

The Inner Court and Politics in the Han Empire: A Comparative Perspective

Yunxin Li, Stanford University

Leave Empty

This space will be automatically filled with a QR code and number for easy sharing

The inner court acquired political power because of their spatial closeness to the ruler in terms of space; gender, sexual, and emotional relations; and social networks.

Spatial Closeness to the Ruler

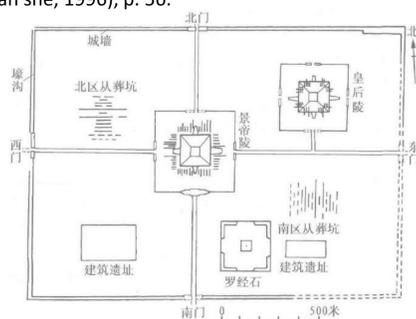
The capitals of the Western Han and the Eastern Han both had three levels of restricted spaces: the Imperial Palace (*gong zhong* 宮中), the Inner Palace (*dian zhong* 殿中), and the Forbidden Quarter (*jin zhong* 禁中 or *sheng zhong* 省中). The gate to the Forbidden Quarter was called the Yellow Gate and guarded by eunuchs. Only those whose names had been registered on the rosters and who held tallies and credentials could pass the gates and enter each level of space. From the Imperial Palace to the Inner Palace and then to the Forbidden Quarter, restriction of access became stricter as the space became inner and closer to the emperor's residence. Only the emperor and those closest to him could live and work in the Forbidden Quarter.

A Forbidden Quarter existed in the emperor's temporary residence as well. While the Weiyang Palace offered a stable spatial hierarchy and a sedentary lifestyle, travelling palaces and imperial parks witnessed the movement of the center of power together with the emperor's body. The Western Han emperors who travelled to the Ganquan Palace and the Shanglin Park only brought their favorite concubines and closest officials. Thus, the inner court moved with the emperor's body.

The layouts of the imperial palace and mausoleums indicate that the emperor's body was the innermost space and that the inner court members were close to the emperor.



A Map of the Weiyang Palace, the imperial palace of the Western Han dynasty. Image Credit: Shi Nianhai (ed.), *Xi'an li shi di tu ji* (Xi'an: Xi'an di tu chu ban she, 1996), p. 56.



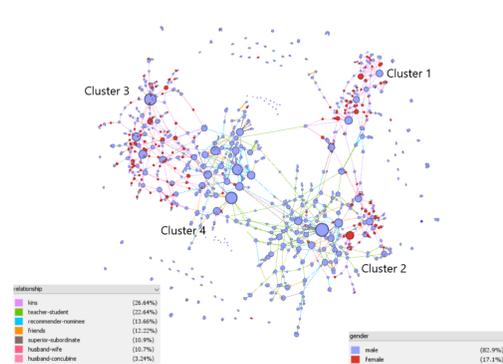
The Layout of Emperor Jing's Yang Mausoleum Complex. Image Credit: Jiao, Nanfeng. "Shi lun xi han di ling de jian she li nian," *Kao gu*, 2007 (11), 76-82, p.80.

Gender, Sexual, and Emotional Closeness to the Ruler

While palace women's participation in politics was often criticized by the outer court, gender norms and practices were complex and often contradictory. In fact, empress dowagers in the Han were heavily involved in politics, and several of them served as regents for young emperors. Empresses and imperial concubines, especially those in the Eastern Han, also played key roles in state ceremonies and in the imperial lineage's alliance with powerful families. The resourcefulness of elite women, together with ideological and pragmatic grounds, granted palace women legitimacy to participate in politics. As long as they did not attempt to replace the royal clan with a different clan, their political functions were necessary to the continuation of the dynasty.

The crossing of gender boundaries was crucial in eunuchs' rise to power and in male favorites' relations with emperors. While eunuchs were despised by scholar-officials as mutilated, incomplete men, they were no longer subject to male gender norms, including gender segregation. Thereby, they gained access to both men and women of the imperial household. The emperor's male favorites, who were called the *ning xing* ("sycophants and favored") by historians, maintained close emotional and sometimes physical relations with the emperor, allowing them to extend their influence into the political realm.

The Inner Court and the Outer Court from a Social Network Perspective



Social Networks at the Han Court, consisting of 1187 individuals and 1449 connections collected mainly from *Shi ji*, *Han shu*, and *Hou han shu*. Clusters 1 and 2 consist of Western Han figures, while Clusters 3 and 4 comprise Eastern Han figures. In terms of backgrounds, Clusters 1 and 3 mainly consist of emperors, empresses, imperial concubines and imperial affines, whereas Clusters 2 and 4 are dominated by professional bureaucrats and classical scholars but also include imperial affines. The main types of networks correspond with the social groups. In Clusters 1 and 3, the major networks are kinship and marriage relations. By contrast, teacher-student and recommender-nominee relationships figure prominently in Clusters 2 and 4. Generally speaking, Clusters 1 and 3 represent the inner court, and Clusters 2 and 4 mainly consist of the outer court. The distance between Clusters 1 and 2 and that between Clusters 3 and 4 reveal significant chronological changes in terms of the relationship between the inner court and the outer court. Basically, we see that the imperial affines moved away from the emperors and became closer to the outer court as time went on. From a gender perspective, the inner court was very much reliant on the females to mediate social connections.

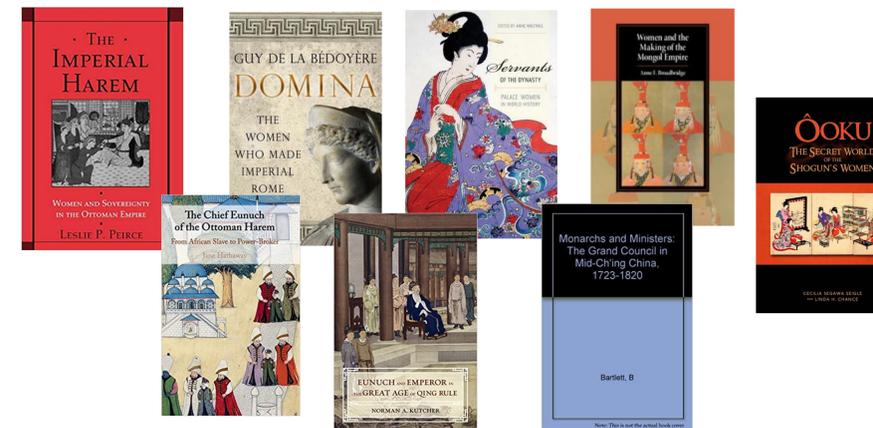
The Institutionalization of the Inner Court

The inner court was repeatedly institutionalized in imperial China. Emperor Wu granted official titles to the eunuchs, male favorites, and imperial affines whom he trusted, thus creating the category of inner court officials (*zhong chao chen* 中朝臣). These inner court officials lived in the Inner Palace and often stayed in the Forbidden Quarter to accompany the emperor, yet they also had residences outside the imperial palace and could go out during vacations. Previous scholars identified several official posts as those of inner court officials, such as Grand Marshal (*da si ma* 大司馬), various Generals (*jiang jun* 將軍), Superintendent of the Palace (*guang lu xun* 光祿勳), Palace Attendant (*shi zhong* 侍中), Regular Attendant of the Inner Palace (*zhong chang shi* 中常侍), and Official who Concurrently Serves in the Palace (*ji shi zhong* 給事中).

Constant Tension between the Inner Court and the Outer Court and the Biases in Traditional Chinese Historiography

The tensions among the inner court, the outer court, and the ruler created a constant dilemma in imperial politics. This is well illustrated by the partisan prohibitions, a series of political struggles in the Eastern Han dynasty. Elites in the late Eastern Han developed a culture of forming cliques, evaluating others' character, and critiquing each other. Despite the factionalism among the literati, they all hated the eunuchs and tried to persuade the emperor to dismiss the eunuchs. This caused the eunuchs to accuse the literati in front of the emperor, leading to hundreds of literati being arrested, executed, or banned from government service. Later Chinese scholars often sympathized with these literati, seeing them as the victims of the evil eunuchs. However, this narrative reflects the later literati's own dilemmas in political reality.

This cycle repeated many times in history. If there is no ruler, the outer court elites fall into factionalism. Therefore, they need the ruler to adjudicate among them. In order to secure power and control the outer court, the ruler relies on the inner court, making the inner court an indispensable part of the state. However, the outer court keep denouncing the inner court because they want to directly cooperate with the ruler, seeing the inner court as unnecessary and disruptive to politics. Thus, the outer court frequently stuck in a position that they could not defend.



The Inner Court in A Comparative Perspective

The power of the inner court was a common phenomenon in premodern empires, for instance, the Roman empire (27 BC-476 AD), the Ottoman empire (1299-1922), the Ming (1368-1644), and the Qing (1644-1912), although the compositions and institutions of the inner court varied across time and space.

Despite many differences, the inner courts of these empires all played crucial roles. First, the palace women largely controlled the reproduction and succession of the royal line. In the Eastern Han dynasty, the empress dowagers influenced which women would be chosen as imperial concubines and which woman would become the empress. The family background and status of a palace woman also heavily influenced the chances that her son would be chosen as the crown prince. In the Roman empire, where monogamy was the norm, royal succession relied even more on the emperor's wife and her natal family. The bloodline of the Julio-Claudian dynasty (27 BCE-68 CE) was almost exclusively transmitted through the women of the imperial family; none of the Julio-Claudian emperors was succeeded by his biological son, yet the dynasty's reliance on the female line was obscured by the fiction of a father-son succession through the mechanism of adoption.

Second, the inner court served to enhance the legitimacy of the ruling house. Palace women and eunuchs were necessary in performing state rituals and ceremonies, sponsoring religions, and modeling family ethics and morality to imperial subjects. In the Han and subsequent Chinese dynasties, the empress was a necessary counterpart to the emperor when performing ancestral sacrifices. The Chinese emperors displayed their filial piety to their mothers, which was important for the legitimacy of rulers. In the Ottoman empire, women of the imperial household sponsored mosques and religious foundations and organized public charity to help lower class women. By doing these, they upheld the Islamic standards of morality and contributed to the public image of the ruling house.

Third, the inner court served as the ruler's power base against the outer court. Members of the inner court often assisted the ruler's policy-making by providing advice and information. In the Han dynasty, the emperors' affines and confidants, and later the eunuchs, led the central army and guarded the imperial palace. The eunuchs of the late Eastern Han helped Emperors detect and punish officials with political dissent. More famously known are the eunuchs of the Ming dynasty, who served as the secret police for the emperors and intimidated the bureaucracy.

Fourth, the inner court helped secure imperial control of the periphery. In the Eastern Han dynasty, the imperial lineage frequently intermarried with a few great local families. In the Qing dynasty, the emperors routinely married Mongolian princesses in order to strengthen the alliance between Manchu and Mongolian nobles. Sometimes the inner court members were dispatched to the provinces as the ruler's delegates, such as the chief black eunuchs of the Ottoman empire, who were sent out to be provincial governors to strengthen the provinces' connections to the sultan.