (2200-1700 BC). The last characters in their given names *e* 娥, *ying* 嫈, and *yuan* 媛 have the woman radical of *Nü* 女, which identifies their gender. And these characters have complimentary meanings as beautiful, good lady, and gentle.

Chambermaids kept their family name after entering the court, but since they did not have imperial rank to identify themselves, they were usually given a name that was

[54] *MS*, 114. 3504.
[55] Emperor Yao 堯, c. 2200 BC

easy to address. For example, on the night of October 21st, 1542, 16 palace maids tried to kill the Jiajing 嘉靖 emperor (r. 1521-1567) in his sleep. Their assassination failed because Empress Fang 方皇后 (d. 1547) stopped the servants and saved the emperor. The incident is recorded with few details in the official history, and the unofficial history (*yeshi* 野史) has recorded this incident in numerous versions. The exact reason for the assassination is still unclear, but the names of chambermaids are recorded (Jin Ying 金英, Su Chuanyao 蘇川藥, Yang Yuxiang 楊玉香, Xing Cuilian 邢翠蓮, Yao Shucui 姚淑翠, Yang Cuiying 楊翠英, Guan Meixiu 關梅秀, Liu Miaolian 劉妙蓮, Chen Juhua 陳菊花, Wang Xiulan 王秀蘭, Zhang Jinlian 張金蓮, Xu Qiuhua 徐秋花, Deng Jinxiang 鄧金香, Zhang Chunjing 張春景, Huang Yulian 黃玉蓮, Yao Shugao 姚叔皋).[56] The names all use the characters that refer to flowers (such as *lian* 蓮 lotus, *ju* 菊 chrysanthemum, *lan* 蘭 orchid, and *he* 荷 water lily) and were common names of servants in commoner families. Shen Defu thought that chambermaids' names in the Ming court were the least elegant.[57] These flower meaning names were just the identifications for the servant's social status rather than their personal names.

Seeing that the women from both elite and humble backgrounds had given names, imperial women like Empress Dowager Li must have had names when they entered the palaces. But the given names are not in the official record and the Ming imperial women were recognized by their natal surname and their designated names derived from their place in the hierarchy of the emperor's harem. Ming princes married girls without powerful

[56] Xu Jie and Zhang Juzheng et al. *Ming shizong shilu* 明世宗實錄 (Veritable Records of Ming Shizong) (Nangang: Zhongyang yanjiu yuan lishi yuyan yanjiu suo, 1966), juan 267.
[57] *YHB*, *juan* 3.

family background in order to prevent maternal relatives from participating in court affairs. They did not intend to or were unable to separate the ties between imperial women and their natal relatives. This can be seen in the fact that the imperial court recognized imperial women by their family surnames, and benefits were granted to Empress Dowager Li's parents and brothers.

Her mother, Woman Wang (Wang Shi 王氏), was also a self-disciplined person praised by the historians for her propriety. She often visited Empress Dowager Li in the palace.[58] Each time Empress Dowager Li invited her to dinner in the inner court, she refused on the basis that an empress dowager should not share dinner with a commoner like herself.[59] She considered her visits with her daughter in the inner court, a place reserved for the imperial family and palace servants, already an outstanding privilege.

Her father, Li Wei, was a merchant, and he received an official title because of his relationship to Empress Dowager Li. In 1567, when her son, the future Wanli Emperor, bacame crown prince, Li Wei was promoted to *Dudu tongzhi* 都督同知 (Commander-in-chief). Six years later when the Wanli Emperor took the throne, he got promoted to Count of Wuqing 武清伯, then as Earl of Wuqing 武清侯, owing to his status as maternal grandfather to the throne.[60] But these honored titles afforded him only modest stipends and land grants.[61] He wanted more monetary profit and became an agent operating supply depots and working between tax deliverers and palace eunuchs. The Wanli Emperor

[58] *MS*, 114. 3534.
[59] Fan shuzhi, *Wanli zhuan* 萬曆传 (Biography of the Wanli Emperor) (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshu ju, 1996), 286.
[60] *MS*, 300. 7679.
[61] Huang, *1587*, 14.

eventually informed Empress Dowager Li of her father's corruption and collaboration with palace eunuchs. Humiliated and extremely angry, Empress Dowager Li wanted the case to be settled by law. Zhang Juzheng interceded and said that was too strict for a maternal relative. Li Wei was instead summoned to stand in front of Empress Dowager Li's residence in the imperial grounds to receive a reprimand.[62] Her official biography recorded this event to demonstrate Empress Dowager Li's self-discipline and strict management of her natal relatives. Not demanding special benefits for her natal relatives already made her look virtuous, not to speak of requesting that they be punished in public. But Empress Dowager Li might not have been totally impartial on the issue of her natal relatives.

In fact, her son the Wanli Emperor had been a source of support to her natal relatives. In 1582, five years after Li Wei's corruption incident, he issued a decree to regulate the landholdings of the maternal relatives:

> The empress's natal family members could keep 100 *qing* of land that imperial family ordered to them for five generations; honored consort and other consorts' family members could keep 70 *qing* of land that the imperial family ordered them for five generations . . . this regulation applies from now on.[63]

This new decree did strictly restrict the landholdings of maternal relatives, especially when compared with the Jingtai 景泰 reign (r.1450-1456), when maternal relatives held land around Beijing in thousands of *qing*.[64] Wanli shrank maternal relatives'

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[62] Hsieh, "From Charwoman to Empress Dowager," 56-57.
[63] Wen Tiren et al, *Ming Shenzong shilu* 明神宗實錄 (Veritable records of Ming Shenzong) (Nangang: Zhongyang yanjiu yuan lishi yuyan yanjiu suo, 1966, hereafter cited as *SZSL*), *juan* 243.
[64] Jing Cui, "Mingdai waiqi zhuangtian chutan," 明代外戚莊田初探 (Basic Exploration on Ming Imperial in-law's Landholdings*) Nongye kaogu* 3 (2013): 72.

landholdings to ten percent of the Jingtai period. After the 1573 Single whip tax reform, this new decree may have increased the state revenue. It also showed Empress Dowager Li's hands-off approach to her natal relatives' monetary activities.

Empress Dowager Li took care of her natal relatives even in subsequent generations. Her elder brother, Li Wenquan 李文全, inherited the father's noble title and passed it down to his son Li Mingcheng 李銘誠 and to his grandson Li Guorui 李國瑞.[65] In the Ming, enjoying the imperial benefit for over four generations was a prestige not usually granted to maternal relatives.[66] Although historians praised Empress Dowager Li's impartiality, her 42 years' of being an empress dowager did benefit the Li family for over 4 generations. This relationship identifies her role as a daughter to the Li family, an important but usually neglected duty for imperial women.

Indeed, her ability to benefit her natal family also demonstrates her ambition and agency as an empress dowager. Her life as an imperial woman started in 1560, when she was 15 years old serving as a palace maid to the Longqing Emperor. Her youthful charm and beauty quickly attracted his sexual interest in her and she gave birth to their two sons and four daughters.[67] We can assume that Empress Dowager Li got imperial favor right after she entered the palace in 1560. Princess Taihe was her first child, but she died soon after birth in 1560. Losing a child must have been a depressing experience to the fifteen-year old girl who also feared losing imperial favor in a childless situation. But the

[65] *MS*, 300. 7679.
[66] Hsieh, "From Charwoman to Empress Dowager," 57.
[67] In 1560, Empress Dowager Li born princess Taihe. In 1563, Empress Dowager Li gave birth to Zhu Yijun 朱翊鈞, the future Wanli Emperor. In 1565, she gave birth to a daughter Zhu Yao'e 朱堯娥; In 1567, she gave birth to daughter Zhu Yaoying 朱堯嫈; In 1568, she born her second son Zhu Yiliu 朱翊鏐; In 1573, she born her last daughter Zhu Yaoyuan 朱堯媛.

Longqing Emperor kept her for twelve years until he died in 1572, during which she gave him another three daughters and two sons, the last child born in 1572. Especially for a girl from humble origins, it was not an easy task to keep the attention of an emperor with a large harem. Aside from the two empresses, Empress Li (d. 1558) and Empress Dowager Chen (d.1596), the Longqing Emperor had another 24 women ranking as concubines or upper concubines.[68] From the age of 15 to 27, the role of a wife was Empress Dowager Li's most significant duty, making sure that she was attractive and affectionate. Giving birth to sons also helped her promotion from chambermaid to senior concubine, a position that identified her as a good wife and a successful imperial woman.

There is no record about Empress Dowager Li's physical appearance or beauty. Relying on beauty to attract the attention of the Longqing Emperor's affection may not have been her only strategy. She tried to be well-behaved as a good wife. In 1563, she gave birth to Longqing's third son. Because his two elder sons died before adulthood, her older son, the future Wanli Emperor, was designated the crown prince in 1569. Being the mother to the future emperor promoted her to the position of senior concubine. The Longqing Emperor justified the promotion on the basis of her daily virtuous conduct:

> I follow the *Ancestral Instructions*, that my consorts must come from 'good families', which will be helpful for organizing the inner court system . . . You, Lady Li, have a tender heart, are loyal and obedient, morally chaste, deferential and

[68] Hsieh, "From Charwoman to Empress Dowager," 47.

without any wrongdoing . . . I would like to bestow you with the title of senior concubine.[69]

At the end of the document, Emperor Longqing gave a brief but important summary: "morality justifies her promotion" (*wei yi de sheng* 位以德升).[70]

In 1572, the Longqing Emperor died at the young age of 35. Empress Dowager Li was 27 years old and had been designated senior concubine Li (Li *guifei* 李貴妃) for only 3 years. For a woman to start her widowhood at age 27 must have been miserable. No records tell us of her emotions at the time, but she might have been sad but relaxed for ending 12 years' stressful life as a concubine competing among dozens in the emperor's harem. She could finally stand out as the new emperor's mother and ensure a secure position as an empress dowager. Before focusing on the most significant period of her life, motherhood, we should not ignore her role as a wife who tried so hard to behave virtuously to please the emperor. The effort she spent getting promoted from a palace maid to a senior concubine was an important twelve years of her life that enabled her leave a legacy.

In 1572, Wanli Emperor started his reign at the age of 9. Due to his young age, the Longqing Emperor on his death bed had ordered that Empress Dowager Li and his principal wife, Empress Dowager Chen, become co-regents under the guidance of Grand Secretary Zhang Juzheng and eunuch director Feng Bao 馮保 (d.1583) to ensure that the young emperor governed well and brought the state to a prosperous situation. Empress Dowager Li was the *de facto* regent, as she actively collaborated with Zhang Juzheng and

[69] Zhang Juzheng et al, Ming *Muzong shilu* 明穆宗實錄 (Veritable Records of Ming Muzong) (Nangang: Zhongyang yanjiu yuan lishi yuyan yanjiu suo, 1966), *juan* 6.
[70] Ibid.

Feng Bao, and subjected Wanli to a strict education. She enjoyed political opportunity and a respectable reputation in the outer court, while Empress Dowager Chen, although the principal wife, was in a voiceless situation.

With support from the most powerful official Zhang Juzheng and the most powerful eunuch Feng Bao, Empress Dowager Li got direct access to the emperor and court administration, thus establishing a superior role in the regency. As senior concubine of Longqing Emperor, she was ranked lower than Empress Dowager Chen, his principal wife. Under Ming regulations, as long as the principal empress dowager was alive, the lower-ranked biological mother of the emperor could not be honored with honorific names. This was the manner to clarify the difference between emperor's principal wife and concubines.[71] But Eunuch Feng Bao was able to get Empress Dowager Li an honorific title equaling that of Empress Dowager Chen at the same time. She was honored as Empress Dowager *Cisheng* 慈聖 (Kindly Blessed) while Empress Dowager Chen was honored as Empress Dowager *Rensheng* 仁聖 (Benevolently Blessed). Empress Dowager Chen lived in Ciqing palace 慈清宮 and Empress Dowager Li was supposed to live in Cining palace 慈寧宮. These palaces were specifically used as residences for the empress and senior concubine. But Grand Secretary Zhang Juzheng requested that Empress Dowager Li reside with the young Wanli Emperor in his palace, Qianqing palace 乾清宮,[72] in order to better educate him.

Empress Dowager Li and Empress Dowager Chen were co-regents for 23 years, and the latter died in 1596. Although placed in a superior position, true to her virtuous

[71] *YHB*, 95.
[72] *MS,* 114. 3534-3535.

reputation, Empress Dowager Li treated her co-regent with respect rather than jealousy. She insisted that Wanli show respect and filial piety to Empress Dowager Chen, whom he often visited in the morning. Each time she heard the sound of Wanli's sedan passing by her gate, she would excitedly prepare to welcome him with pleasure.[73] This record shows that the co-regents had a peaceful and respectful relationship with each other, even though Empress Dowager Chen was not Wanli's biological mother.

In terms of the co-regency, Empress Dowager Li was obviously more powerful, not only due to her relationship to the emperor as biological mother, but also due to an active relationship with Zhang Juzheng and Feng Bao. She was already building this collaborative relationship at the end of the Longqing reign. In the transition between Longqing and Wanli, her support allowed Feng Bao to become the eunuch director of *Silijian* 司禮監 (Directorate of Ceremonial), the most powerful eunuch agency in the Ming.[74] She had been unhappy with eunuch directors Chen Hong 陳宏 and Meng Chong 孟崇 because they had pampered the Longqing Emperor with sexual indulgence that led to his poor health. But she liked the well-educated eunuch Feng Bao, who took good care of her son, the young crown prince. The *Zhuozhong zhi* talks about Feng Bao being courteous like a scholar and good at playing zither, reading, classical singing, and *touhu* 投壺.[75] So when he became the most powerful eunuch in the Wanli reign, he was very grateful to Empress Dowager Li and supported all of her orders.[76]

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[73] *MS,* 114. 3435.
[74] Jang, "The Eunuch Agency," 116.
[75] Ancient banquet game of throwing arrows into a pot, the winner determined by the number of arrows thrown in, and the loser required to drink as punishment.
[76] Lin, "Zhang Juzheng gaige," 55.

Empress Dowager Li also helped the official Zhang Juzheng to climb to the position of Grand Secretary. Tradition required that a regency be set up to guide new emperors who were minors. Thus when the Longqing Emperor was dying, he requested that senior officials supervise the young emperor and the empress dowager in the matters of the court. At the time, the cabinet official (*neige* 內閣) Gao Gong 高拱 (1512-1578) often neglected the Wanli Emperor and the two empress dowagers. He was known to have said: "how could a ten year old boy take the emperor's duty?"[77] Feng Bao repeated his comment to Wanli and the two empress dowagers. So Empress Dowager Li decreased his power, a situation that Zhang Juzheng also wanted. This common interest grew the seed of a cooperation that secured the dismissal of Gao Gong in the summer of 1572, the first year of the Wanli reign. Hundreds of officials, gathered at the plaza in front of the palace gate, heard a eunuch read an announcement from Wanli, Empress Dowager Li, and Empress Dowager Chen.[78] It said:

> The Longqing Emperor declared in his testament that the crown prince was so young and needed you, officials, to assist him. But recently the *da xueshi* 大學士 (senior scholar) Gao Gong dismissed the emperor and intended to control the court himself. The three of us have no idea what he is going to do. His self-indulgent activities scare us. We request that Gao Gong leave his position and go back to his hometown immediately.[79]

With Gao Gong removed from office, Zhang Juzheng replaced him as Grand Secretary. It was the first case in the Ming dynasty that an empress dowager removed a

[77] *MS*, 305. 7800.
[78] Huang, *1587*, 14.
[79] *SZSL*. 9.

grand official. The act violated the regulation of "stay away from court affairs" for imperial women.[80] But it did not raise doubt in the court, partly because Empress Dowager Li had the support of Zhang Juzheng and his colleagues. So, this event not only established Zhang Juzheng's powerful position, it also confirmed the prestige of Empress Dowager Li.

Zhang Juzheng and Feng Bao supported each other in their upward path in the complicated court politics. In removing Gao Gong, Feng Bao followed the instruction of Zhang Juzheng to observe and report immediately on Gao Gong's words and actions, and so they seized Gao Gong's comment: "How could a ten years old boy take the emperor's duty?" With Zhang Juzheng's permission, Feng Bao spread the words to Empress Dowagers and to the young Wanli. Feng Bao helped Zhang Juzheng get rid of his political competitor, and in return he got a supervisorial role to the young emperor. Longqing's will requested that *neige* officials, such as Zhang Juzheng and Gao Gong, as well as the eunuch Feng Bao, assist Wanli. Such an appointment (*guming* 顧命) was traditionally never given to an eunuch, so it was likely that Zhang Juzheng and Feng Bao had changed the will. In his memoirs, Gao Gong also showed doubt the authenticity of the will. [81]

In this relationship with two powerful men Empress Dowager Li contributed to the first ten years of the Wanli reign (1573-1582) by supporting Zhang Juzheng's reforms that helped the economy to recover and flourish.[82] Historians usually attribute the economic growth to Zhang Juzheng, but even the latter acknowledged the educational contribution of Empress Dowager Li to the emperor.

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[80] Lin, "Zhang Juzheng gaige," 56.
[81] Fan, *Wanli zhuan*, 12.
[82] *MS*, 114. 3535.

Empress Dowager Li educated the Wanli Emperor in a strict manner.[83] During the years when she lived with him in Qianqing palace, she did not allow maids under the age of 30 to serve him. She required him to get up very early every day. Each morning, she woke up the emperor before 5 am by calling out "The emperor will get up!" Maids sat at each side of the emperor and supported him into a seated position. Other maids quickly helped him wash his face, dress him up and send him on the carriage for the morning audience.[84] Zhang Juzheng thought: "All her instructions to the emperor mentioned either being close to virtuous officials or accepting sincere advice, either caring about commoners or being economical. The empress dowager is both a kind mother and strict teacher to the emperor."[85] Zhang Juzheng once praised her handwriting: "the style and strokes of each character are refined and exquisite."[86] This praise emphasized her moral education of Wanli and he honored her as a teacher of the emperor, ranked equally with himself in the outer court.

Empress Dowager Li was not simply a supporter in the collaborative relationship with Zhang Juzheng, she also initiated plans to work together. The most concrete example of their cooperation is publishing *Nüjie zhijie* in 1578. At Wanli's first marriage, she appointed Zhang Juzheng to edit the *Nüjie* 女诫 (*Lessons for Women*) into vernacular language in order to educate the inner court. It was necessary to have a vernacular version of the feminine didactic books for those humble-origin palace women in the Ming court, who needed an easy to read textbook to get trained on morality. Usually, feminine didactic books were written by top-ranked imperial women (empress and empress dowager), elite

[83] *MS*, 114. 3535.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Fan, *Wanli Zhuan*, 146.
[86] Wu, "Mingdai gongting," 281.

women, and Confucian scholars and officials.[87] But why was Zhang Juzheng the only eligible candidate to edit the work? Some studies claim it was because Zhang Juzheng had been Wanli's teacher and his experience and knowledge on the Confucian classics qualified him to handle the editing work.[88] But at the time, there were many qualified scholars working in the *neige* like Lü Tiaoyang 呂調陽 (1516-1580), Zhang Siwei 張四維 (1526-1585), and Shen Shixing 申時行 (1535-1614), who had passed the highest civil service examination that qualified them to serve in the court. Although they were all qualified for the editing work, Empress Dowager Li did not select them and none among them had any real power in the court.[89] She selected Zhang Juzheng because he had helped her, and it just seemed like good timing to cement the relationship with him.[90]

Another example happened in 1580, when the emperor turned 17 and requested independent authority from his mother. But she replied: "You are still too young to deal with all the complicated affairs in and outside the court. Master Zhang [Juzheng] committed himself to support you and to serve the state, and it would be merciless if you just sent him away. Let us discuss your independent authority in your 30s?"[91] Zhang Juzheng did not live to see Wanli turn into his 30s. He was sick in 2 years' time and he died in 1582. Empress Dowager Li clearly wanted Zhang Juzheng to remain in power, for it was through him that Empress Dowager Li exercised control of the emperor and the appointments in the outer court.

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[87] Li Yuan, "Zhang Juzheng yu gongting Nüshu: Nüjie zhijie," 張居正與宮廷女書：女誡直解 (Zhang Juzheng and Admonitory Books for Women in the Palace *Nüjie zhijie*), *Gudai wenming* 7(2013): 99.
[88] Ibid., 100.
[89] Lin, "Zhang Juzheng gaige,"57.
[90] Li, "Zhang Juzheng," 100.
[91] Lin, "Zhang Juzheng gaige,"57.

In the name of morality, Empress Dowager Li ruled the court as a *de facto* regent. Her cooperation with Zhang Juzheng allowed her to play a significant role in the outer court. Some historians claim that her power met a decline after the death of Zhang Juzheng in 1582,[92] because she appeared voiceless when Wanli accused Zhang Juzheng and Feng Bao of corruption that year. But on the basis of Empress Dowager Li's resolute influence on the emperor in his daily life and on the imperial succession dispute from 1586 to 1601, I argue that her influence in the outer court continued after the death of Zhang Juzheng.

In 1578, when Wanli married Empress Xiaoduan at the age of 15, Empress Dowager Li had moved out of Wanli's palace. But her control over the emperor's daily life continued into his adulthood. One evening in November 1580, when Wanli was 17, he got angry at his attendants for not singing the latest song. He took up a sword and seemed about to strike them. The other attendants begged for mercy and he agreed to "punish" the girls by cutting off tufts of hair from their heads. Feng Bao reported this misbehavior to Empress Dowager Li. Hearing her son's wrongdoing, she removed her ornaments and cosmetics and presented herself for punishment.[93] She asked Feng Bao to read to Wanli the Huo Guang 霍光 (d. 68) biography in the *Hanshu* 漢書 (*History of the Former Han Dynasty*).[94] She threatened him with removal as emperor, as she considered a replacement by her second son, Zhu Yiliu 朱翊鏐 (1568-1614).[95] That she used a serious threat on an independent emperor at 17 years old is impressive, but more surprisingly, he kneeled down and asked for her forgiveness. He cried with regret and promised to behave well in the

[92] Lin, "Zhang Juzheng gaige," 59.
[93] Soulliére, "Palace Women," 375-76.
[94] Huo Guang (d. 68 BCE) reliance on his brother Huo Qubing's power got meteoric rise in his political career, and became a powerful official in the Han palace. Huo Guang has been seen as a typical case that imperial in-laws' power could affect the issue of inheritance.
[95] Lin, "Zhang Juzheng gaige," 58.

future.[96] By educating the emperor in such a strict manner, Empress Dowager Li exerted great impact on his administrative policy. And Wanli became the most powerful and legitimate supporter who extended her prestige in the inner court and sometimes even to the outer court.

Empress Dowager Li was a pious Buddhist. After a mysterious dream she deified herself as the re-incarnation of Nine-lotus Bodhisattva. In the dream, the Nine-lotus Bodhisattva had nine heads riding on a phoenix and teaching the Nine-lotus sutra (*jiulian jing* 九蓮經) to the empress dowager.[97] Her Buddhist beliefs in the sacredness of life made Wanli's no-kill administration policies more merciful. But sometimes Zhang Juzheng insisted on the death sentence, in which case she and Wanli would compromise.

Empress Dowager Li's enthusiastic sponsorship of Buddhism resulted in excessive spending. Building Buddhist temples around Beijing cost more than ten thousands,[98] not counting constructions outside Beijing. Extravagance was a fault that blemished her virtuous reputation. *Mingshi* historians were concerned: "When Zhang Juzheng served in the court, he usually persuaded the empress dowager to be frugal, but his words did not work."[99] In the context of her entire conduct, extravagant spending on patronage has usually been forgotten. I observe that her patronage of Buddhism relied on Wanli's support in the name of public concern and religion. Wanli wrote to celebrate the re-building of Putuo 普陀 temple, an undertaking that Empress Dowager Li sponsored:

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[96] *MS*, 114. 3535.
[97] Yan Chongnian, "Cisheng taihou yu Yong'an shouta," 慈聖太后與永安壽塔 (Empress Dowager Cisheng and Yong'an Buddhist Pagoda) *Gugong bowuyuan yuankan* 1(1995): 6.
[98] *MS*, 114. 3536.
[99] Ibid.

> The Putuo temple was destroyed by a fire. My sage mother was sorrowful for its destruction and decided to rebuild on its original foundation. I admire her compassionate orders—no disturbing the people, no brothering the army and artists, no wasting on natural, human, and economical resources. These orders show her love and care for the people and her intention to support the state. I respect her thoughtful intention and would like to carry her kindness, thus I make a donation on behalf of the state treasury for the re-building project. My follow officials all honestly support the building, both financially and mentally. With the continual support and supervision of construction, the temple is now re-established.[100]

Wanli did not consider it a money-wasting project, but thought that it represented the "state wide spread of the court blessing."[101] With sustained support from Wanli, Empress Dowager Li's patronage on Buddhist temples extended to each corner of the empire. From 1572 to 1608, at least 36 temples were constructed around the Beijing region under her patronage. The annual construction of Buddhist temples was also under-going in other provinces outside the capital, for example, the Da Baota 大寶塔 temple in Shanxi Wutai Mountain, Longchang 隆昌 temple in Nanjing, and numerous temples on Putuo Mountain in Zhejiang province.[102] And each temple may have similar inscriptions to that of Putuo temple, emphasizing the kindness and the generosity of Empress Dowager Li. Thus her reputation as a Buddhist surely spread, despite the decree in the *Ancestral Instructions* that forbade palace women from venturing outside the palace or visiting the Beijing

[100] Zhou Yingbin, *Putuo shan zhi* 普陀山志 (Record of Putuo Mountain, between 1573 and 1619, 5vols.), *juan* 1, 15-16, accessed January 20, 2015, http://pds.lib.harvard.edu/pds/view/11279830.
[101] Ibid., 1. 17.
[102] Wu, "Mingdai gongting," 266-310.

temples. Through patronage of Buddhist temples she was able to transfer her influence outside the palace. Timothy Brook studied the rise of gentry's patronage to Buddhist temples during the late Ming period.[103] Empress Dowager Li's patronage of temples around the state inevitably increased her popularity in both gentry and commoner families. Such a wide-spread reputation could hardly be matched by that of Wanli. In the Ming dynasty, the image of the emperor was almost invisible to the public. Only the reign title circulated with material items to elites who could afford imperial made products.[104] In comparison, putting her name on the temples' inscriptions could make the name of Empress Dowager Li spread more widely than emperor's reign title, because the visitors to Buddhist temples were diversified in gender and social status.

Through supervising Wanli Emperor's daily life and influencing him with virtue and Buddhist religion, Empress Dowager Li was still an active powerful woman in the court, even after she left the position of regency. Her son the Wanli Emperor became the filial supporter who established her fame and reputation around the state. However, she was not always on the side of Wanli. From 1586 to 1601, she was in her 40s when she stopped Wanli from designating as crown prince the son of Imperial Concubine Zheng, the other subject of my study.

Starting from 1586, the officials in Wanli's court pushed him to choose as crown prince his eldest son, Changluo 常洛 (1582-1620), whose mother was a chambermaid serving in Empress Dowager Li's Cining palace. In accordance with primogeniture and as

[103] See Timothy Brook, *Praying for Power: Buddhism and the Formation of Gentry Society in Late-Ming China* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1993).
[104] Craig Clunas, *Empire of Great Brightness: Visual and Material Cultures of Ming China, 1368-1644* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2007), 41.

regulated by *Ancestral Instructions*, if the principal wife did not have a son (as was the case with Wanli), the eldest son of the emperor by lower-ranked concubines should inherit the throne. But Wanli wanted to give the throne to Changxun 常洵 (1586-1641), born to his favorite concubine, Imperial Concubine Zheng. The designation of heir was thus stalled for over 10 years because he did not accept his official's proposal until 1601. One day in 1586, when the Wanli emperor came to visit Empress Dowager Li, she asked him why he did not choose his eldest son as the crown prince. Wanli replied: "because he is just a son of a maid." She was extremely angry at his reply and yelled: "you are also a son of a maid." The response of Empress Dowager Li scared Wanli, and he kneeled down immediately and did not stand up without her permission.

On the imperial succession issue, Empress Dowager Li was on the side of the chambermaid, saying: "A mother should be valued by her noble son. How could you discriminate against her for her humble origins?"[105] Wanli finally designated as crown prince his eldest son and promoted his mother, Chambermaid Wang, to the rank of Concubine Gong 恭妃. As Empress Dowager Li had herself been a chambermaid before her promotion, she wanted to justify her position. Showing sympathy towards the maid who shared a similar experience with her was imaginable. On this issue, Empress Dowager Li was also on the side of Wanli's principal wife Empress Xiaoduan. During the succession dispute, Empress Xiaoduan was in her 20s, and had given birth to Princess Rongchang 榮昌 (1583-1647) and it was possible for her to give birth to a son, who would be designated the crown prince. If Imperial Concubine Zheng's son became the crown prince, she would

[105] *MS*, 114. 3535.

very probably be legitimately promoted to the position of empress and Empress Xiaoduan's position would be in danger. Empress Dowager Li's insistence on primogeniture became a barrier to Imperial Concubine Zheng's effort to get promoted to the empress position. The pressure from Empress Dowager Li and court officials finally persuaded Wanli to let the maid's son become the crown prince in 1601.[106] In 1605, Changluo's eldest son, the future Tianqi 天啟 Emperor (r. 1620-1627), was born. To celebrate the birth, Wanli promoted Chambermaid Wang to Imperial Concubine, the same rank as Imperial Concubine Zheng.

Empress Dowager Li's support allowed Chambermaid Wang to be promoted from a palace maid to Imperial Concubine, but Imperial Concubine Zheng remained at that position until her death. Although there is no record showing clearly the relationship between Empress Dowager Li and her daughter-in-law, Imperial Concubine Zheng, it could hardly have been friendly after the imperial succession dispute. During important court rituals, as required, Imperial Concubine Zheng was always the companion to Empress Dowager Li, and Empress Xiaoduan was the companion to Empress Dowager Chen, due to the similar ranks they shared.[107] The rituals proceeded as regulation, while emotionally, it would be a torturous moment for Empress Dowager Li and Imperial Concubine Zheng. Their contradiction erupted after Changluo was chosen as the crown prince in October 1601. Instead of sending Changxun to take his duty at his fiefdom outside Beijing[108] Imperial Concubine Zheng delayed his departure for 10 more years by using all kinds of excuses, which included the unfinished construction of his fiefdom palace. Until 1614, when Changxun's fiefdom palace in Henan had finally completed construction, the officials

[106] *MS*, 114. 3535.
[107] Fan, *Wanli Zhuan*, 285.
[108] On more about the trip to fiefdom see Jessica Harrison-Hall, *Ming: Art, People and Palaces* (London: The British Museum Press, 2014), 16.

asked Changxun to leave Beijing immediately for his duty at the fiefdom, in order to eliminate his claim to the throne. Imperial Concubine Zheng wanted to delay her son's departure date to the next year, so she said that he should stay and celebrate the 70th birthday of his grandmother, Empress Dowager Li. But the latter replied: "Do you think my second son, Prince Lu[109] can come back to Beijing and celebrate my birthday?"[110] Such a tough reply scared Zheng and she dared no longer delay her son's departure.[111] Empress Dowager Li died before her 70th birthday, but the decision to send Changxun to his fiefdom was not revocable.

Chinese historians named this imperial succession dispute as one shaking the foundation of the state (*guoben zhizheng* 國本之爭). It was historically significant because it started Wanli's alienation from his court, and made him a famous no-show emperor for the remaining 20 years of his reign. Empress Dowager Li's support of the orthodox officials and *Ancestral Instructions* are recorded in her *Mingshi* biography, where she is credited with ending the court dispute in 1586 when she was mad at Wanli's discrimination against Chambermaid Wang: "Since then Changluo legally became the crown prince."[112] This statement may have exaggerated her contribution, because Changluo did not become the crown prince until 1601.[113] But considering Empress Dowager Li's focus on moral ideology and her supporting gesture to Empress Xiaoduan and Chambermaid Wang we should not diminish her role. The succession dispute allows us to observe her decisive role in an important court matter. We can observe her relationships with other imperial women

[109] Zhu Yiliu 朱翊鐐 (1568-1614), the fourth son of Longqing Emperor. Started serving in the Weihui fiefdom (now Henan province) at his 22, serving continually for 26 years.
[110] *MS*, 114. 3536.
[111] Ibid., 3535-3536.
[112] Ibid., 3535.
[113] Lin, "Guoben zhi zheng," 120.

such as Chambermaid Wang, Empress Xiaoduan, and Imperial Concubine Zheng. The sources are silent on the relationships among these imperial women who were associated with the succession dispute, but such a topic must have been hotly debated, perhaps secretly among servants or others, in their daily life for over ten years.

A powerful player in the Ming, Empress Dowager Li died in March, 1614 at the age of 69. Her respectful reputation and her virtues were praised, as seen in the 12 character-long title of "Filial, stately, chaste, pure, imperial, humane, principled, majestic, assistant to heaven, blessed, sage, imperial empress dowager 孝定貞純欽仁端肅弼天祚聖皇太后."[114] She was buried in her husband, Longqing's mausoleum, Zhaoling 昭陵. The Portuguese Jesuit Alvaro Semedo (1585-1658) witnessed the funeral:

> The emperor himself helped to lower the body onto its quilt and pillow and then strewed upon her pearls and precious stones to the value of 70,000 crowns and placed by her side fifty pieces of cloth of gold and fifty of cloth of silver, which would truly have been enough to have maintained a gallant man all his lifetime.[115]

The material appearing at her funeral represented her prestigious position in her life time and offers a new lens to examine her presence and power through material objects.

After Empress Dowager Li died, Wanli lived for another 6 years and was succeeded by the Taichang Emperor, who died after a month on the throne. His two sons, or her great-grandsons, Zhu Youjiao 朱由校 (Tianqi Emperor) and Zhu Youjian 朱由儉 (Chongzhen 崇禎 Emperor, r.1628-1644), were the last two Ming emperors. The imperial benefit granted

[114] Soulliére, "Women in the Imperial Household," 50.
[115] Alvaro Semedo, *The History of the Great and Renowned Monarchy of China* (London: John Crook, 1655), 78. Quoted in Soulliére, "Women in the Imperial Household," 50.

to her natal family, the Li, extended to the fourth generation and beyond. Such an honor was unimaginable for a woman from a common family. The daughterhood, wifehood, and motherhood of Empress Dowager Li demonstrate a successful imperial woman's agency, opportunity, emotions and relationships. In comparison, the life of her daughter-in-law, Imperial Concubine Zheng, was an adventure that ended in tragedy, despite securing and maintaining imperial favor. Her experience is worthy of study because it leads us to another kind of life cycle of an imperial woman ending up with a bad reputation.

Imperial Concubine Zheng (1565-1630)

Imperial Concubine Zheng was daughter-in-law to Empress Dowager Li and favorite concubine to the Wanli Emperor for several decades. Similar to Empress Dowager Li, she left no personal name in the historical records and came from Daxing 大興 county near Beijing. She was selected as *Xuanshi* (Consort Candidate), passed the recruitment selection at age 16, and in 1581 entered Wanli's harem as *shupin* 淑嬪 (Virtuous Consort). She quickly received the favor of Wanli, got promoted to *De fei* 德妃 (Favor Concubine), and gave birth to three sons and three daughters.[116] In 1584, after her first child, Princess Yunhe 雲和 (1584-1590), was born, she was promoted to senior concubine. The next year, she delivered Wanli's second son, but he died after birth. In 1586, after she gave birth to Wanli's third son, Changxun, she was promoted to imperial concubine. Wanli had married his principal wife Empress Xiaoduan in 1577, but she did not have a son. In 1582, a palace maid, née Wang, had given birth to Wanli's eldest son. Comparing herself to the Empress

[116] In 1584, born Yunhe 雲和 princess, Zhu Xuanshu 朱軒姝, In 1585, born the second son of Wanli Emperor Zhu Changxu 朱常溆, who dead at the birth; in 1586, she born the third son of the emperor Zhu Changxun 朱常洵, in 1587, she gave birth to another son, Zhu Changzhi 朱常治. In 1588, she born Lingqiu 靈丘 princess, Zhu Xuanyao 朱軒姚; in 1592, she born Shouning 壽寧 princess, Zhu Xuanwei 朱軒媁.

Xiaoduan and the lowly-ranked palace Chambermaid Wang, Imperial Concubine Zheng counted on imperial favor to get her son designated the crown prince and thereby raise her own position to that of empress. So, she raised her son Changxun to inherit the throne. Her ambition in promotion resulted in more than ten years of succession dispute at court. Because of the event, Wanli was disenchanted with the court for the remaining two decades of his reign. Imperial Concubine Zheng was, therefore, blamed as a *femme fatale*. Her natal relatives who supported her ambition in the dispute also acquired a bad reputation in history for that.

Imperial Concubine Zheng was born in a military family. Her natal relatives benefited a lot after she gained imperial favor. Her father Zheng Chengxian 鄭承憲 was promoted several times, his final position being *Dudu tongzhi* 都督同知 (Commander-in-chief). Her brother Zheng Guotai 鄭國泰 inherited the title and got further promoted to *Du zhihui shi* 都指揮使 (Capital Commander). The official Zhang Xigao 張希皋 admonished Wanli to rescind the promotion, on the basis that this position was highly ranked and had never previously been granted to maternal relatives. If such a promotion was made, the Ming court might have to grant similar promotions to other maternal relatives to show fairness.[117] Wanli did not budge and unprecedented imperial benefits continued in the Zheng family for three generations. These natal relatives promoted to high official ranks supported Imperial Concubine Zheng's effort to get her son Changxun designated as the crown prince. The family lost favor when it was reported that her brother's son Zheng Yangxing 鄭養性 had participated in the seditious cult, the White Lotus Society 白蓮教.

[117] *MS,* 300. 7681.

During the succession dispute that lasted from 1586 to 1601 that I mentioned above, Imperial Concubine Zheng sponsored the re-publication of *Guifan* in 1595. This title was first edited and published in 1590 by Lü Kun 呂坤 (1536-1618).[118] It is a feminine didactic book that selected and simplified the Han anthology *Lienü Zhuan* 列女傳 (*Biography of Model Women*) to an easy-to-read form. It explained obscure characters, condensed original biographies, deleted difficult classical texts, and illustrated each story with a woodblock print.[119] The illustrated version of *Lienü zhuan* by Lü Kun attracted enthusiasm in the inner court.[120] The eunuch Chen Ju 陳居 (1529-1607) showed this work to Wanli and he liked it and gave it to Imperial Concubine Zheng. Trained in feminine virtues by her mother at home, Zheng was literate and could tell that *Guifan* was an outstanding didactic work, among others, and worthy to be reprinted.[121] She put out large sums of money to sponsor its re-publication. She credited the re-publication to her uncle Zheng Cheng'en 鄭承恩, who also served in Wanli's court.

In 1598, an anonymous pamphlet titled *Youwei hongyi* 憂危竑議 (A big discussion on my worries about the endangered state) circulated and soon became a debated topic in Beijing. It said that in the *Guifan*, Imperial Concubine Zheng compared herself to Empress Ma (d.79) of the Han, who had been childless but raised a chambermaid's son. When this son became crown prince, she got promoted to empress dowager. Imperial Concubine

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[118] Ch'en Hung-mou Chiao-nu i-Kuei and Fang Chao-ying, *Dictionary of Ming Biography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967, 2 vols.), Volume I, 1007. Lü Kun was a scholar-official who wrote ten more didactic works and handbooks for women, children, and the poor. He was working as an investigation messenger in Shanxin Province when he published the *Guifan Tushuo*. See Joanna F. Handlin, *Action in Late Ming Thought: The Reorientation of Lü Kun and Other Scholar-Officials* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1983), 143.

[119] Handlin, *Action in Late Ming Thought*, 144.

[120] Ibid.

[121] *ZZZ*, 1. 3.

Zheng's natal relatives suspected that the official Dai Shiheng 戴士衡 and the head magistrate of Quanjiao county 全椒, Fan Yuheng 樊玉衡, were the authors. Just before the release of *Youwei hongyi*, Fan and Dai had written Wanli a report accusing Imperial Concubine Zheng of coveting the position of empress. This report and the *Youwei hongyi* made the Zheng family nervous. Zheng Cheng'en did not have enough evidence to prove the authorship, but he wanted to eliminate dissent and thus directly named Dai Shiheng and Fan Yuheng.[122] To end the rumors, Wanli punished Dai and Fan by sending them to the frontier. In this case, Imperial Concubine Zheng survived the rumors presumably because she communicated well with her natal relatives and Wanli, who took her side.

Five years later in 1603, Eunuch Chen Ju discovered another anonymous pamphlet titled *Xu youwei hongyi* 續憂危竑議 (The sequel of a big discussion on my worries about the endangered state) in the court. It also intended to entrap Imperial Concubine Zheng. The postscript named one Zheng Fu-cheng. "*Zheng* 鄭*"* was the surname of Imperial Concubine Zheng; "*fu* 福" is pronounced the same as the title of her son Changxun (Prince *Fu*); and "*cheng* 成" means to succeed or turn into. The three characters together send a clear message that Imperial Concubine Zheng's son Prince Fu will be the future emperor. Again, Wanli protected Imperial Concubine Zheng and punished the suspected authors severely.[123]

From 1598 to 1603, during the pamphlet incidents, Imperial Concubine Zheng was in her late 30s and still enjoying Wanli's imperial favor. In 1601 she failed to get her son

[122] *ZZZ*, 1. 3.
[123] *MS*, 114. 3538.

selected as crown prince because Empress Dowager Li and court officials opposed it, but she continued to get Wanli's support until he died in 1620, when she was in her fifties. Wanli wanted to promote Imperial Concubine Zheng to the position of empress.[124] He had an affectionate relationship with her for four decades and wanted her buried with him in the same tomb. Similar to Empress Dowager Li who succeeded in her role as a wife, her position as Imperial Concubine was higher than that of Empress Dowager Li, who was only a senior concubine when her husband the Longqing Emperor died. From the beginning of the Ming dynasty to the Wanli reign, in 250 years, only 16 imperial women were ranked as imperial concubine.[125] But she was not that successful in being a highly ranked imperial woman in the court. Although she had Wanli's support, she did not establish friendly relations with imperial women or officials other than her natal relatives.

During the imperial succession dispute, Imperial Concubine Zheng sponsored the re-publication of *Guifan*, even thought it was unprecedented for an imperial concubine to have feminine didactic publications. She presented a role of mother of the state, but the rumors that circulated about her lust worsened the relationship with her mother-in law, Empress Dowager Li.

Most of the feminine didactic works were published by official scholars and imperial women during the early Ming dynasty. The political purpose was greater than the educational meaning. For example, a female didactic work edited by a Confucian scholar—*Gujin Lienü zhuan* 古今列女傳 (*The Biographies of Exemplary Women, Past and Present*) was published under the Yongle Emperor on September, 1403, a year after the succession

[124] Ye Xianggao et al. *Ming Guangzong shilu* 明光宗實錄 (Veritable Records of Ming Guangzong) (Nangang: Zhongyang yanjiu yuan lishi yuyan yanjiu suo, 1966), *juan* 2.
[125] Fan, *Wanli zhuan*, 279.

dispute between Jianwen 建文 (r.1399-1402) and Yongle (*Jingnan zhiyi* 靖難之役) ended with the former's defeat. Yongle had rebelled against his nephew Jianwen and usurped the throne. Yongle had commissioned *The Biographies of Exemplary Women, Past and Present*, where its preface contains the message that Yongle was the son of Empress Ma, the principal wife of Hongwu. Clearly, this was meant to portray Yongle as a dutiful son to his parents and a worthy successor to established traditions.[126] Actually, this statement was for the purpose of legitimatizing Yongle, who had been born to Hongwu's Mongolian consort.[127] A throne won from a bloodshed competition with one's own relative needs justification. The traditional primogeniture practice selected the principal wife's son to inherit the throne. The *Biographies of Exemplary Women, Past and Present* was more than an educational text; it was also official propaganda. The editing of feminine didactic works was gradually transferred from the scholar-officials to imperial women during the late Ming.[128] Their political purpose remained the same. As I argued in the previous section, the publication of *Nüjie zhijie* as ordered by Empress Dowager Li was a strategy to cement the cooperation with Zhang Juzheng and to reinforce her reputation as a "sage mother." Imperial Concubine Zheng's *Guifan* involved the matter of imperial succession and her political intention and agency.

In the Ming, before Imperial Concubine Zheng sponsored the publication *Guifan,* only empresses and empress dowagers had published books. That an imperial concubine could publish a book was unprecedented. Imperial Concubine Zheng used her own funds to

[126] Soulliére, "Palace Women," 27.
[127] Chan, "Legitimating Usurpation: Historical Revisions under the Ming Yongle Emperor (r. 1402-1424)," In *The Legitimation of New Orders: Case Studies in World History*, Philip Yuen-sang Leung edit (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2007), 103-104. And see Jang, "The Eunuch Agency," 151.
[128] Soulliére, "Palace Women," 147.

sponsor the publication of a book concerning setting norms for the behavior of women assuming the role of a reigning empress or empress dowager.[129] Comparing Imperial Concubine Zheng's version of *Guifan* with Lü Kun's original version, we see that the former had personal political purpose in adding 12 additional women that included Empress Ma in the Han dynasty and herself.[130] Empress Ma was a virtuous concubine with many exemplary deeds worthy of discussion, but *Guifan* emphasized her experience of adopting a maid's son and being promoted to the position of empress. She raised her husband's son by a chambermaid and she became empress and later, empress dowager. The book was published in 1595, when the succession dispute was taking place. *Youwei hongyi* states that *Guifan*'s editor intended to use Empress Ma's situation to justify Imperial Concubine Zheng's goal of promotion.[131]

Considering the rising circulation of writing in late Ming, we can also imagine the fame of Imperial Concubine Zheng outside the inner court. *Guifan,* with its easy-to-read writing style, quickly aroused the enthusiasm of readers and was reprinted repeatedly within a few years of its publication. Early Qing sources estimate that "not less than several tens of thousands of copies" were published during the Ming dynasty.[132] Scarlett Jang notes a rise in circulation of morality books in Ming society and attributes it to male anxiety to contain women during the late Ming.[133] Apart from the male anxiety, I think imperial women's pursuit of fame accounts for the rise in circulation. By sponsoring the printing of

[129] Soulliére, "Palace Women," 21-22.
[130] Fan, *Wanli zhuan*, 340.
[131] *ZZZ*. 1. 4.
[132] Handlin, *Action in Late Ming Thought*, 36. And Ch'en, Chiao and Fang, *Dictionary of Ming Biography*, 1007.
[133] Jang, "The Eunuch Agency," 162.

a popular moral educational book, Imperial Concubine Zheng made her voice heard not only in the court but also outside the court, among elite and illiterate women.

Without the support from powerful court officials, as Empress Dowager Li had in Zhang Juzheng, Imperial Concubine Zheng's efforts to advance herself were criticized by officials as lust, avarice, and ambition to covet the position of empress. The criticism associated with the two pamphlets put the Zheng family in a nervous situation and did not cease, even though she had Wanli's support and survived the rumors.

On the issue of her avarice, the cost on her cosmetics per year was stated to be over 100,000 *taels*, while the tax revenues from the entire country per year was only 4,000,000 *taels*. In 1614, Imperial Concubine Zheng had to send her son Changxun to assume duty at his fiefdom in Luoyang. The cost of constructing his palace there was already over 400,000 *taels* of silver, more than ten times the cost of building expenses at other fiefdoms.[134] Imperial Concubine Zheng still demanded but was rejected for agricultural fields for up to 40,000 *qing* 頃 (1 *qing* equals to 6.67 hectares) for her son. According to the ancestral tradition, the cost of a prince moving to a fiefdom across the country could reach thousands of *qing* only. But the Wanli Emperor supported her, and she helped her son collect 20,000 *qing*.[135] Although it was only half of her initial plan, the amount was still ten times more than the normal allocations. Court officials could hardly be happy to see her collecting great amounts of state income and putting it into her son's pocket. Meanwhile, Chambermaid Wang, the mother of the crown prince, was living a lonely and miserable life. She was living in Jingyang 景陽 Palace and her son Changluo lived in Ciqing palace.

[134] Fan, *Wanli Zhuan*, 374.
[135] Ibid.

Since they lived separately they barely had opportunities to meet with each other. When the message came of Chambermaid Wang dying, Changluo got a chance to visit her on her death bed. Although an imperial concubine, her life was hard and she was almost blind from cataracts, an eye disease acquired from crying too much and for staying too long in a place with insufficient light.

Despite Imperial Concubine Zheng sponsoring a didactic work to show her concern about the inner court residents, her disregard for Chambermaid Wang's situation showed her selfishness. This was probably part of the reason that made Empress Dowager Li oppose her in the imperial succession dispute. And Zheng did not try to improve the relationship with her mother in-law. She wrote a preface for the republished *Guifan*, which we may now read thanks to Eunuch Liu Ruoyu 劉若愚 (1584-1642), who at the age of 16 had just entered the inner court in 1600. He discovered the related text documents in a sealed box in the bedroom of his eunuch foster father and patron, Chen Ju.[136] We can now read what Imperial Concubine Zheng herself wrote in the *Guifan* preface. She had little respect for Empress Dowager Li and she claimed her own solid moral education and training in feminine virtue by her mother at home before she entered the court at 16. After she entered the court, she lived in a virtuous atmosphere, reading Empress Dowager Li's *Nüjian* and listening to Wanli reading the *Dijian Tushuo*[137]帝鑑圖說 (*The Emperor's*

[136] *ZZZ*, 1. 7.

[137] Zhang Juzheng edited *Dijian tushuo* in 1570s. It is a sumptuous didactic album given to Wanli Emperor in 1573 by Grand Secretary Zhang Juzheng. "To encourage him to become a sage ruler, Zhang had orchestrated this appealingly illustrated and copiously annotated collection of exemplary and cautionary tales about rulers from remote antiquity to the late Northern Song period. One volume presented eighty-one models to emulate, and the other contained thirty-six examples to avoid." Julia K. Murray, *Mirror of Morality: Chinese Narrative Illustration and Confucian Ideology* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 91.

Mirror, Illustrated and Discussed).[138] This description gives a firm moral foundation to her publishing a didactic work. And then she explained that it was because she thought the didactic book should be easy to understand by commoners that she decided to sponsor the *Guifan*, the same purpose for which Empress Dowager Li published *Nüjie*. At the end, she repeated the humble position that she dared not use it to compete with Empress Xu's *Nüjie* nor with Empress Dowager Jiang's *Nüxun*. But here she did not mention Empress Dowager Li's *Nüjie*. It sounds like Imperial Concubine Zheng thought her *Guifan*, in being easy to read and understand, could rival with Empress Dowager Li's publication. She thus expressed her dissatisfaction with Empress Dowager Li in a subtle manner, but the message was loud and clear.

In the inner court, Imperial Concubine Zheng was thought to pose the biggest threat to Crown Prince Changluo. In 1615, a year after Empress Dowager Li died, she had more freedom to pursue her ambitions. One night, one Zhang Chai 張柴 rushed into the crown prince's palace with a long stick to kill the crown prince or harm him. The security guard stopped him at the door, but the rumors spread through the court. Imperial Concubine Zheng had the biggest motive to hire someone to kill the crown prince, because if he were eliminated, her own son could be the new crown prince who succeeds Wanli. The rumors also said that Zhang Chai had two allies, Pang Bao 龐保 and Liu Cheng 劉成, who were servants serving in Imperial Concubine Zheng's chamber.[139] To stop the rumors, Wanli made her apologize to crown prince Changluo. Such a serious incident in the Forbidden City was settled in an easy manner. In 1620, after the death of Wanli, Changluo took over

[138] *ZZZ*, 1. 3.
[139] Fan, *Wanli zhuan*, 370.

as the Taichang 泰昌 Emperor (r. August, 1620-September, 1620), ruling for only 1 month before dying accidentally at the age of 38. Imperial Concubine Zheng was suspected of sending beautiful women to his chamber to weaken his physical condition from sexual indulgence. She was suspected of ordering the eunuch pharmacist Cui Wensheng 崔文昇 to write the wrong prescription to worsen his condition.[140] When Taichang was worried about himself, Li Kezhuo 李可灼, a doctor from Honglu temple, said he had an elixir that could heal the emperor, who died after taking the medicine the second time. Taichang's death was a mystery, and rumors pointed to Imperial Concubine Zheng as the master of the scheme. But, there was no clear evidence and she did not receive any punishment from this incident. No matter what the Imperial Concubine Zheng had planned, she did not realize her goal to be an empress and an empress dowager.

An imperial concubine for 39 years and beloved as a wife, until Wanli died in 1620, Imperial Concubine Zheng lived for another ten years and died at the age of 65. She could not be buried together with Wanli and his two empresses. She had the opportunity and imperial support to reach the high ranks of empress and empress dowager, but court officials refused to promote her. So she ended up with nothing but rumors and a lonely tomb at Yinquan 銀泉 Mountain, where secondary wives and concubines of Ming emperors were buried. Even the tomb was robbed of treasures, and her objects that might have been generous gifts from Wanli have not surfaced. Today archaeologists can see that it stands out among those of other imperial women, a symbol of the imperial favor that she

[140] *MS*, 305. 7827.

once enjoyed.[141] After her death, her spoiled son Changxun lived a corrupt and wasteful life at his fiefdom in Henan. He was killed by Li Zicheng 李自成 (1606-1645), the rebel leader who destroyed the Ming dynasty. Her grandson escaped death and Ming loyalists enthroned him as the Hongguang 弘光 Emperor (r.1644-1645) at Nanjing. The Qing army arrested and killed him in 1645.

Compared to Empress Dowager Li's respectable life, Imperial Concubine Zheng had a miserable ending. An imperial woman who lived under strict regulations, and without support from the outer and inner courts, she lost all ability to perform agency. Therefore, even if Imperial Concubine Zheng had tried to keep her power by assisting Taichang Emperor's widow Concubine Li as regent, her endeavor was lost at the end.

Empress Dowager Li and Imperial Concubine Zheng both carried out roles as daughter, wife, and mother, as in the experience of women in general. They promoted themselves as imperial women, but they experienced different endings. Their experiences of performing agency and building relationships under different identities provide the scope for understanding the life of imperial women. Their lives were tied to the imperial hierarchy, but they turned out to be more real than general individuals in their emotions, thought, agency, and social relationships. They made decisions and built social relationships as the strategy to perform agency. In the next chapter, I use material objects as evidence and the record of their social activities to further enrich our understanding of imperial women's material agency and material culture.

[141] Hu Hansheng, "Ming shisan ling lingqu nei de feizi fen," 明十三陵區內的妃子墳 (Tombs for Concubines in Ming thirteen imperial tombs region) *Zijin cheng* 6 (2011): 43.

Chapter 2. High Elite Material Culture and Social Activities of the Ming Inner Court

To better present the life of Empress Dowager Li and Imperial Concubine Zheng, in this chapter, I employ the material relics from Wanli's reign to examine imperial women's material life. In particular I compare Empress Dowager Li's birthday robe with her son the Wanli Emperor's ceremonial robe. I also examine her gifting practice to see how she formed her political connections. Because of the lack of material objects that connect directly to Imperial Concubine Zheng, I examine the jewelry, buttons, hairpins, as well as phoenix crown discovered from the Ding mausoleum, the tomb of the Wanli Emperor and his two wives They were contemporaries with Imperial Concubine Zheng, who as Wanli's favorite imperial concubine for four decades must have owned objects similar in origins, quality, and designs. Such objects allow us to observe how imperial women influenced court fashion and design. This chapter also examines social and entertainment activities of imperial elites. Eunuch Liu Ruoyu's record of flower appreciation and banquets of imperial elites in the late Ming inner court illuminates the entertainment activities among imperial women in daily life. We also see the social connections between men and women that took place in the Ming court.

Material Culture of Wanli's Court

The late Ming era has been examined as the time when consumerism rose in Chinese cities.[142] Studies on such objects as blue-and-white porcelain, furniture, painting

[142] See Wu Jen-shu, *Pinwei shehua* and *Youyou fangxiang*. Antonia Finnane, "Yangzhou's 'Modernity'."

and calligraphy show the vibrancy of the Ming economy and culture.[143] Historians have studied the commodities consumed by commoner and gentry circles alike. Timothy Brook and Craig Clunas, who studied material lives from the imperial elite to the gentry and commoner, have enriched our knowledge of the social and cultural history of the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries.[144] Material objects in the Ming imperial court, however, remain under-researched. Dingling, Wanli's tomb, is to date the only one out of thirteen Ming tombs outside Beijing that has been excavated. The objects in it belonged to Wanli and his two wives, Empress Xiaoduan and Chambermaid Wang (Empress Dowager Xiaojing). These objects have often appeared in museum exhibitions[145] but have not been contextualized in historical analysis. Therefore, I intend to examine these material objects in the context of the Ming imperial women and their material agency. Through presenting the creative and exotic design on imperial women's materials, I argue that imperial women's creativity, personal preference, and beliefs had influence on the design of Ming imperial material culture.

The Ding mausoleum is located in Changping 昌平, Beijing. It took 6 years to complete, from 1584 to 1590, and cost 8,000,000 *taels* of white silver, the equivalent to two years of state tax income.[146] It was excavated during Mao Zedong's turbulent Hundred Flowers and Rightist campaigns, from 1956 to 1958. The discoveries from the tomb are

[143] See Robert Finlay, *The Pilgrim Art: Cultures of Porcelain in World History* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2010), 214-252. Craig Clunas, *Chinese Furniture* (London: Victoria and Alberta Museum, 1988). Zhang Xiaoming, *Chinese Furniture*, trans. Kang Jian, Han Huizhi and Wang Wenliang (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). See also Susan Bush, *The Chinese Literati on Painting: Su Shih (1037-1101) to Tung Ch'i-ch'ang (1555-1636)* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012). And J. P. Park, *Art by the Book: Painting Manuals and the Leisure Life in Late Ming China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012).
[144] See Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure*. Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things*.
[145] See footnote 29.
[146] Yang, *New Perspectives on China's Past,* 545.

believed to have been necessary objects for the imperial family's daily life. The tomb builders usually made sure that the tomb owner could enjoy in the next life everything that he or she had. And so, when the group of archeologists opened the tomb, they found "1712 bronze coins, 134 gold and silver buttons, and a large number of funeral paper currencies, 7 sets of tin and wooden funerary eulogium, 644 silk robes and textiles (as well as a few cotton and wool textiles), 289 gold and 271 silver wares and articles, 65 bronze objects, 370 tin objects, 51 jades, 30 stone works, 16 porcelains, 15 glazed ceramics, 84 lacquers, 248 jewels and ornaments of various precious materials, 40 weapons, and 305 wooden horses and human Figures."[147] This list of abundant material objects shows the superfluous life-style of Wanli's inner court. Among them the most eye-catching is Wanli's gold crown, which is twisted by golden lines and decorated by the shape of two dragons on each side (fig.1). Also breath-taking are the phoenix crowns that once belonged to Empress Xiaoduan and Chambermaid Wang. They are made from kingfisher feather in *diancui* 點翠 technique, or "dotting with kingfishers" involving using glue to adhere the feathers onto vermeil, or silver"[148] (fig.2). The design and materials show the delicate technique of court artists, and confirm the extravagant life of the Ming inner court.

The golden jewelries decorated with red and blue gems in conjunction with the golden hairpins with Buddhist elements characterize the fashion style of Ming imperial women. Using the valuable material of gold to decorate their bodies, especially hair and ears, was a manner in which imperial women presented their superior positions. Some Ming tombs belonging to elite women, located outside Beijing, provide a limited number

[147] Yang, *New Perspectives on China's Past,* 547
[148] Anais, "Expensive Blue and Burnt Money," The Contemporary Jewelry in China Blog, last modified December 7, 2012, https://jewelrychina.wordpress.com/tag/kingfisher-feathers/.

of golden hairpins and earrings; such findings are used as evidence to prove Ming elite women's preference for golden jewelry. For example, in 2006, archaeologists excavated the tomb of a rich family in Jiaxing, and buried were Li Xiang 李湘 and his wives, Woman Chen 陳氏 (d. 1589) and Woman Xu 徐氏. Their son Li Fang 李芳 passed the imperial service examination in 1565 and served as an official. Among the discoveries from the tomb are 3 pairs of gold plated earrings and 1 pair of gold plated hairpins.[149] And in 2008, the discovery of Lady Mei's (d. 1474) tomb in Nanjing included gold artifacts with gemstones. She was a concubine to a political and military strategist.[150] In comparison to these elite women, Wanli's wives and concubines enjoyed the privilege with access to the largest amount of golden materials. Aside from visualizing the owners' power and privilege, and the design of golden accessories from the Ding tomb, I will now interpret the personal preference and creativity of these imperial women.

The material belonging to Empress Dowager Li is very limited. So far there is only one over-vest made particularly for her 50th birthday. It was purchased by Asian Art Museum of San Francisco in 1990 and it is accessible to the public. The date of its origin is labeled clearly as December 5, 1595 on an embroidered inscription inside the lapel. This was 2 days before Empress Dowager Li's 50th birthday.[151] But it is a pity that there is no record of who found it and where they found it. The over-vest is thus the only item belonging to Empress Dowager Li that we may access and use as a valuable lens to

[149] Wu Haihong, "Jiaxing wangdian lijia fen mingmu qingli baogao" 嘉興王店李家墳明墓清理報告 (Report of Lijiafen Tomb in Ming Dynasty at Wangdian, Jiaxing) *Dongnan wenhua* 208 (2009): 59-60.
[150] "Gold-Filled Tomb of Chinese 'Survivor' Mom Discovered," last modified May 13, 2015, http://www.livescience.com/50817-ming-dynasty-tomb-gold-discovered.html.
[151] "Imperial court over-vest," Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, accessed August 5, 2015, http://searchcollection.asianart.org/view/objects/asitem/id/15054.

interpret the decorative symbols, colors, and buttons that inform us about her power and creativity.

Fig.1 (left) Anonymous. *The Wanli Emperor's Crown*. 1573-1619. Gold. Dingling Museum, Beijing. Source: Barbara Steinberg, "Chinese Gold Jewelry," Ethnic Jewels Magazine, accessed on August 15, 2015, http://ethnicjewelsmagazine.com/chinese-gold-jewelry/.

Fig.2 (right) Anonymous. *The Empress Dowager Xiaojing's Phoenix Crown*. 1573-1619. Gold, Pearls, kingfisher feathers, coral. National Museum of China, Beijing. Source: Luli, "Mingdai gongting fushi jianjie: Huanghou lifu," (Brief introduction of Ming imperial clothes: Empress's robe), Ciafu blog, last modified on September 12, 2014, http://m.91ddcc.com/t/26615.

Aside from the high artistic technique of objects from the Dingling, I examine their artistic meanings, decoration materials, as well as the sources of ornamental elements. The creativeness of Empress Dowager Li's vest is compared to that of Wanli's robe. I also explore and imagine the physical and psychological feelings of imperial women, inasmuch as they perceive the function of the material and the experience of wearing it.

Empress Dowager Li's Over-vest and Wanli's Robe

The court over-vest (*bijia* 比甲) designed specifically for Empress Dowager Li on her 50th birthday in 1595 is now in the collection of the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.[152] It is a vest decorated with embroidered traditional Chinese blessing symbols of longevity (*shou* 壽) as well as the imperial symbol of dragons on red silk gauze (fig.3,fig.4 and fig.7). The over-vest was a popular style of women's clothing since the middle of the Ming dynasty. Imperial women in the Yuan Dynasty started to wear the over-vest, and this clothing style gradually spread among commoners. Here I will use the Wanli Emperor's robe (fig.5) to give a comparative analysis of Empress Dowager Li's over-vest. I will note in particular the creativity of imperial women's dressing design.

[152] Soulliére, "Women in the Imperial Household," 47.

Fig.3 Anonymous. *Imperial Court Over-vest (front)*. 1595. Silk satin embroidered in canvas stitch and satin stitch, and over-embroidered in silver and gold couching. Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, San Francisco. Source: Soulliére, "Women in the Imperial Household," 34.

Fig.4 Anonymous. *Imperial Court Over-vest (back)*. 1595. Silk satin embroidered in canvas stitch and satin stitch, and over-embroidered in silver and gold couching. Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, San Francisco. Source: Soulliére, "Women in the Imperial Household," 47.

Empress Dowager Li's court over-vest is decorated with multi-cultural symbols: the Chinese character *shou*, Wanli style dragon,[153] and traditional fortune symbols like water motif, reishi mushroom, and aquatic grasses, and Daoist symbols of bats and clouds. These ornaments have been embroidered on the red silk satin. The Buddhist swastika 卐 on the front of the robe is a homophone with the same sound and meaning as *wan* 萬 (ten thousand). In conjunction with the golden character *shou*, together they form a rebus for *wan shou*, "ten thousand longevities," a greeting that could be used only for the emperor, the empress, or the empress dowager.[154] The rebus is repeated on the back of the robe (fig.4), where two Buddhist swastikas and one "long life" character are present. The symbols on the back of the robe say, *wanwan shou* 萬萬壽, "Ten thousand, ten thousand longevities!"[155] Such a fine, grand gown lets us imagine that the venue of her birthday celebrations must have been equally fine and grand: "[the ten thousand, ten thousand longevities] cry undoubtedly echoed through her palace . . . on her birthday."[156] The decorations on the robe also contain Daoist icons and traditional Chinese word games: a furry and real bat (*fu* 蝠) is homophone for good fortune (*fu* 福) and the clouds (*yun* 雲) are homophones for good fortune (*yun* 運).[157] This combination of different cultural symbols conveyed a message of super-abundant blessings for the empress dowager and the imperial family.[158] The blessings decorations such as the bat, cloud, and Buddhist swastika were commonly used by both male and female elites and commoners in clothing styles.

[153] "The dragons of the Wanli period are characterized by white horns and white spiky eyebrows and whiskers." Quoted in http://searchcollection.asianart.org/view/objects/asitem/id/15054
[154] Soulliére, "Women in the Imperial Household," 48.
[155] Ibid.
[156] Ibid.
[157] Ibid.
[158] Ibid.

Therefore, they were "secular and sacred, Buddhist and Confucian, popular and imperial, unlimited by gender."[159] Empress Dowager Li's vest combining multi-cultural decorations shows that the Ming court was not only a Confucian domain. It demonstrates an eclecticism that embraced Confucian thinking together with Daoist and Buddhist thought rather than being restricted to one norm of behavior.[160] Comparing the two gowns, we find that Empress Dowager Li's vest has more creative and multi-cultural decorative elements.

Five of Wanli's robes were found in his tomb, located in his coffin under his body. Three were embroideries and two were woven by silk tapestry craft (*Kesi* 緙絲). But none of them was protected well during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) that destroyed many cultural artifacts. In fact, they rotted. The *gunfu* were specifically worn at formal sacrifice ceremonies together with the crown is named *guanmian fu* 袞冕服 (robe and crown costumes) and was the most honorable dress for emperors in imperial China.[161] One of the *gunfu* named *Huang kesi shier zhang fushou ruyi wen gunfu* 黃緙絲十二章福壽如意紋袞服 (Yellow silk, twelve patterned[162] tapestry imperial robe with Bat, *shou* characters, and Ruyi emblazonries) was duplicated by *Kesi* artisan Wang Jianjiang in 2010 at Jiangsu. It allowed people to appreciate the splendid Ming court robe (fig.5).[163] The robe is embroidered with twelve imperial patterns. These images were only used on male imperial elites' clothes. Similar to Empress Dowager's vest, this robe also contains word

[159] Soulliére, "Women in the Imperial Household," 48.
[160] Pricilla Ching Chung, *Palace Women in the Northern Sung, 960-1126* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981), 82.
[161] Guobao dangan 國寶檔案 (Archives of national treasures), "Ming Wanli kesi gunfu," 明萬曆緙絲袞服 (Ming Wanli's Kesi embroidery ceremonial robe), CCTV video, 13:23, November 26, 2011, http://tv.cntv.cn/video/C14121/4f541414e38e4c948eb1bbe077505a97.
[162] Twelve patterns refer to 山 mountain, 龍 dragon, 華蟲 pheasant，日 sun，月 moon，星辰 star，宗彝 two goblets，藻 algae，火 flame，黼 axe, 黻 fu symbol，粉米 rice.
[163] Exhibited in Capital Museum 首都博物館, "Huiwang da Ming: zou jin Wanli chao."

games. The white and red dots on the shoulder represent the emperor shouldering moon and sun (*jiantiao riyue* 肩挑日月), a reference to the emperor taking the responsibility of the whole state. It has 279 Buddhist swastikas, 256 Longevity characters, 301 Bats, and 271 Ruyi 如意 (literally, being pleasant). Ruyi and Buddhist swastikas were wrapped with ribbon (*dai* 帶), which pronounced the same as generation (*dai* 代) and therefore represent ten-thousand generations' being pleasant (*wan dai ruyi* 萬代如意).

Fig.5 Anonymous. *A Modern Reproduction* of the *Yellow silk, twelve patterned tapestry imperial robe with Bat, shou characters, and Ruyi emblazonries robe*. Duplicated in 2010. Silk embroidered tapestry. Capital Museum, Beijing. Source: Shelia Melvin, "China's Reluctant Emperor," The New York Times, last modified on September 7, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/08/arts/08iht-wanli08.html?_r=0 .

Fig.6 (left) Anonymous. *A Portrait of Ming Shenzong*. 1573-1619. Vertical scroll. National Palace Museum, Taipei. Source: Shelia Melvin, "China's Reluctant Emperor," The New York Times, last modified on September 7, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/08/arts/08iht-wanli08.html?_r=0 .

Fig.7 (right) Anonymous. *A Modern Portrait of Ming imperial woman wearing over-vest*. 2008. Collection unknown. Source: Xiefang zhuren Blog, last modified on March 3, 2008, http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_49fa638701008o18.html.

The *gunfu* was designed to adhere to sumptuary law. In 1528, the Jiajing 嘉靖 Emperor (1507-1566) ordered his officials to check the ancestral regulation on the emperor's *gunfu* to see if his grown was adherent to the law. The decorations required by law all appeared on Wanli's *gunfu*: "Moon and sun symbols on the shoulders, stars and mountain on the back; pheasants on both of the sleeves. The dress part (*chang* 裳) of *gunfu*

is decorated with four lines of symbols, two of them with flame and water plant, the other two with rice and axe. The fastener at the waist should decorate with jade."[164] In the sense of decorative patterns, Wanli's robe was made exactly to adhere to the sumptuary regulation. Its shape, however, differed from the traditional *gunfu* style that combined two separated parts as upper cloth and lower dress (*shangyi xiachang* 上衣下裳). Wanli's robe was made in one single piece. The single piece gown was not a creation during Wanli's reign, but actually began from the Zhengtong 正統 Emperor (r. 1457-1464), when the single piece *gunfu* had already appeared in the emperor's portraits.[165] In comparison, I argue that Empress Dowager Li's robe is more creative and breaks the norm with new decorative patterns that reflected her personal preference.

On Empress Dowager Li's robe, we can see four big Wanli-period dragons on both the front and the back of the robe; there are 41 small dragons on the edges. But, there is no feminine decoration like phoenixes and flowers on it. In the sumptuary regulation of the dressing code of Ming empresses and concubines, feminine symbols like phoenix and flowers were necessary elements.[166] In terms of gendered decorative symbols, Dowager Li's distinctive robe overstepped the sumptuary law. And its design and color could identify the creativity and preference of its owner.

The creativity of Empress Dowager Li's over-vest is demonstrated by its fastener. Wanli Emperor's robe is fastened in a traditional way, with the robe on the right side of the dress in conjunction with a belt at the waist (fig.6). But Empress Dowager Li's over-vest is

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[164] Guo Zhengyu, *Huang Ming dianli zhi* 皇明典禮志 (Ritual Institutes of the Ming), Juan 18, 2, accessed January, 21, 2015. http://pds.lib.harvard.edu/pds/view/22719200.
[165] Guobao dangan, "Ming Wanli."
[166] *MS,* 65. 1597-1615.

fastened by buttons at the central front. Four pairs of symmetrical white points on the open front of her robe are very probably hinting at the position of the disappearing buttons. This assumption can be reassured by the discovery of 67 pairs (134 pieces) of golden buttons from the Ding tomb (fig.8).

Before the common usage of the button as fastener in the Qing dynasty (1644-1911),[167] the Chinese commonly used belts to fasten their clothes at the waist. The functional buttons appeared in the Mongol Yuan and were widely used in the Manchu Qing period. The nomadic life-style of the Mongols and Manchus required that their clothes be fitted with their bodies to accommodate riding horses.[168] People's feelings are the valuable meanings behind the public display of materials.[169] They inspire me to study beyond materials to investigate the feelings of Ming imperial women as they dressed up in a set of buttoned-up formal robes. When analyzing the comfort of buttons on the Ming imperial vest, I find that the buttons from the Ming imperial tombs were different from Yuan and Qing buttons and they functioned as decoration while representing the owner's power and prestige.

[167] Shen Yan, "Niukou fazhan shi qiantan" 鈕扣發展史淺談 (A Brief Study on the History of Button) *Shaoxing wenli xueyuan xuebao* 23(2003): 105.
[168] Ibid.
[169] See Beverly Lemire, "Draping the Body and Dressing the Home: The Material Culture of Textiles and Clothes in the Atlantic World, c. 1500—1800," in *History and Material Culture: A Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources,* ed. Karen Harvey. (London and New York: Rouledge, 2009), 85-102. See also Lemire, *Cotton* (Oxford and New York: BERG, 2011), 99-123.

Fig.8 Anonymous. *Prince Riding on Goat Shaped and Ruby Decorated Golden Button*. 1573-1619. Gold. Dingling Museum, Beijing. Source: Shoudu bowuguan de wenhua biaoqing Sina Weibo (The Cultural Presentation of Capital Museum Sina Micro Blog) last modified on November 24, 2014. http://www.weibo.com/capitalmuseum?stat_date=201411#feedtop.

As for buttons made from hard materials like gold and jade, once the clothes are buttoned up they are less flexible. For the sake of comfort and fitting, they are used more as icons at a formal ceremony that required clothes to look tidy, starched, and straight. Similar to the function of ties for T-shirts, they make the person look more tidy but less comfortable than to go without ties. Both the buttons and ties contain their decorative and aesthetic values. According to the archaeological record of the Ding tomb excavation, in the 67 pairs of buttons, aside from 4 pairs being gold-plated silver, the others are all made

from gold.[170] The tomb has released pictures of eight buttons (fig.9), where we see that the diversified decorations made from gold and gems symbolized and represented the extravagant features of the Ming court. Formal Chinese robes were usually combinations of good fortunate symbols that represented the number of wishes their owners could get. The materials of good fortune symbols represent the degree of sincerity of the well-wishers. Gold represents the highest degree of blessing sincerity and is the most valuable material, usually restricted to the imperial and elites. Although it is hard to tell which buttons were decorated on Empress Dowager Li's robe, the shining golden buttons excavated from the Ming imperial tombs already show the creativity of the vest's design. Instead of practical function, the buttons functioned to represent the wearer's privilege and power and allow us to visualize the creativity and the privilege that allowed an imperial woman to control her own body.

[170] Wu Haiyun, "Ming dai niukou yishu yanjiu," 明代鈕釦藝術探究 (Aesthetic Study on Ming Buttons), *Meishu xuekan* 10(2012): 50.

Fig.9 Anonymous. *Golden Buttons in variety shapes: the first row from left to right: Peonies and "longevity" character; Butterflies and flower; Blossom flowers and "good fortune" character. Second row from left to right: Bees and chrysanthemum; reishi mushrooms and swastika. Third row from left to right: reishi mushrooms with leaves and fortunate cloud; Butterflies and flower; Golden ingots*. 1573-1619. Gold. Dingling Museum, Beijing. Source: Capital Museum Sina Micro Blog.

The bright red color of Empress Dowager Li's vest is also distinctive. Unlike other dynasties, the Ming favored most the color of red, rather than bright yellow, because the imperial family surname was Zhu, meaning "red" in Chinese.[171] Another explanation for

[171] Shen Congwen, *Zhongguo fushi shi* 中國服飾史 (A History of Chinese Clothes) (Shannxi: Shannxi Normal University Press, 2004), 127.

the Ming preference for the red color was the Ming interest in exotic materials. Indeed red color dyes were derived from a particular plant in Southeast Asia—sappan wood.[172] If the sappan wood is boiled it can yield a reddish tint, a popular dye.[173] Seeing both the imported reddish dye with Islamic blue on the famous blue and white porcelain, Yangwen Zheng assumes that it showed the Ming preference for dyes from other countries that colored the Ming imperial court in its particular way.[174] If the literal explanation of the Ming imperial family name Zhu could function as a part of the reason for the court's preference for red color, then we see that the Ming imperial family wore their family name explosively in a color imported from overseas, something unprecedented in previous dynasties. That Empress Dowager Li could wear such a robe dyed with limited reddish dye and symbolizing the glory of the imperial family was in line with the zenith power that she had attained by the time she reached middle age, and celebrated her 50th birthday.

Traditional historians and recent scholars have ignored the changes on the dressing decorations from standard regulated to self-preferred. They also did not see the creativity of design as shown by Empress Dowager Li's over-vest. When Quentin Bell and Fernand Braudel drew their conclusion that Chinese dress from dynasty to dynasty remained the same, just as Chinese society remained static for centuries,[175] they could hardly have imagined that the robe of an empress dowager in China in the late 16th century could contain such images of creativity, as represented by the Wanli-period dragons, the

[172] Chen Kuo-tung, *Dong Ya Haiyu Yi Qian Nian* 東亞海域一千年 (Taibei: Yuanliu chuban gongsi, 2005), 104-07.
[173] Yangwen Zheng, *China on the Sea: How the Maritime World Shaped Modern China* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2012), 55.
[174] Ibid, 219.
[175] Finnane, "Yangzhou's 'modernity'," 396.

Southeastern Asian reddish dye, golden buttons, and her personal preference—the Buddhist swastika.

Empress Dowager Li's Gifting Practice: Connecting with the Outer Court

When Empress Dowager Li was wearing her birthday over-vest on her 50th birthday, the officials and court servants must have knelt down in front of her crying out the greeting of "ten thousand years of longevity." This would have been the time to reward them with gifts in appreciation of their birthday wishes. In fact, her rewarding activities to court officials on her birthday and her gifting practice to Grand Secretary Zhang Juzheng are recorded in official history. The gifts provide concrete evidence of the existence of connections between her and male officials. The *Mingshi* and *Ming shilu* have detailed records of her gift lists. Historians have seldom interpreted gifting as a political practice in the Ming court. Anthropologists such as Marcel Mauss[176] and Natalie Davis[177] have studied human gifting practice. Their research offers fundamental guidance for us to analyze gifting happened at the Chinese imperial court. Marcel Mauss refers to his interest in the archaic Chinese gifting law as he argues that in China there is a very legal indissoluble bond of a thing with its original owner, so it would be dangerous to receive a gift of this fact.[178] This observation can be applicable to the top-down rewarding activities that happened in the court, as the gift containing its owner's majestic position and power. One can use the quality of the gifts to visualize the imperial court's power and privilege as well as Empress Dowager Li's eligibility as a representative of the imperial court to offer gifts.

[176] Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. Ian Cunnison (New York: The Norton Library, 1967).
[177] Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Gift in Sixteenth-Century France* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2000).
[178] Mauss, *The Gift*, 62.

In the private sense, through examining the receiver of the gift, the gift could also be understood as a tool to extend her power to the outer court.

According to *Ming shilu*, in 1577, in the early years of Wanli's reign, on her birthday Empress Dowager Li gave gifts to powerful officials in public display. The quality and quantity of gifts varied in accordance with the receiver's position. As her greatest and most powerful supporter, Grand Secretary Zhang Juzheng received the largest gifts. He got 50 *taels* of silvers, 4 pieces of gauze, 4 golden *shou* characters, 2 pieces of *huangf*u 黃符 (talismans on yellow papers) writing in golden ink, and 2 pieces of *huanglingfu* 黃綾符 (talismans on yellow satin). The secondary secretaries Lü Tiaoyang and Zhang Siwei received 40 *taels* of silver, 3 pieces of gauze, 3 longevity characters, 8 golden seal scripts, one golden *talismans on yellow papers* and one *talisman on yellow satin*. Her gifts to *jiangguan* 講官 (the emperor's lecturer) Shen Shixing and *zhengziguan* 正字官 (imperial court editor) Ma Jiwen 馬繼文 and so on were varied according to the level of their positions but we do not have detailed records for them.[179]

Empress Dowager Li also gave gifts to Grand Secretary Zhang Juzheng and his family members at private venues. In 1574, at her initiation, Wanli asked his servants about the health of Zhang Juzheng's parents. The servants replied that they were both alive and healthy in their 70s. She was happy to hear that. Days later, on her advice, Wanli gave Zhang Juzheng's parents a red *mang* 蟒 (four-finger claw dragon) robe, 20 *taels* of silver, 7 jade drop decorations in flower shape, 6 bolts of color gauze. The 20 *taels* of silver were

[179] *SZSL*, 69.

for Zhang Juzheng specifically.[180] We can see that Empress Dowager Li's gifting to Zhang Juzheng and his family confirms Natalie Davis's analysis on the purpose of gifts: "Gifts were to express sentiments of affection, compassion, and/or gratefulness, but they were simultaneously sources of support, interest, and advancement."[181] The gifts sent in private contain more emotions and showed her consideration and gratefulness toward the officials' dedicated services to the state. Such gifting practice reinforced and extended her political collaboration with them.

In comparison, her competitor for her husband's attention, Empress Dowager Chen, his principal wife, was less generous with her gifts to officials. In the harem hierarchy, the position of Empress Dowager Chen was superior to hers, who was only a senior concubine. But she was superior and more generous in a gifting practice that represented her control of the court's material and property. In January 1574, when the court celebrated the birthday of Empress Dowager Chen, officials merely offered blessing and she gave few gifts.[182] But in November that same year, when officials offered their blessings on her birthday, Empress Dowager Li bestowed luxurious foods on three grand ministers.[183] The recipients of her gifts were all officials in important positions. These gifts can be seen as material evidence proving her efforts at building friendly relationships with powerful officials.

Receivers of the gifts understood Empress Dowager Li's personal purpose. Being the most supportive partner, Zhang Juzheng received the most gifts. Even his family members received benefits on occasion. The gifts showed her appreciation of Zhang

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[180] *SZSL*, 25.
[181] Davis, *The Gift*, 22.
[182] *SZSL,* 130.
[183] Ibid.*,* 143.

Juzheng's assistance in dealing court affairs. She also wanted the gifts to ensure the continued support of powerful officials. So we can say that gifting was a strategy used by Empress Dowager Li to extend her power to the outer court. Gifting in public display represents the majesty and privilege of the sender as well as sender's right at controlling the division of court property. Gifting in private surely implies the sender's intention at cementing the connection.

The gifts from Empress Dowager Li could be divided into two categories. One is the fortune symbols like the golden "longevity" character and talismans on yellow papers. The other is consumer material like satin textiles, silver, and sweet desserts. The former undoubtedly represents the majesty and best wishes from the imperial court. The gifts like satin and silver were precious, and the amount given could take care of a common family's living expenses for an entire year. According to the Ming novel, *The Golden Lotus*, shop attendant Fu earned 2 *taels* of silver per month working in Ximen Qing's shop.[184] His annual income was 24 *taels* of silver. At this rate, the amount of silver that Empress Dowager Li granted to officials may amount to no more than a commoner's annual income. The silver was like the red envelope a superior or senior person usually sent during holidays and birthdays to those at lower hierarchical ranks, or those belonging to a younger generation. The gift money varied in accordance with the sender's income and specifically concerned the sender's appreciation for, and best wishes, to the receivers. Both categories of gifts imply that the Ming court was satisfied with the staff and Empress Dowager Li was able to represent the imperial court by offering the gifts and managing with the inner court income.

[184] Lanling xiaoxiao sheng, *Jin ping mei cihua* 金瓶梅詞話 (The Golden Lotus) (Hong Kong: wenhai chuban she, 1963), 90.

All of the gifts that Empress Dowager Li gave out were brand new. This was different from the second-hand gifts such as the worn dresses that Queen Elizabeth I gave to her servants and to many people of high rank. Dresses worn by her obviously might be seen as the door to her personal privilege.[185] I think the brand new gifts from Empress Dowager Li likely came from the abundant material in the court and not the personal items belonging to her. This observation is opposite to Marcel Mauss's anthropological analysis on the gifting system, that "one gives away what is in reality a part of one's nature and substance."[186] It is possible that she had also given gifts like a dress she had worn to her favourite maids in private. But, in public venues, her material gifts to officials represented the Ming court, rather than she, as the giver.

The discussion on imperial women's gifting in public and private reflects different implications of gender norm and operating in "public and private spheres". Dorothy Ko's study on footbinding discovers the contradictory and duplicated "public and private" concept of women's body. She argues that equating "womanly work" with "public work" can endow the women's sphere with enormous public and political significance.[187] Frank Trentmann in his expectation on the materiality in the future of history also suggests connecting "hard" things and networks to the "soft" world of possessions and the domestic interior in order to create a space for reconnecting private and public.[188] The analysis on the public and private sense of gifting practice can also imply the public and political significance of imperial women at the outer court.

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[185] *Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd*, Ed. Janet Arnold (Leeds: W.S. MANEY & SON LTD, 1988), 98.
[186] Mauss, *The Gift*, 10.
[187] Ko, *Cinderella's Sister*, 126.
[188] Frank Trentmann, "Materiality in the Future of History: Things, Practices, and Politics," *Journal of British Studies*, 48(April 2009): 286.

Openness of the Forbidden City: Exotic Design in the Late Ming Court

The hairpins, phoenix crowns, and jewelries discovered in the Ding mausoleum belonged to the principal wife and imperial concubine of their common husband, Wanli, but these objects can shed light on how Imperial Concubine Zheng dressed up daily. The good fortune symbols on the buttons showed the Ming court's concern with the blessing of happiness. The decorative gem on the buttons from Southeast Asia may also infer a maritime influence on design in the Ming court. Most of the objects on the list such as incense burner, jewelries with gem, hairpins, and phoenix crowns were made or decorated with Southeast Asian materials like hard wood, red and blue precious stones, and kingfisher feathers. Buddhist symbols are also important ornaments on these objects belonging to the Ming palace ladies. In these objects we see a combination of blessing or religious information with imported materials from the Southeast Asian regions. Further examination may help us understand the material communication between Ming China and Southeast Asia. If we imagine the feelings the owners of these objects had when wearing them, it may be possible to reconstruct their daily life, material culture and their influence on court fashion design.

Buddhism came from India and Nepal and spread to China through the Silk Road from the first to the seventh-centuries. By the Ming dynasty, Buddhism had undergone a domestication process and become an inseparable part of Chinese culture and religion. By then Buddhism in India was insignificant and some Southeast Asia states remained Buddhist. Many imperial women in the Ming court including Empress Dowager Li and Empress Xiaoduan, were pious Buddhists.

Between 1405 and 1433, the Muslim eunuch admiral Zheng He 鄭和 (1371-1433) led the treasure fleets on seven voyages to the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean and East Coast of Africa (Fig.10). He and his followers were interested in obtaining the hardwoods growing on Southeast Asian regions. The hardwoods could work as ideal emergency replacements for the ships,[189] and more importantly they were valuable materials for making expensive incenses. Zheng He left many records of his purchase of hardwoods on his voyages. In Champa, he purchased ebony, lakawood, an unusual black bamboo, and a rare aloe wood for making expensive incense.[190] He believed that they were so valuable and worth their weight in silver, and so he traded precious blue-and-white Ming porcelains and silks to Champa in exchange for them.[191] In the forest interior of Sumatra and other Indonesian islands, Zheng spent a lot of money for precious tree resins such as camphor, frankincense, and gharawook, which were used to make incense.[192] Siam was also an important supplier of hardwoods and incense.[193] Zheng He and his men used some of the incense to drive away mosquitoes in their trips,[194] and most of the rest would be tribute for the Ming court.[195] Since the 15th century, the Buddhists in the Ming court started burning the imported incense that came from trade and tribute from Southeast Asia. We can imagine the imperial chambers suffusing with the perfume of imported incense. The fragrance made the Buddhist rites enjoyable for the imperial women, and they physically felt a closer connection with Buddha's place of origin.

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[189] Louise Levathes, *When China ruled the seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne 1405-1433* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 111.
[190] Ibid, 98.
[191] Ibid.
[192] Ibid., 112.
[193] Ibid, 105.
[194] Ibid, 112.
[195] Ibid, 98.

Fig. 10: *The Outbound Route of Zheng He's Fleet During the Seventh Voyage*. Source: "Treasure voyages," Wikipedia, last modified August 4, 2105, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treasure_voyages.

The maritime trade of incense with Champa, Sumatra, and Siam was partly attributed to pious imperial women, who desired high-quality hardwoods and incense in their Buddhist rites. The religion of imperial women also affected the development of art design on the imperial jewelry. Placing symbols like Buddhist swastika and Buddhist figures in the jewelry was common in the late Ming period. Buddhist art had reached a high level during the Wanli reign and artists portrayed Buddhist decorative symbols perfectly.[196]

[196] Wang Xiuling, "Ming Dingling chutu shoushi tedian,"明定陵出土首飾特點 (On Characteristics of the Ornaments Excavated from Ding Mausoleum of the Ming Dynasty) *Shoucangjia* 5(2007): 17.

For example, one favourite hairpin of Empress Xiaoduan (fig. 11) represented the very high level of technology and creativity of artisans. The golden hairpin in the shape of Buddhist pagoda and decorated with gems (鑲珠寶寶塔形金簪), was so well-made that all the details of a Buddhist pagoda got represented in a tiny pagoda.[197] It combined with many other jewelry decorated with Buddhist symbols (fig.12). Such objects make us feel the religious influence of imperial women on court aesthetic creative art designs. It is also impressive that Ming imperial women could boldly show their belief by wearing jewelry specifically designed for their preference.

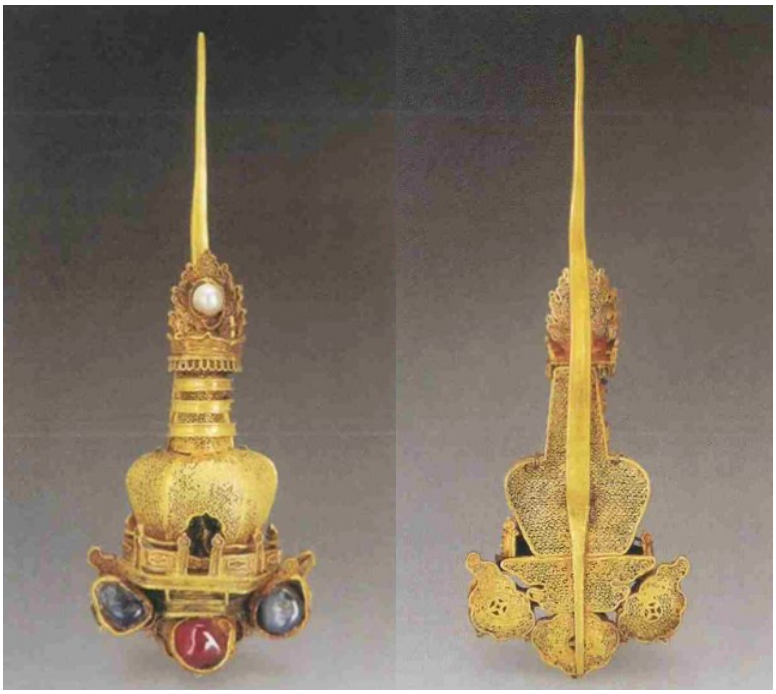

Fig.11 Anonymous. *The Golden Hairpin in the Shape of Buddhist Pagoda and Decorated with Gems*. 1573-1619. Gold. Dingling Museum, Beijing. Source: Zhang Wen, "Ming Dingling Chutu jinzan zhuangshi zhong de fojiao yinsu," 明定陵出土金簪裝飾中的佛教因素 (Buddhist decorative elements of the jewelry in Ming Ding Tomb) *Dongfang shoucang* 2(2014): 25.

[197] Wang, "Ming Dingling," 18.

Fig.12 Anonymous. Golden Gems Decorated Hairpin in Stand Buddha Shape; and Golden Hairpins Decorated with Jade *fo* Character and Ruby. 1573-1619. Gold, gem, jade. Dingling Museum, Beijing. Source: Zhang, "Ming Dingling," 25.

Fig.13 Anonymous. *The Wanli Empress's Crown*. 1573-1619. Gold, pearls, kingfisher feathers, coral. Dingling Museum, Beijing. Source: Barbara Steinberg, "Chinese Gold Jewelry," Ethnic Jewels Magazine, accessed on August 15, 2015, http://ethnicjewelsmagazine.com/chinese-gold-jewelry/.

Viewing the red and blue gems shining on imperial women's jewelry and smelling of imported incense, the Ming court seems to have hardly anything remaining purely Chinese by design and aesthetics. Even the most privileged representation of empresses—the phoenix crown (Fig.13) adopted materials from overseas. Many hair decorations for the imperial women, fashionable commoners, and drama actresses were made with the *diancui* technique that produced a beautiful blue color from bird feathers. The most expensive feather from kingfishers was almost restricted to the imperial court for its extremely high price and limited supply. Siam and Cambodia were two main supply sources of kingfisher feather to China. Exporting kingfisher feather to China became an important source of national income for Cambodia. Osbert Sitwell, an English writer and traveler, on his trip to Cambodia in 1930s asked an inspiring question, as he gazed upon the spectacular and lovely ruins of Angkor Wat: "How did the ancient Cambodian culture pay for all that building? Since there was no gold or silver mined in Cambodia . . . How did they pay for these and for the other luxuries such as sandalwood, blue and white porcelain, textiles, copper utensils, and iron pots that arrived from China?"[198] Sitwell wrote and answered his own question: "The answer, which I have never hitherto seen stated outright in print, is one of the strangest and most romantic that can be imagined: from the wings of the kingfishers…Cambodian kingfishers were esteemed above all others in the Chinese market, because of their superior sheen and colouring, and were the chief sources of national income."[199] Although kingfishers existed in southeast China, the picky Chinese consumers preferred Cambodian kingfisher feathers because they had a special tint of

[198] Beverley Jackson, *Kingfisher Blue: Treasures of an Ancient Chinese Art* (Berkeley, Toronto: The Speed Press: 2001), 4-5.
[199] Ibid., 5.

green: sea-green and lime-green that you cannot find anywhere else in the world, thus making the Cambodian kingfisher feathers the most exquisite in the Chinese fashion market.[200] In pursuing the best of the best, the Ming imperial court artisan very probably chose Cambodian kingfisher feathers to make the phoenix crown for empresses and imperial concubines.

Four phoenix crowns were excavated from the Ding tomb. They belonged to Empress Xiaoduan and Chambermaid Wang. They are all decorated with kingfisher feather in the *diancui* technique. The differences on their ornaments indicate the owners' positions on the harem hierarchy. Of the two belonging to Chambermaid Wang, one has 12 dragons and 9 phoenixes and the other has 3 dragons and 2 phoenixes. Of the other two belonging to Empress Xiaoduan, one has 9 dragons and 9 phoenixes and the other has 6 dragons and 3 phoenixes. These crowns are decorated with hundreds of red and blue gems. Like the emperor's *gunfu*, they were worn only during significant rituals. The position of imperial women should be identified by their clothing and ornaments, and the number of dragons and phoenixes on the crowns. Because Empress Xiaoduan was Wanli's principal wife, her phoenix crown was better decorated than that of Chambermaid Wang, who was an imperial concubine. Imperial Concubine Zheng may also have owned several phoenix crowns decorated with dragons and phoenixes as well as ruby hairpins and jewelry, although so far none has been discovered. Wanli favoured her for several decades, so the quantity of Imperial Concubine Zheng's jewelry might have been larger than that of Chambermaid Wang. But whether Imperial Concubine Zheng's jewelry had Buddhist decorative elements is hard to tell. There is no record or material evidence indicating her devotion to Buddhism.

[200] Jackson, *Kingfisher Blue*, 6.

For the sake of court fashion and showing respect towards Empress Dowager Li, who claimed herself to be the reincarnation of Nine Lotus Bodhisattva, she probably also wore Buddhist symbols. The phoenix crown not only confirms that Ming China was traditional on the rituals and hierarchy, but also shows that the Ming court was open to new and exotic materials.

To imperial women, dressing-up meant more than attending significant rituals. Their phoenix crowns and dress combined Chinese design with Southeast Asian materials could be seen as representations of the position of the Great Ming as a central kingdom receiving tributes from surrounding regions and developing trade with them. Lynda Shaffer's analysis on Southernization observes the Southern Asian impact on China since 350 and China's central position in the overseas commerce of Eastern hemisphere.[201] Her argument could be reinforced by reference to Cambodia kingfisher feathers on Ming empresses' phoenix crowns, Myanmar red and blue gems decorating their jewelry, and Siam incense held in their soft and white hands.

The Maritime Prohibition (*haijin*, 海禁) police associated with the Qianlong emperor (r. 1735-1796) left the world an image of an arrogant self-contained China. In 1792, George Macartney (1737-1806) was sent by the King George III of Great Britain to China with the excuse of celebrating Qianlong's 80th birthday. His real mission was to build an equal trading relationship with China. Qianlong arrogantly refused the request, as seen in his response to King George III (1738-1820): "Our Celestial Empire possesses all things in prolific abundance and lacks no product within its own borders. There is therefore no need to import the manufactures of outside barbarians in exchange for our own

[201] Lynda Shaffer, "Southernization," *Journal of World History*, 5 (Spring, 1994): 1-21.

produce."[202] Antonia Finnane's study on the exotic consumption in Yangzhou during the 18th century China connects the material culture of the east and west, breaking the stereotype of Chinese restriction towards foreign goods.[203] The shining red gem on the buttons of a Ming empress gives us a hint of the exotic taste of the imperial court. And the imperial preference on imported goods from Southeast Asia could be used as concrete evidence to argue against the stereotype of a self-contained imperial China.

In sum, the objects of imperial women were not merely necessary parts of their daily life that also identify their position in the harem hierarchy. They also imply preference, beliefs, and political agency. The social activities associated with imperial women were gifting, flower appreciation events, and banquets. In conjunction with material objects, they form a lens, through which we could visualize imperial women's daily life as well as the relationships they formed on day-to-day events.

Entertainment Activities of the Inner Court

Although we see Ming imperial women extend their power into the outer court, their daily life at the inner court is still blurry. Here, in order to reconstruct the daily and social life at the inner court, I examine imperial women's entertainment activities such as flower appreciations and banquets. They offer windows to view their day-to-day activities that went unmentioned in official records. Current historical research on the Ming court has only mentioned the male dominated activities like *touhu* and hunting,[204] as based on the

[202] "Qianlong's letter to George III," accessed March 16, 2015, http://rhs.rocklinusd.org/subsites/AP-World-History/documents/1450-1750/Qianlong.pdf.
[203] Finnane, "Yangzhou's 'modernity'."
[204] See Robinson, "The Ming Court and the Legacy of the Yuan Mongols," 365-411. And Robinson, *Martial Spectacles of the Ming Court,* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2013).

visualization of the court painting *Xuanzong shoulie tu* 宣宗狩獵圖 (The Xuande Emperor Hunting with Bow). As I argue about the importance of building relationships for imperial women, it is necessary to see how such activities took place at the inner court. The eunuch Liu Ruoyu jotted down his observation of the inner court entertainment in *Zhuozhong zhi*. As he resided at the inner court at the similar time with Empress Dowager Li and Imperial Concubine Zheng, his observation can offer a valuable lens for us to visualize their experience in their daily life. We can also see the interconnection between men and women at the inner court.

Liu Ruoyu wrote the *Zhuozhong zhi* in prison, relying on his three decades of court experience to write about the Wanli to Chongzhen's reigns.[205] The book offers valuable and reliable historical glimpses of the Ming court and reveals many details omitted by official historians. Based on Liu Ruoyu's record of imperial elites' flower appreciation and crab banquet, I will note the medium that connected female elites in imperial China and observe the circumstances that gathered people together regularly in the Ming inner court and launched conversations in both friendly and elegant manners.

The climate of Beijing with four seasons a year allows various flowers to blossom throughout the year. The flowers gave Ming imperial elites a reason to appreciate the beauty of nature while building a regular social network. Due to the sensibility that connects femininity to flowers, imperial women were regular and necessary guests at the flower appreciation activities. As other social gathering, dressing up beforehand and having a banquet afterward were also routines for it. A similar activity associated with flowers was

[205] Jay, "Random Jottings,"277-278.

the flower morning in the Tang dynasty.[206] On the flower morning, imperial women dressed up with perfume and wore flowers in the hair, and those whose hair attracted butterflies might have the chance to share the bed with emperor. Therefore, such an activity was restricted to imperial wives and concubines who had the right to serve the emperor and in a position to access perfumes and afford them. In comparison, flower appreciation during the Ming had more diversified participants. It was a gendered and hierarchical mixed gathering among imperial women, court officials, imperial elites, and court servants.

During the winter months, talented gardeners would store flower plants/seeds in the basement cellars to keep them from the cold weather. In the second lunar month, gardeners needed to ventilate the cellars[207] to let the flowers be ready for the appreciation. In the fourth day of the third lunar month, imperial women and court officials would dress in gauze clothes, and pin a poplar twig on their hair on their way to appreciate the first blossom of the new year. They followed the emperor's ride to appreciate the crab apple (*haitang* 海棠) blooms at *Huilongguan* 回龍觀 and other places. Elite families would appreciate peonies in the meantime.[208]

On the fourth day of the fourth lunar month, imperial women and court officials would dress in yarn clothes. Officials serving in Beijing would get a gift fan made by official artisans. It was the time to appreciate peony, paeonia lactiflora, and cherry fruits, those icons the start of fruitful harvest of the year. [209]

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[206] See Ellen Johnston Laing, "Notes on Ladies Wearing Flowers in their Hair," *Orientations*, 21(1990): 32-39.
[207] *ZZZ*, 20. 175.
[208] Ibid.
[209] Ibid.

In the fifth lunar month, from the first to the thirteen day, imperial women and court officials needed to wear four-claw dragon robes with badges of five poisonous animals (scorpion, serpent, gecko, centipede, and toad). It was the time to appreciate pomegranate flower.[210]After the end of summer, on the day of *liqiu* (立秋 Start of Autumn), in the sixth lunar month, it was the season to appreciate jasmine, cape jasmine (*zhizi* 梔子), lotus and so on.[211] In the seventh lunar month, the court would have banquets for having fish and imported jackfruit. After that imperial elites walked out to appreciate osmanthus flowers (*guihua* 桂花).[212]

In the eighth lunar month, people in the court would start to appreciate autumn crab-apples. Since the first day of the month, moon cakes went on sale and they were perfect seasonal gifts for exchange. It was also the right time to have crabs with abundant ovaries. Usually at this time, imperial women and court officials would have a crab banquet. They sat together in a hilarious atmosphere. Everyone tried to eat their crabs carefully to make sure no crab meat remained in the shells. Someone might show-off her technique of taking all the meat out of the crab and leaving the shell intact. The empty shell might even look like a butterfly.[213]

With the weather getting colder, the flower season was about to end. In the ninth lunar month, imperial women and court officials dressed in four-claw dragon robes with chrysanthemum badge, to celebrate the Double Ninth festival (*chongyang* 重陽). As was traditional custom, the emperor, followed by imperial elites, climbed a mountain and drank

[210] *ZZZ*, 20. 176.
[211] Ibid.
[212] Ibid.
[213] Ibid.

chrysanthemum wine.[214] On the fourth day of the tenth lunar month, imperial women and court officials started to wear ramie clothes. The pomegranate flowers they appreciated should be stored in the cellars.[215]

Liu Ruoyu tells us that the Ming court had flower related gatherings nine out of twelve months. The gatherings had gift exchanges, allowed them a stage to show their aesthetic and banquet techniques, and more importantly provided an opportunity to socialize. These social entertainments are invisible in both the official history or court regulations. Liu Ruoyu's record offers a fresh view of imperial women's everyday life other than reading didactic works and educating their children. They also had the chance to walk out of the chamber and come into a gender mixed social environment to show their aesthetics on dressing and on flowers, and be actively engaged in conversation with other court women and male officials.

In this chapter analyzing imperial women's material culture and social life, I used material evidence such as Empress Dowager Li's birthday over-vest to demonstrate her privilege, political agency, and gifting practices. Examining the material culture of Wanli's women, including that of Imperial Concubine Zheng, has offered a lens to view the way that imperial wives and concubines dressed up, their preference, and influence on court design. The social activities like flower appreciation and banquet attended by female and male elites, along with the servants, reveal a social life among imperial elites rarely visible in the official sources.

[214] *ZZZ*, 20. 177.
[215] Ibid.

Concluding Remarks

Ming imperial women were thought as obedient and without political performance at the male dominated outer court. Powerful women like Empress Wu (624-705) in the Tang dynasty, who became the first and the only female emperor in Chinese history, did not exist in the Ming palace. However, through examining the two cases of Ming imperial women's lives and everyday life, we can see their political opportunity, agency, and creativity. Their roles as daughter, wife, and mother identified imperial women as more than just imperial wife and concubine. Instead of pursing the power at outer court, the gendered activities they performed to be a good wife, kind mother, filial daughter, and fashionable imperial wife in the court demonstrated their agency.

In comparing the lives of Empress Dowager Li and Imperial Concubine Zheng, we observe that the different historical reputation depended on the way they treated their relationships with court officials and other imperial women, and their influence over the emperor. Empress Dowager Li had known and assisted Grand Secretary Zhang Juzheng in performing administrative duties, was kind to Empress Dowager Chen, and she strictly educated her son, the Wanli Emperor. Imperial Concubine Zheng, however, had no support from the outer court other than that of her natal relatives, and they were in less powerful positions. She lived a superfluous life with imperial benefits while Wanli's other women were in a relative lonely or even meager condition. Her pursuit of the rank of an empress dowager dragged the emperor and the court officials into more than ten years of dispute. Therefore, even if Ming imperial women had some opportunity that allowed them to actively perform their agency, to be successful, they needed to rely on male officials in the

outer court and female sympathizers in the inner court. Knowing the importance of relationships to Ming imperial women, in retrospect of their lives, this project also interprets their family background, their husbands, their allies and rivals. Aside from the textual records, I used material evidence like gifts and entertainment activities to demonstrate the way that imperial women built their relationships.

Material evidence like jewelry, phoenix crown, imperial robe, button and hairpins of Wanli's women give a sense of the material life of imperial women at the time. They also offer a chance to understand imperial women as independent individuals who showed preference in taste, creativity, and open mind, although sometimes these were restricted to sumptuary regulation.

This project has raised a number of issues in the study of Ming imperial women and material culture that deserve further investigation. First, this project uses the term "imperial women" to refer to women of the inner court who had relationships with the emperor. However, princesses, or sisters and daughters of emperor, are barely mentioned here. Yi Jo-lan studied the rituals, education, marriage, and economic situation of Ming princesses, and Soulliére studied the system of Ming princesses selecting husbands and gave a general introduction of their lives.[216] To better understand the life-cycles of princesses, I would like to further investigate their emotions, personal thought as well as their material culture as daughter, wife and mother. I intend to see if they had the agency to develop social

[216] Yi Jo-lan, "Bei yiwang de gongting funü: qiantan Ming dai gongzhu de shenghuo" 被遺忘的宮廷婦女——淺論明代公主的生活 (The Forgotten Palace Women: The Life of Princesses in the Ming Dynasty) *Furen lishi xuebao* 10(1999): 27-55. And see Ellen Soulliére, "The Imperial Marriages of the Ming Dynasty," *Papers on Far Eastern History,* 37 (1988): 15-42.

relationships in both the inner and outer courts, and whether they had any opportunities to participate in court affairs.

Secondly, the project has presented the building of relationships between imperial women and officials in the outer court and women in the inner court. It has mentioned gifting and social gatherings where imperial women had the opportunity to established relationships. Because of the importance of relationships to imperial women's agency and reputation, as I have argued, it is worthy to further investigate with more textual and material evidence. The records such as episodes of imperial women's interactions with men and women in the court would be ideal. And further archaeological findings of material gifts exchanged between imperial women can also reinforce the argument with visual evidence. With such evidence, we may have a better understanding of the relationship between Empress Dowager Li and Imperial Concubine Zheng and the gifting culture of the inner court.

Finally, I have argued about the openness of the Ming court by viewing its adaptation of Southeast Asian ornaments, like the incense burner and kingfisher feather. A further project from this breaking point could be studying the diplomatic influence of imperial women's preference on exotic fashion. Numerous foreign delegations from countries surrounding China could provide valuable material evidence for studying the Ming court's diplomatic and consumerist relationships with them. As David Robinson has discovered, these materials still have not been deeply researched: "the Ryukyu king sent horses, ivory, agate, sandalwood, and spices; Korean courts supplied horses, high-quality paper, inks, ramie and cotton fabrics, and ginseng; the "king of Japan" offered samurai swords, folding fans, sulphur, silver, and tea-bowls; Vietnam brought Southeast Asian

spices, medicines, and precious metals; Mongol and Jurchen envoys arrived with steppe horses, furs, leathers, and hunting falcons; Tibetans brought Buddhist icons, pennants, horses, and relics; missions from western Asia contributed lions, jade, and textiles. Later European visitors including Matteo Ricci would submit religious paintings, maps of the world, prisms, hourglasses, and a small harpsichord."[217] If we could give serious consideration to the circulation and impact of these stuffs, we could realize in more detail a picture of elites pursuing high-quality and exotic materials. Such demand that pushed the voyagers in the western Age of Discovery might also be seen in 16th century China's Southeast Asian trade.

Imperial women during Ming China were recorded as well behaved in the norm, and I argue that they also made some history. Empress Dowager Li and Imperial Concubine Zheng's endeavours on pursuing promotion, taking political opportunity, developing social relationships, and performing material creativity offer representative cases to present imperial women's agency. In interpreting women's life cycle, their identities as daughter, wife, and mother constructed their lives in the private and public sphere. The imperial women should be understood as independent individuals with their own thought. Their materials are significant historical evidence of their lives as individuals. Knowing about their personal preference and emotions has improved our understanding of imperial women. Ming imperial women's personal endeavour, agency, and creativity on fashion will help modern readers revise the stereotypical image of a static imperial China with imperial women cloistered in the inner court.

[217] Robinson, "The Ming Court," 33.

Appendix: The List of Imperial Wives and Concubines with Biographies in *Mingshi*

Emperor	Imperial Woman	Born	Died	Origin	Notes
Hongwu (r. 1368-1398)	Empress Ma	1332	1382	Suzhou, Anhui	
	Senior Concubine Sun	1343	1374	Chenzhou, Henan	
	Concubine Li		1384	Shouzhou, Anhui	
	Concubine Guo			Haozhou, Anhui	
Jianwei (r. 1398-1402)	Empress Ma	1378	1402		Daughter of Official Ma Quan
Yongle (r. 1402-1424)	Empress Xu	1362	1407	Beijing	Daughter of Official Xu Da
	Senior Concubine Wang		1420	Suzhou	
	Concubine Quan		1407	Korea	
Hongxi (r.1424-1425)	Empress Zhang		1442		Was empress dowager to Xuande emperor and Grand empress dowager to Zheng tong emperor
Xuande (r. 1425-1435)	Empress Hu		1443	Jining, Shandong	Was deposed in 1428 for childless
	Empress Sun		1462	Yongcheng, Henan	Was empress dowager to Zhengtong emperor
	Concubine Wu		1461	Danxi	Was empress dowager to Jingtai emperor
	Concubine Guo		1435	Fengyang, Anhui	Was good at literature
Zhengtong (r. 1435-1449)	Empress Qian		1468	Haizhou	Childless, was empress dowager to her stepson Chenghua emperor

	Senior Concubine Zhou		1504	Changping, Beijing	Was biological mother and empress dowager to Chenghua emperor, and grand empress dowager to Hongzhi emperor
Jingtai (r. 1449-1457)	Empress Wang		1505	Shuntian, Beijing	Was deposed in 1452
Chenghua (r.1464-1487)	Empress Wu		1506	Shuntian, Beijing	Deposed
	Empress Wang		1476	Shangyuan	
	Concubine Ji				Daughter of Northern Barbarian leader.
	Concubine Shao		1521	Changhua	Grand empress dowager to her grandson Jiajing emperor
	Imperial Concubine Wan		1486		Was chambermaid to empress dowager Sun. Was promoted because of imperial favour. She was known as jealous and murdered other imperial women's kids, therefore a femme fatale
Hongzhi (r.1487-1505)	Empress Zhang		1541	Xingji, Hebei	
Zhengde (r. 1505-1521)	Empress Ma	1492	1535	Shangyuan, Nanjing	
Jiajing (r. 1521-1567)	Empress Dowager Chen	1508	1528	Yuancheng, Hebei	
	Empress Zhang		1537		Deposed in 1535
	Empress Fang		1546		
	Concubine Du		1553	Daxing, Beijing	Was empress dowager to Longqing Emperor
Longqing (r.1567-1572)	Empress Li		1557	Changping, Beijing	

	Empress Dowager Chen		1595	Tongzhou Beijing	Was empress dowager to the Wanli Emperor
	Senior Concubine Li	1545	1614	Huoxian, Beijing	Was a chambermaid to Longqing Emperor and the biological mother and empress dowager to the Wanli Emperor
Wanli (r.1572-1620)	Empress Wang	1564	1620	Yuyao, Zhejiang	
	Imperial Concubine Wang	1565	1611	Hebei	Was a chambermaid to Empress Dowager Li, also Empress Dowager Xiaojing to Taichang emperor
	Imperial Concubine Zheng	1565	1630	Daxing, Beijing	Intended to designated the crown prince her son but failed.
Taichang (r. 1620)	Empress Guo		1613	Shuntian, Beijing	
	Concubine Wang		1619	Shuntian, Beijing	Was a chambermaid to Taichang, and the biological mother to Tianqi
	Concubine Liu		1613		Was biological mother to Chongzhen emperor
	Concubine Li		1674		Stepmother of Tianqi, and intended to take regency but failed
	Concubine Li	1606	1624	Xiangfu, Henan	
Tianqi (r.1620-1627)	Concubine Zhao				
Chongzhen (r.1627-1644)	Empress Zhang	1611	1644	Suzhou	Suicide at the collapse of the Ming
	Concubine Zhang			Shannxi	
	Empress Zhou		1644		
	Imperial Concubine Tian		1642		

Source: Mingshi, juan 113-14

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