

Unexpected Corporation: Chinese Emperors' Rear Palace

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Five thousand years across the vast expanse of Chinese civilization gave birth to the rise and demise of sixty-six dynasties. Yet one symbol of cultural continuity persisted through the vicissitudes of regality---Emperor's Imperial Palace. The Forbidden City, the state residence of the Emperor of China from the Ming dynasty to the end of the Qing dynasty, is perhaps the most well-known Chinese Imperial Palace to the Occidental realm. Its majesty is undoubtable, yet only symbolizes a fraction of the marvel of Chinese palatial architectures throughout history.

Large halls (殿) for ceremonies and official business, residence buildings(寝宫), temples (庙), towers (塔), galleries (廊), courtyards (园), gardens (花园), and outbuildings (外宫) are all incorporated into one palatial complex, the architectural design of which not only immaculately mirrors the religious and philosophical principles of each Dynasty, but also forms a physical hierarchy reflective of the social stratification of the Palace residents. (See [Appendix I](#) for the physical layout of the Rear Palace in the Forbidden City.)

Much attention has been given to Chinese Imperial Palaces as the center of state economics, politics, and ceremony as a whole, which, in my humble opinion, obfuscates the tremendous nuances of each palatial component that could act as a body of corporation on its own. Today I want to talk about the mysterious center of scandal, debauchery, luxury, and revelry---the Emperor's Rear Palace (后宫 / phonetics: ho gong) or the Harem, and argue that it is a perfect epitome of corporate form despite its seemingly non-political and non-economic functions. Perhaps it is exactly because of the Rear Palace's auxiliary and domestic role relative to other buildings in Imperial Palaces that its corporate nature is overlooked. I will use the Rear Palace in the Forbidden City as the main example to demonstrate how Emperor's Rear Palace serves as a social body with a recognized existence separate from its members, acts as an agent that owns and transacts property and owns its own name, persists through changes in membership, and governs its members through everlasting hierarchical rules.

(Besides searching for relevant English resources on Google, I searched for Chinese archival materials, documents, and ancient literature, poetry, and arts on Baidu, the Chinese equivalent of Google, and translated them into English myself.)

The Rear Palace is traditionally situated in the deep quarter of an Emperor's palatial complex, and houses all females living inside the palace, including palace servants, the entire rank of concubines tasked to bear children for the Emperor, royal Princesses, and the empress.¹ Emperors visit the Back Palace mainly to engage in sexual intercourse with his concubines for pleasure or procreation. (Please see [Appendix II](#) for some really interesting information about emperor's lunar schedule of sexual activities.) The earliest record of Back Palace traces back to the Zhou Dynasty (1046-256 BCE), and persisted till the end of Qing Dynasty, the end of the imperial age of feudal China (1912).²

Recognized Social Body

In Chinese folklores, Emperors' consorts are often referred to as "the 3000 Beauties of the Rear Palace" (后宫三千佳丽; phonetics: ho gong san qian jia lee). While the number 3000 does not always represent the actual number of an Emperor's consorts, this appellation illustrates the collective body represented by the Rear Palace.³

Once a woman is selected to enter the Rear Palace, she becomes a mere symbol of Emperor's companionship, entertainers and procreators, the "chosen ones" to serve the continuation of the heavenly lineage of the Emperor. Chinese Emperors' blood lines are always imbued with heavenly significance, a sign of heavenly mandate that is given utmost sanctity in traditional Chinese familial structure. In fact, Emperors would give each chosen consort a new name, a single Chinese character that symbolizes the most prominent aspect of the consort's beauty or

¹ Duhalde, Marcelo. "Life inside the Forbidden City: How Women Were Selected for Service." South China Morning Post, 12 July 2018, multimedia.scmp.com/culture/article/2154046/forbidden-city/life/chapter_01.html?src=follow-chapter.

² The Rear Palace: the Life of Zhou Emperors 周朝帝王的后宫生活简介, 趣历史, 4 July 2014, www.qulishi.com/news/201407/15725.html.

³ MacMahon, Keith (2013), Women Shall Not Rule: Imperial Wives and Concubines in China from Han to Liao, Rowman & Littlefield. ISBN 9781442222908

character. The consort's new name would consist of the chosen character and her rank in the imperial harem system. (See [Appendix III](#) for fun information on how imperial harem systems persisted in different dynasties.)

In the Rear Palace of the Forbidden City, for example, there were eight classes of imperial concubines, with the Empress (皇后; huáng hòu) at the very top of the hierarchy and followed by Imperial Noble Consort (皇贵妃; huáng guì fēi), Noble Consorts (贵妃; guì fēi), Consorts (妃; fēi), Imperial Concubines (嫔; pín), Noble Lady (贵人; guì rén, literally "precious person"), First-Class Female Attendant (常在; cháng zài, literally "often present"), Second-Class Female Attendant (答应; dā ying, literally "promise"), and Chosen Maid (官女子; guān nǚ zǐ). For example, in the Rear Palace one would be called Noble Lady Duan (Duan: elegance), Consort Le (Le: happiness), First Attendant Mei (Mei: beauty), ect. Women lose their individual identities once entered into the collective body of the imperial consorts; and together, they become representations of the procreational function, imperial service, and royal companionship that the Rear Palace collectively symbolizes.

The Rear Palace was the theme of many ancient Chinese poems, which, interestingly, almost never talked about the Rear Palace solely as an architecture but always as a collective social body of the "Harem Beauties". For example, in this following poem, *Words Within the Palace* by poet Qingyu Zhu (Tang Dynasty), the Rear Palace was considered synonymous with the Harem Beauties.

*“The gate of the Palace is closed when flowers reside in their perpetual solitude;
A shadowy hallway stands in front of the fair lady,
Who pines to talk to the Palace with lust.
The parrot dares not utter a word.”⁴*
(寂寂花时闭院门，美人相并立琼轩。含情欲说宫中事，鹦鹉前头不敢言)

The Rear Palace is thus not only an architectural component of the Imperial Palace, but also creates and acts as a social body separated from its members, where individual consorts do not act in their own capacities but as representation of the capacities and functions of the Rear Palace as a whole. The public perception and recognition of the Rear Palace as a collective social body are manifest in many ancient Chinese poetry and literature.

Agent of property ownership and transaction

The Rear Palace holds a staggering wealth of antiquities, jewelry, and paintings, usually as rewards from the Emperor to his concubines or the Emperor's private collections. In September 1916, in his letter to President Li Yuanhong, Prime Minister Duan Qirui admitted that the antiquities displayed in the halls of the Rear Palace were all private property of the Qing Dynasty, with a total of more than 700,000 pieces worth of over five million yuan.⁵ Internal monetary transactions also take place among the Harem Internal Office, set up by the Emperor to manage the affairs and hierarchy of the Rear Palace, the Emperor's State Treasury, and the Imperial consorts. Internal officials distribute monthly stipends from the State Treasury to the consorts according to their ranks. External transactions also occur when consorts of higher ranks in the Rear Palace interfere with external affairs by bribing officials or generals in an attempt to affect state politics, which is supposedly forbidden by the Emperor.⁶ For example, Empress Dowager Cixi broke out of the domestic confine of the Rear Palace and rose to power by bribing officials in the Emperor's Front Court, the equivalent of modern day think-tanks or advisory committee for national leaders, and installing her nephew as a puppet Emperor under her control at the death of the Tongzhi Emperor in 1875.⁷

In short, the Rear Palace not only has collective ownership of private property, but also acts as agents of both internal and external transactions of money, property, and power.

⁴ Translated from Online Archives of Tang Poetry Collection. <https://baike.baidu.com/item/宫中词/6974144?fr=aladdin>

⁵ Translated from Chinese Documentary Archives of Qing History—the Fall of the Qing Dynasty. <https://zhidao.baidu.com/question/2057960767526330427.html>

⁶ Translated from the Chinese Encyclopedia of History: The Rear Palace. <https://baike.baidu.com/item/后宫/1400?fr=aladdin>

⁷ Translated from Chinese Archive of Emperor Cixi's Biography. <https://baike.baidu.com/item/慈禧/184326?fr=aladdin>

Governance, Integrity, and Hierarchy

The Rear Palace exercises an extremely hierarchical form of governance over its members, and abides by strict codes of operations, including selection of members, members' daily schedules, and expected duties and responsibilities.⁸ (See [Appendix IV](#) for more information on the selection criteria of imperial consorts.) The Integrity of the Rear Palace is maintained not only through the integrity and enforcement of its hierarchical structure, but also through its indisputable code of conducts that every member must follow. (See [Appendix V](#) for more information on the Imperial Harem Code of Conduct.)

What makes it even more interesting is that its integrity also has a dimension of bloodline and kinship. Every consort in the Rear Palace and her children are technically related through their relationships with the Emperor. (Consorts often address each other as "sister" in the Rear Palace.) The hereditary, structural, and behavioral aspects of governance together create and justify a form of almost unbreakable integrity that binds the identity of each member.

Moreover, the different residence halls in the Rear Palace are also structured and arranged according to the rank of their residents. The Empress' hall naturally occupies the center of the Rear Palace, and has the most exorbitant design, whereas consorts of lower ranks scatter around the center, mirroring their status on the Harem Hierarchy. The physical location of the Rear Palace, deep in the back of the entire Palatial Complex, also indicates the external hierarchy between the front center of state politics and the back center of domestic affairs. (See [Appendix I](#) for the hierarchical layout of the Rear Palace in the Forbidden City.)

Persistence over time

The Rear Palace persists over time in and through its hierarchical structural. While the specific ranks of each dynasty's harem hierarchy varies, the strict code of stratification persists and dominates thousands of years of Chinese Emperors' familial affairs. (See appendix III for more details on the continuum of Harem Hierarchy throughout Chinese history.) The Rear Palace exercises the power of governance regardless of the constitutes of its membership. While consorts come and go, dynasties flourish and perish, and emperors rise and fall, the Rear Palace sustains its form of hierarchical power that creates persistence, attachment, and a lasting bio-identity where power consolidated in the imperial social status and material wealth of Emperor's child bearers timelessly binds the identity of its members, the "the 3000 Beauties of the Rear Palace".

To summarize, the Chinese Emperor's Rear Palace, despite being a place commonly associated with sexual pleasure, intimacy, taboos, and procreation, that are seemingly non-economic and non-political characteristics, perfectly represents the corporate form. Not only does it create and function as a recognized social body separated from its constitutes, have its own name, and act as an agent of ownership and transaction, it also follows a strict hierarchy of operation, through which its governance persists over time and exercises control over generations of membership. The Rear Palace is not just an architectural marvel, but a corporate body, and perhaps with just an extra scope of historical drama and tantalizing mythologization. 😊

(This short write-up really does not do justice to the amazing parallels between the Rear Palace and the corporate form. In fact, a lot of corporate officials study Chinese dramas about the Rear Palace as a manual of corporate management. I would love to research more on this topic in my free time and exchange my ideas with you in the future.)

⁸ Hsieh, Bao Hua (2014), *Concubinage and Servitude in Late Imperial China*, Lexington Books, p. ISBN 9780739145166

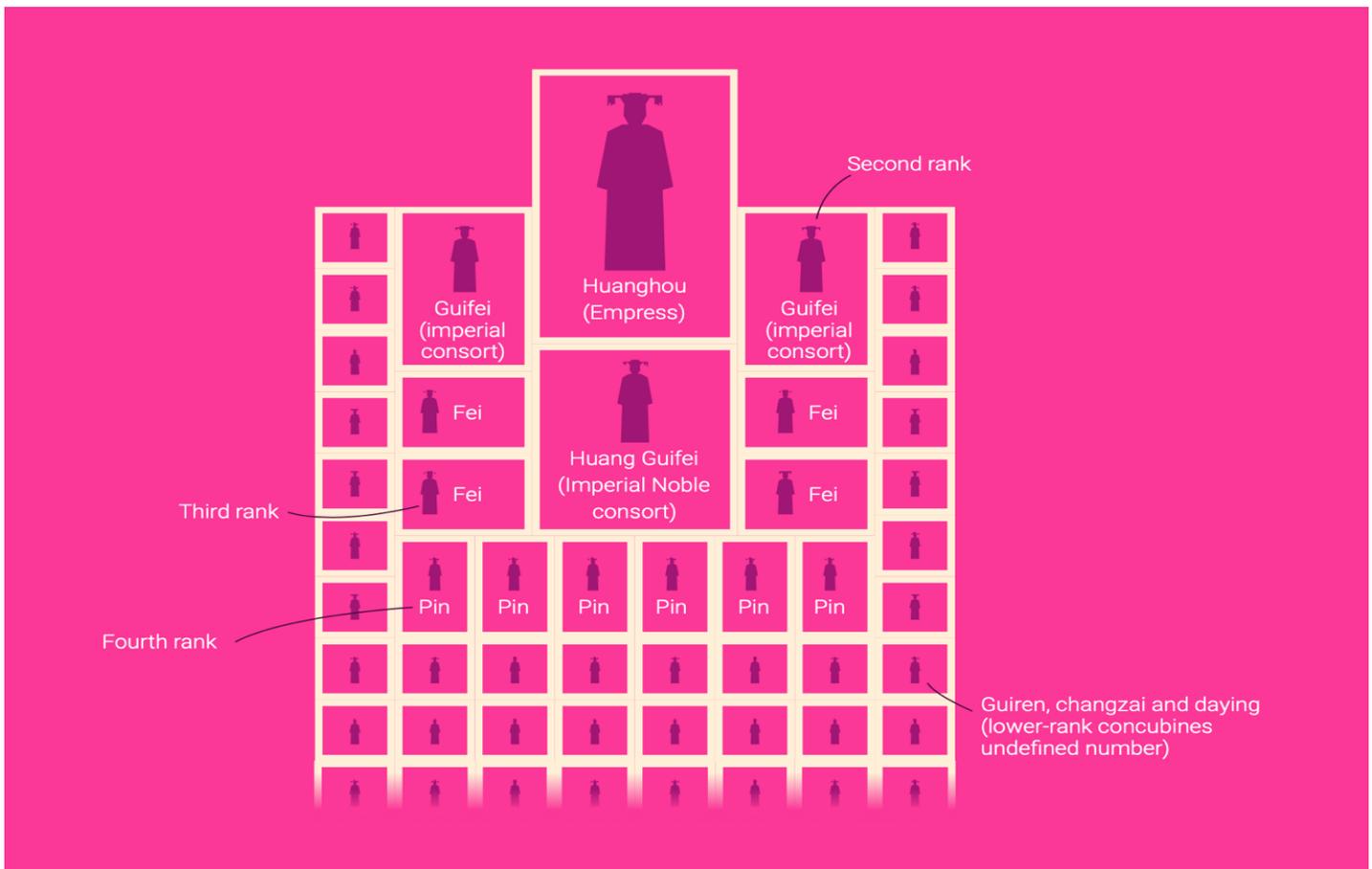


Figure 2: Chinese Imperial Consort Hierarchy in Qing Dynasty¹⁰

We can see from figure 1 and figure 2 that there is an internal hierarchy within the Rear Palace and an external hierarchy between the Rear Palace and the Front Palace. Both internal and external hierarchy is shown by the geographic layout and proximity between each consort’s residence to the Emperor’s Front Palace. The physical layout of the Rear Palace (figure 1) neatly coincides with the form of social hierarchy among all imperial consorts (figure 2)

Appendix II Qing Emperor’s Lunar Calendar of Sexual Activities

Emperor’s Sexual Rotation

“Organizing the emperor’s sex life was essential to maintaining the well-being of the entire Chinese empire. The Chinese calendars of the 10th century were not used to keep track of time but rather to keep the emperor’s sex schedule in check. The rotation of concubines sleeping with the emperor was kept to a regimented order. Secretaries were employed to record the emperor’s sex life with brushes dipped in imperial vermilion.

Moon Cycle

In China, and some other Asian countries, age is determined from the moment of conception, not the moment of birth. The Imperial Chinese believed that women were most likely to conceive during the full moon, when the Yin, or female influence, was strong enough to match the Yang, or male force, of the emperor. The empress and other wives slept with the emperor around the time of the full moon because it was believed children of strong virtue

¹⁰ Duhalde, Marcelo. “Life inside the Forbidden City: How Women Were Selected for Service.” South China Morning Post, 12 July 2018, multimedia.scmp.com/culture/article/2154046/forbidden-city/life/chapter_01.html?src=follow-chapter.

would be conceived on those nights. The lower-ranking concubines were tasked with nourishing the emperor's Yang with their Yin, sleeping with him around the time of the new moon."¹¹

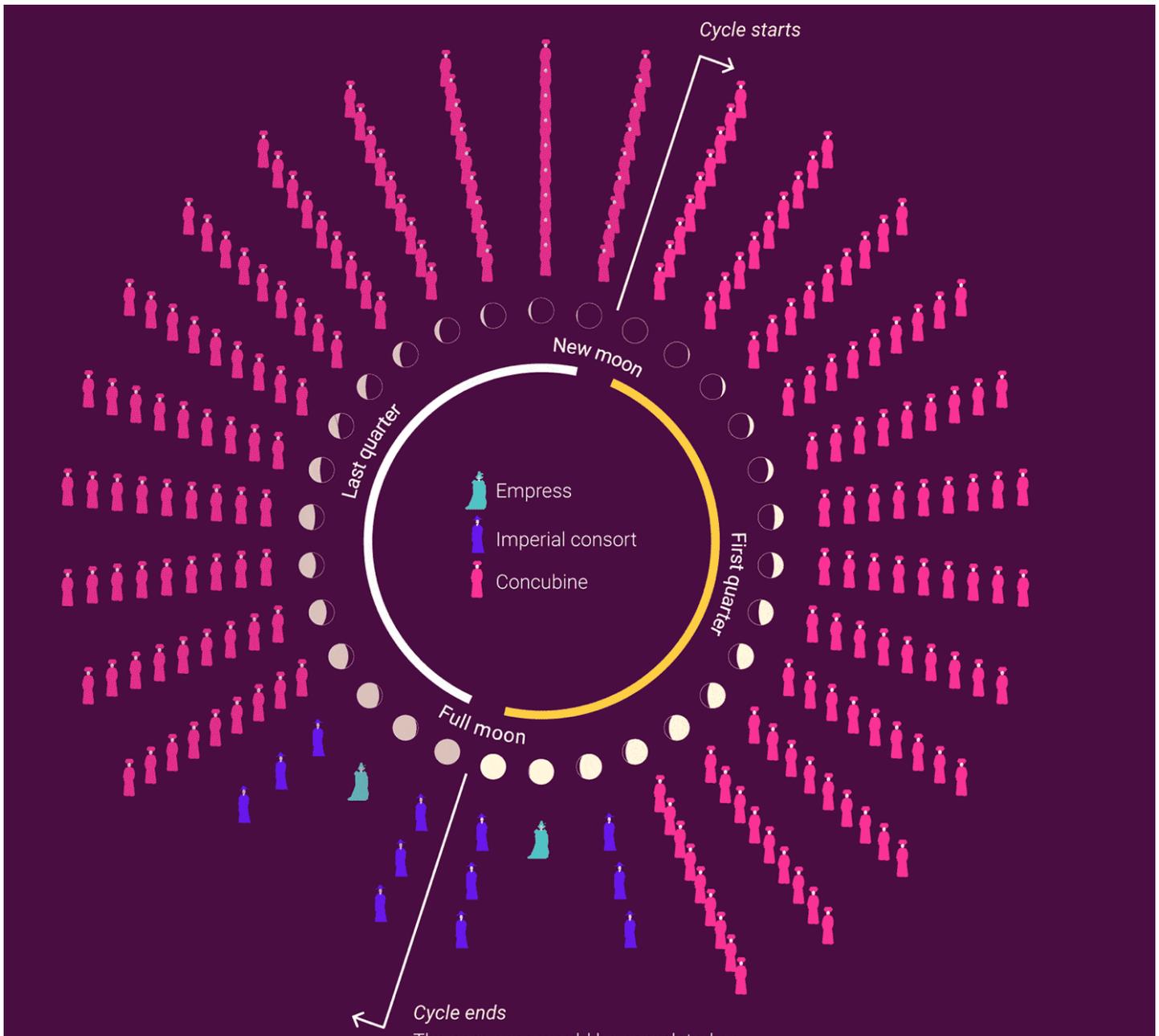


Figure 3. The Moon Cycle that dictates Qing emperors' sex life schedule¹²

¹¹ Duhalde, Marcelo. "Life inside the Forbidden City: How Women Were Selected for Service." South China Morning Post, 12 July 2018, multimedia.scmp.com/culture/article/2154046/forbidden-city/life/chapter_01.html?src=follow-chapter.

¹² Duhalde, Marcelo. "Life inside the Forbidden City: How Women Were Selected for Service." South China Morning Post, 12 July 2018, multimedia.scmp.com/culture/article/2154046/forbidden-city/life/chapter_01.html?src=follow-chapter.

Appendix III Imperial harem systems in different dynasties rank their consorts¹³.

<p>Qin (221--- 206 BC)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 1 Queen (王后; <i>wáng hòu</i>), which later became Empress (皇后; <i>huáng hòu</i>) 2. Consort (夫人; <i>fū rén</i>) 3. Beauty (美人; <i>měi rén</i>) 4. Virtuous Lady (良人; <i>liáng rén</i>) 5. Consort (八子; <i>bā zi</i>) 6. Lady (七子; <i>qī zi</i>) 7. Senior Palace Woman (長使; <i>zhǎng shǐ</i>) 8. Junior Palace Woman (少使; <i>shǎo shǐ</i>)
<p>Western Han (202 BC— 9 AD)</p>	<p>During the reign of Gaozu:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Empress (皇后; <i>huáng hòu</i>) 2. Consort (夫人; <i>fū rén</i>) <p>Later:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Empress (皇后; <i>huáng hòu</i>) 2. Consort (夫人; <i>fū rén</i>) 3. Beauty (美人; <i>měi rén</i>) 4. Virtuous Lady (良人; <i>liáng rén</i>) 5. Consort (八子; <i>bā zi</i>) 6. Lady (七子; <i>qī zi</i>) 7. Senior Palace Woman (長使; <i>zhǎng shǐ</i>) 8. Junior Palace Woman (少使; <i>shǎo shǐ</i>) 9. <p>From the reign of Emperor Yuan</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Empress (皇后; <i>huáng hòu</i>) 2. Lady of Bright Department (昭儀; <i>zhāo yí</i>) 3. Lady of Handsome Fairness (婕妤; <i>jié yú</i>), created by Emperor Wu 4. Lady of Graceful Beauty (嬪娥; <i>xíng é</i>), created by Emperor Wu 5. Lady of Lovely Countenance (容華; <i>róng huá</i>), created by Emperor Wu 6. Lady of Complete Department (充衣; <i>chōng yī</i>), created by Emperor Wu

¹³ Translated from the Chinese Encyclopedia of History. <https://baike.baidu.com/item/后宫/1400?fr=aladdin>

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Beauty (美人; <i>měi rén</i>) 8. Virtuous Lady (良人; <i>liáng rén</i>) 9. Consort (八子; <i>bā zǐ</i>) 10. Lady (七子; <i>qī zǐ</i>) 11. Senior Palace Woman (長使; <i>zhǎng shǐ</i>) 12. Junior Palace Woman (少使; <i>shǎo shǐ</i>) 13. Lady for Miscellenous Uses (五官; <i>wǔ guān</i>) 14. Lady of Complaisant Constancy (順常; <i>shùn cháng</i>) 15. Lady Without Impurity (舞涓; <i>wǔ juān</i>), Lady of Reverent Gentleness (共和; <i>gòng hé</i>), Lady who Pleases the Spirit <i>yuling</i> (娛靈; <i>yú líng</i>), Lady who Could Comfort a Multitude (保林; <i>bǎo lín</i>), Lady of Excellent Employment (良使; <i>liáng shǐ</i>), Lady for Night Attendance (夜者; <i>yè zhě</i>)
<p>Eastern Han (25–220 AD)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Empress (皇后; <i>huáng hòu</i>) 2. Noble Lady (貴人; <i>guì rén</i>) 3. Beauty (美人; <i>měi rén</i>) 4. Courtier (宮人; <i>gōng rén</i>) 5. Talented Lady (才女; <i>cǎi nǚ</i>) <p>No limits were set for these consorts. This later created situations when more than 20,000 women were living in the palace during the reigns of Emperor Huan and Emperor Ling.</p>
<p>Sui (581---618 AD)</p>	<p>In the beginning, there existed a simple system of rankings for imperial consorts:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Empress (皇后; <i>huáng hòu</i>) 2. Concubine (嬪; <i>pín</i>) 3. 9 (世婦; <i>shì fù</i>) 4. 38 (禦女; <i>yù nǚ</i>) <p>There also existed a system of (女官; <i>nǚ guān</i>) to manage ceremonial affairs in the harem. The system was based on similar systems in the past. After the death of Empress Dugu, Emperor Wen expanded the ranks of the consorts to the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 1 Empress (皇后; <i>huáng hòu</i>) 2. 3 (貴人; <i>guì rén</i>) 3. 9 (嬪; <i>pín</i>) 4. 27 (世婦; <i>shì fù</i>) 5. 81 (禦女; <i>yù nǚ</i>)

Tang
(618 --
907 AD)

Imperial consorts of Tang China are organized in eight or nine ranks, in addition to the Empress. They are also called the "inner officials" (内官), as opposed to "palace officials" (宫官), the bureaucracy.

1. 1 Empress (皇后; *huáng hòu*)
2. 4 Consort (夫人; *fū rén*)
 1. Honoured Consort (貴妃; *guì fēi*)
 2. Pure Consort (淑妃; *shū fēi*)
 3. Virtuous Consort (德妃; *dé fēi*)
 4. Worthy Consort (賢妃; *xián fēi*)
3. 9 Imperial Concubine (嬪; *pín*)
 1. Lady of Bright Deportment (昭儀; *zhāo yí*)
 2. Lady of Bright Countenance (昭容; *zhāo róng*)
 3. Lady of Bright Beauty (昭媛; *zhāo yuàn*)
 4. Lady of Cultivated Deportment (修儀; *xiū yí*)
 5. Lady of Cultivated Countenance (修容; *xiū róng*)
 6. Lady of Cultivated Beauty (修媛; *xiū yuàn*)
 7. Lady of Complete Deportment (充衣; *chōng yī*)
 8. Lady of Complete Countenance (充容; *chōng róng*)
 9. Lady of Complete Beauty (充媛; *chōng yuàn*)
4. 9 Lady of Handsome Fairness (婕妤; *jié yú*)
5. 9 Beauty (美人; *měi rén*)
6. 9 Lady of Talents (才人; *cái rén*)
7. 27 Lady of Treasure / Lady of Precious Bevy (寶林; *bǎo lín*)
8. 27 Lady of His Majesty / Secondary Concubine (禦女; *yù nǚ*)
9. 27 Selected Lady / Lady of Elegance (採女; *cǎi nǚ*)

During the reign of Gaozong:

1. 1 Empress (皇后; *huáng hòu*)
2. 4 Consorts (夫人; *fū rén*)
 1. Noble Consort (貴妃; *guì fēi*)
 2. Pure Consort (淑妃; *shū fēi*)
 3. Virtuous Consort (德妃; *dé fēi*)
 4. Worthy Consort (賢妃; *xián fēi*)

	<p>3. 9 Imperial Concubines (嬪; <i>pín</i>)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lady of Bright Department (昭儀; <i>zhāo yí</i>) 2. Lady of Bright Countenance (昭容; <i>zhāo róng</i>) 3. Lady of Bright Beauty (昭媛; <i>zhāo yuàn</i>) 4. Lady of Cultivated Department (修儀; <i>xiū yí</i>) 5. Lady of Cultivated Countenance (修容; <i>xiū róng</i>) 6. Lady of Cultivated Beauty (修媛; <i>xiū yuàn</i>) 7. Lady of Complete Department (充衣; <i>chōng yī</i>) 8. Lady of Complete Countenance (充容; <i>chōng róng</i>) 9. Lady of Complete Beauty (充媛; <i>chōng yuàn</i>) <p>4. 9 Lady of Handsome Fairness (婕妤; <i>jié yú</i>)</p> <p>5. 9 Beauty (美人; <i>měi rén</i>)</p> <p>6. 9 Lady of Talents (才人; <i>cái rén</i>)</p>
<p>Ming (1368--- 1644)</p>	<p>The system was simple with five commonly used titles:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Empress (皇后; <i>huáng hòu</i>) 2. Imperial Noble Consort (皇貴妃; <i>huáng guì fēi</i>) 3. Noble Consort (貴妃; <i>guì fēi</i>) 4. Consort (妃; <i>fēi</i>) 5. Concubine (嬪; <i>pín</i>) <p>Other known titles including:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lady of Handsome Fairness (婕妤; <i>jié yú</i>) 2. Lady of Bright Department (昭儀; <i>zhāo yí</i>) 3. Lady of Bright Countenance (昭容; <i>zhāo róng</i>) 4. Noble Lady (貴人; <i>guì rén</i>) 5. Beauty (美人; <i>měi rén</i>) <p>For the Crown Prince:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Crown Princess (太子妃; <i>tài zǐ fēi</i>) 2. Talented Lady (才人; <i>cái rén</i>) 3. (選侍; <i>xuǎn shì</i>) 4. (淑女; <i>shū nǚ</i>)

Appendix IV Selection criteria of imperial consorts

During the annual selection period of “show women”, the qualified ones from which will become imperial consorts, the Ministry of Households assigns a Selection General to each town to select age-appropriate (13-17 years old) and beautiful women from the households. Families usually voluntarily send their daughters to the General.

After the Emperor approves the selection of show women, a designated Department immediately notifies the public that the annual selection period has ended, and publicly announces the selected show women on giant white banners hung across city walls.

The families of the chosen show women are then required to personally take their daughter or sister to the Shenwu Gate of the Forbidden City, where show women are arranged in order and handed over to the internal supervisors of the Rear Palace (Emperor’s Eunuchs)

The internal supervisors then go through two more rounds of selection to pick out the most beautiful, healthiest, and well-mannered women, and report a list of finalists to the Emperor for the final round of Imperial Selection.

The final candidates are first required to spend several days serving the Emperor’s mother. Upon being given a name by the Emperor, show women, with their initial ranks, such as Responder (Daying) or Noble Person (Guiren), are required to have sex with the Emperor, and may be promoted to higher ranks based on the Emperor’s extent of satisfaction with their sexual performances. For example, Empress Dowager Cixi entered the palace as a show woman, and was selected by Emperor Xianfeng as a noble person. After a night serving the Emperor, she was promoted to concubine and then to noble concubine.¹⁴



15

¹⁴ Translated from the Chinese Encyclopedia of History: The Rear Palace. <https://baike.baidu.com/item/后宫/1400?fr=aladdin>

¹⁵ Duhalde, Marcelo. “Life inside the Forbidden City: How Women Were Selected for Service.” South China Morning Post, 12 July 2018, multimedia.scmp.com/culture/article/2154046/forbidden-city/life/chapter_01.html?src=follow-chapter.

Appendix V The Harem Code of Conduct

Naturally, concubines were strictly forbidden from having sex with anyone other than the emperor. Most of their activities were overseen and monitored by the eunuchs, who wielded great power in the palace. Concubines were required to bathe and be examined by a court doctor before the emperor visited their bed chamber. With hundreds, and sometimes thousands, of concubines at the emperor's disposal, any lady the emperor graced with a visit would be subject to jealous rivalries. Concubines had their own rooms and would fill their days applying make-up, sewing, practising various arts and socializing with other concubines.¹⁶

¹⁶ Duhalde, Marcelo. "Life inside the Forbidden City: How Women Were Selected for Service." South China Morning Post, 12 July 2018, multimedia.scmp.com/culture/article/2154046/forbidden-city/life/chapter_01.html?src=follow-chapter.