



Ladies of the Court of Emperor Huan of Han

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Emperor Huan of the Later Han dynasty, born in 132, came to the throne in 146 under the regency of the Empress-Dowager Liang Na 1g and her brother Liang Ji. The Dowager died in 150, but the young emperor continued under the tutelage of the Liang clan through his Empress Liang Nüying, who had been married to him soon after his accession. When the Empress Liang died in 159, however, Emperor Huan, aided by his eunuch attendants, killed Liang Ji and took power for himself. After eight years of personal rule, he died in the winter of 167/168.

The biographies below deal with a number of the woman at the court of Emperor Huan, whose harem was celebrated and widely criticised. They are part of work currently in progress for a full biographical dictionary of Later Han which I am preparing for E J Brill of Leiden.

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Deng Mengnü (116-150 AD), Empress of Emperor Huan of Later Han

Daughter of Deng Xiang; and his wife Xuan, whose maiden surname is unknown, the Lady Deng was selected into the harem of Emperor Huan in 153 or 154; she was at that time probably thirteen sui, the most common age for such entry, and was therefore born about 141. First appointed a Chosen Woman *v\$K, lowest of the three ranks of imperial concubines, she was extremely beautiful, she attracted the attention and favours of the emperor, and she was swiftly promoted to be an Honoured Lady, highest rank below the empress.

The Lady's father Deng Xiang was a great-nephew of the Empress-Dowager Deng. The family had been respected and powerful in Nanyang commandery, the southwest of present-day Henan, for many generations and Deng Xiang's ancestor Deng Yu, was a leading supporter of the founding Emperor Guangwu of Later Han. After the death of the Dowager Deng in 121, however, the power of her family had been broken by Emperor An, and Deng Xiang was no longer regarded as a man of noble descent. He first held low-ranking probationary appointment as a Gentleman of the Palace, and he never rose higher than the position of a junior official in the office of the Lateral Courts, the bureau which supervised the affairs of the harem and was staffed by both eunuchs and full men. He died comparatively young, a few years after the birth of his daughter, and his widow the Lady Xuan soon married again.

Her second husband, and the Lady Deng's step-father, was Liang Ki , maternal uncle to the Lady Sun Shou , wife of the General-in-Chief Liang Ji,. He was not, however, directly related to the General-in-Chief, and I use the variant transcription Ki to distinguish him. Xuan and her children from Deng Xiang thus shared in the prosperity of the Liang and Sun families, and Mengnü took the surname of Liang Ki.

It was under the influence of Sun Shou, moreover, that Mengnü entered the harem. Recognising the girl's physical attractions, Sun Shou evidently hoped she would act as an agent or support for her adopted relatives. At first the plan appears to have been successful: Mengnü contrived to avoid any quarrel with the reigning Empress Liang Nüying, sister of Liang Ji, and she also obtained special favours for her own family. A year after she entered the harem, presumably at the time she was promoted to be Honoured Lady, her elder brother Deng/Liang Yan was enfeoffed as a county marquis in Nanyang with the high rank of Specially Advanced and precedence next only to the highest ministers of state. When Yan died a year or so later his son Kang, Mengnü's nephew, succeeded to his fief.

On the other hand, the Lady's step-father Liang Ki died soon after her entry into the harem, so the connection with Sun Shou and Liang Ji was weakened, and in the autumn of 159 the situation was dramatically changed by the unexpected death of the Empress Liang. Her brother Liang Ji had no longer any direct connection to the imperial harem, and in order to regain his influence there he now proposed to adopt the Lady Mengnü as his daughter and have her established as empress.

Emperor Huan had no objection to this arrangement on personal grounds - he still preferred Mengnü to the other women available - but there were growing signs that he resented Liang Ji's dominance at court. Now twenty-seven, he had been kept from all practical influence in government and he was resentful about many individual cases of the General-in-Chief's harsh measures against protest and dissent, but so long as Liang Ji had the support and approval of Mengnü's own family, notably her mother Xuan, there was no room for political manoeuvre. At this point, however, Xuan and her immediate relatives came to realise that they would lose much of their influence if Mengnü came under Liang Ji's control, and Xuan herself saw the golden opportunity of official rank as mother-in-law to the emperor. She refused to approve the adoption.

An elder sister of Mengnü had married a certain Bing Zun, who currently held the low-ranking post of Consultant at the court. He too could see the opportunities presented by the good fortune of his sister-in-law, and he took the lead in urging the Lady Xuan to oppose Liang Ji's plans. Within a few days Liang Ji had sent a group of his retainers to kill him, but Xuan still refused to change her mind, and Liang Ji sent his men against her too.

The Lady Xuan's mansion in the capital was directly next door to the house of the eunuch Regular Attendant Yuan She. Like other great houses of the time, it was surrounded by a high wall, and Liang Ji's men broke into Yuan She's compound in order to gain entry to Xuan's. Yuan She discovered them, he beat on a drum to summon his own servants, and called out to warn Xuan. She ran to the palace, reached the emperor, and told him the story.

If Liang Ji could act so directly, Emperor Huan himself was now clearly in danger of his life. He had little time to act before Liang Ji did re-establish control within the harem, but he made effective use of the opportunity: with a trusted group of senior eunuchs, he drew up the necessary orders and sent a mixed force of eunuchs and palace gentlemen to surround the residences of Liang Ji and his wife Sun Shou, taking back their insignia of rank and office, and ordering them to exile in the far south of Vietnam. Both committed suicide and the power of the Liang family was ended.

Five days later, on 14 September 159, the Honoured Lady Mengnü became Empress. She and her relatives had renounced their connection with the Liang family, and the emperor insisted that his new consort should adopt the surname Pu. It is possible the surname was chosen because it had been Xuan's maiden name before her marriage to Deng Xiang, but more likely it was a reminder of the good example of the modest lady Pu, concubine of Emperor Gaozu of Former Han who became the mother of Emperor Wen. Two years later, however, in 161, senior officials at court sent in a memorial to say that it was inappropriate for the empress to avoid the name of her true father, and an edict restored her surname to Deng. Deng Xiang was granted posthumous title as a marquis and appointment as General of Chariots and Cavalry, a high and formal military rank which had been held in the past by imperial relatives by marriage; Xuan was enfeoffed as Lady of Kunyang, a prosperous county in Nanyang, while her grandson Deng Kang had his fief transferred to another county in Nanyang and was awarded a donation of one hundred million cash. When Xuan died some time later, her estate was transferred as a marquisate to another grandson, Deng Tong, Deng Tong's younger brother Deng Bing also received a fief, and Deng Xiang's title was transferred to a senior cousin, Deng Hui. Though her relatives commanded various units in the palace guards and the Northern Army stationed at the capital, only one member of the empress' family, her senior cousin Deng Wanshi, was appointed to significant office as Intendant of the capital commandery Henan. He too received a

marquisate, but his favour may have been due less to the influence of the empress than to the fact that he had been a friend of the emperor before he was brought to the throne.

Though their perquisites were modest compared to the extravagance and power of the Liang family, the Deng family were not popular with regular officials of the court, and Emperor Huan received many complaints and protests against them and against the honours he had granted. In particular and very strangely, though the Deng had long been a leading family, and there appears to have been no direct question raised about the empress' legitimacy, she was quite often described as a woman of low birth. The emperor paid small attention to these criticisms, and the Lady Deng continued to receive his favours. Sadly, however, she bore him no sons, and though two imperial daughters appeared about this time it is not likely that either of them were hers. By this time, indeed, the emperor had gathered a vast harem, alleged to number five or six thousand women, with servants and slaves, and ministers were protesting that the cost was becoming a major strain on the finances of the empire. The numbers are quite possibly exaggerated: it is hard to imagine what any man could do with such a mass of femininity, and Emperor Huan is known to have constructed only one additional palace and a pleasure park. The Empress Deng herself, on the other hand, now in her late twenties and faced with constant competition from new, ambitious rivals, was in an increasingly weak position. It is recorded that she had a furious quarrel with the Honoured Lady Guo, and each told tales about the other, while there is also reference to her drunkenness. Her biography says that she was arrogant and over-bearing and the emperor became tired of her presumptions and importunities.

On 27 March 165 the Empress Deng was dismissed and imprisoned in the Drying House. With the fall of the empress, her relatives were removed without difficulty from their positions at court: unlike the Liang, they had acquired no substantial support or patronage. Deng Wanshi and Deng Hui died in jail, while Deng Tong, Deng Bing and Deng Hui were briefly imprisoned but then released and sent back to their home country in Nanyang. They were also stripped of their honours and the property they had received was now confiscated.

About this time, moreover, two of Emperor Huan's eunuch favourites were dismissed and one, Zuo Guan, was obliged to commit suicide. The ostensible cause was a series of accusations brought by regular officials against the corruption of relatives of the eunuchs who held office in the provinces. Zuo Guan, however, had also been heavily involved in the development of the imperial worship of the divinity Huang-Lao, a combination of the legendary Yellow Emperor and the sage Laozi. The Huang-Lao cult was well established in the Han period, but Emperor Huan was the first ruler to grant his personal patronage. At the very beginning of his reign a temple had been constructed for the sage at his reputed birth place in Chen 3/ kingdom, eastern Henan, but since the emperor held no effective authority at that time we may assume this was an initiative of the Liang regency. Twenty years later, however, in the first month of 165, Zuo Guan was sent to make sacrifice at the shrine, and it may be that this ritual reflected an enterprise of the Empress Deng, seeking mystical support for herself, her husband and his dynasty. Even after the empress' death and that of Zuo Guan, however, the imperial interest continued, with the erection of a commemorative stele in the autumn of 165, another visit to the shrine at the beginning of 166 and a culminating ceremony of worship to Huang-Lao and the new, alien, divinity of the Buddha [described as /B9O or /B1O rather than the modern &r] which was held at the imperial palace in Luoyang in the summer of that year. It has been suggested that Emperor Huan's third empress, the Lady Dou Miao Du', was responsible for this development, but it appears more probable that the worship of Huang-Lao by Emperor Huan reflected the involvement of the Empress Deng in unorthodox religions and her unsuccessful quest for a son and heir who might preserve her husband's affections and her own imperial status.

Hou Han shu 10B [the Biographies of the Empresses], Beijing 1965 edition pp. 444-445; de Crespigny, "The Harem of Emperor Huan; a study of court politics in Later Han" in *Papers on Far Eastern History* 12 (Canberra, September 1975), pp. 1-42 at 11-25 and 34-42, and *Emperor Huan and Emperor Ling* (Canberra 1989) I, 8-14 & 58, also Anna Seidel, *La Divinisation de Lao Tseu dans le Taoisme des Han*, Publications de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient 71 (Paris 1969) and "The Image of the Perfect Ruler in Early Taoist Messianism: Lao-tzu and Li Hung" in *History of Religions* IX.2&3 (November and February 1969-70), pp. 216-247; de Crespigny, "Politics and Philosophy under the Government of Emperor Huan" in *T'oung Pao* 66 (1980), 41-83.

Dou Miao Du'. (d.172 AD), Empress and Dowager of Emperor Huan of Later Han :~.Y+R.

Early in 165 the Empress Deng Mengnü , consort of Liu Zhi The Lady was eldest daughter of Dou Wu Du*Z, a descendant of the north-western warlord Dou Rong Du, who had been the rival and later an ally of the founding Emperor Guangwu of Later Han. Dou Rong's great-granddaughter became the Empress of Emperor Zhang 39, and after his death in 88 she and her family controlled the government of the young Emperor He 丕 until the overthrow of their power in 92. The Dowager died in 97, and her family had not recovered its political importance at the capital. In their home country about Chang'an, present-day Xi'an, however, the Dou still held personal influence and considerable wealth. Dou Wu's father had been administrator of a northern frontier commandery, and Dou Wu himself had established his reputation as a scholar of the classics who ran a private academy near his home. When his daughter was appointed Honoured Lady, Dou Wu was granted probationary appointment as a Gentleman of the Palace, and when she became empress he was appointed colonel of a regiment in the Northern Army, central strategic reserve of the empire, and was enscoffed as a marquis with revenue from five thousand households.

The arrangement, however, was not so straightforward as a summary of Chinese records might indicate. Firstly, it is clear that Emperor Huan was under considerable pressure from senior ministers at court to appoint the Lady Dou, and his own position was evidently not strong enough to withstand their arguments. His personal favourite was the Lady Tian Sheng, a Chosen Woman, lowest rank of concubine, who regularly shared his bed with eight unnamed companions. He had no interest in the Lady Dou, and attended her very rarely, if at all.

The argument of his ministers, however, was that it was essential for the good of the dynasty for the emperor to take a woman of good family as his consort, and the Dou were presented as a most appropriate alliance. There seems no doubt that the Lady Tian was of humble origin, but it is surprising that the former Empress Deng was also criticised on the same grounds. Both the Deng and the Dou were related to powerful empress-dowagers of the past, and the fathers of both women had held only minor official rank. There is, prima facie, no way to determine why the commentators should denigrate the background of the Lady Deng and praise that of the Lady Dou, and one must assume there was some strong sense of personal prejudice.

From the point of view of the dynasty, moreover, and particularly in terms of the succession, the arguments for a woman of good family are very strange. In 159 the emperor had been able to gather supporters among the eunuchs of the harem to overthrow the power of the Liang family, which had dominated the government since the days of his predecessor Emperor Shun [see sub Liang Na], while his Empress Liang Nüying had actually been responsible for the miscarriages or abortion of any children which he had conceived with other women of the harem. One might expect that the last thing Emperor Huan would wish to inflict upon his dynasty was another generation of aristocratic relatives by marriage, while it seems very likely that the Lady Tian Sheng and her eight companions were engaged not only for their qualities as sexual partners, but also in the hope that one of the magical number nine might conceive a son.

It appears, therefore, that Emperor Huan's position was weak. There had been increasing complaints about the size and cost of his harem, while a number of his eunuch allies and favourites had lately been disgraced for corruption. The fall of the Empress Deng and her family gave the reform party at court the opportunity to press for a new influence within the palace, they evidently regarded the scholarly Dou Wu as a supporter of their cause, and the emperor was obliged to accept their wishes.

Dou Wu was later promoted to become Colonel of the City Gates, an independent command responsible for the outer defences of the capital. He gave particular attention to students and junior clerks, recommending many of them for promotion and distributing rewards and subsidies, while keeping his own style of life simple and plain. With a fine reputation and many recipients of his patronage and bounty, he confirmed his alliance with leading officials such as Chen Fan; and established a substantial position at court. In 167, when the imperial eunuchs managed to have some of their out-spoken critics arrested, Dou Wu faced the emperor with a threat to resign his office and his fief, and he obtained the release of the prisoners.

Emperor Huan, on the other hand, liked Dou Wu no better than before for this political activity, and he continued to reject the Empress. Still more important, though two daughters were born about this time, he acquired no son and heir.

It has been suggested that the Empress Dou had some influence on the emperor's patronage of the cult of Huang-Lao a combination of the legendary Yellow Emperor and the sage Laozi which culminated in a

great ceremony of sacrifice at the capital in the summer of 166. It is more probable, however, that his interest was first inspired by the Empress Deng and a number of the eunuch officials, and that it was developed further not in combination with the Dou but rather in opposition to the Confucianism represented by Dou Wu and his ministerial allies. It may even be that the emperor was seeking an alternative source of spiritual legitimacy for his personal regime which would be independent of traditional ideology. [See sub Deng Mengnü, and also especially de Crespigny, "Politics and Philosophy."]

At the end of 167 the emperor became seriously ill, and 25 January 168 he died, still only in his mid-thirties. As he lay upon his death-bed, he promoted Tian Sheng and her colleagues to be Honoured Ladies, but after he was dead, and while his body yet lay in state in the palace, the Empress Dou, now Dowager, killed the Lady Tian Sheng. Through the intervention of two senior eunuchs she was obliged to spare the lives of the other eight favourites, but the Dowager and her father Dou Wu now controlled the government.

As the emperor had died without an heir, the customs of Han, confirmed by the recent precedent of the Dowager Liang Na, allowed her a free choice among the cadets of the imperial house. The Dowager Dou, probably still aged no more than twenty, consulted her father within the private apartments of the palace. Despite his association with members of the outer court and the bureaucracy, Dou Wu made no attempt to involve any senior ministers in the decision. He did ask the Imperial Clerk Liu Shu. Though we are told Liu Shu was asked to propose members of the imperial clan who were noted for their moral qualities, it is difficult to see how this criteria should have led necessarily to Liu Hong. The new emperor was twelve sui when he was placed upon the throne, so he was little more than ten years old by Western reckoning at the time he was chosen. His great-grandfather, Liu Kai. With his family's power now established, Dou Wu and his daughter arranged enfeoffments and rewards for their relatives and clients and, like the Liang family before them, members of the Dou family held significant military and police appointments about the capital. Dou Wu himself became General-in-Chief, the same position as had been held by Liang Ji, brother of the empresses Liang Na and Liang Nüying, which formally gave command over the whole Northern Army, the major professional force at the capital. He also established a close partnership with Chen Fan, named as Grand Tutor, and the two men shared control over the imperial secretariat, centre of government authority.

In accordance with the wishes of their popular constituency, the young men about the capital who wished to see a revival of reform on idealistic Confucian lines, Dou Wu and Chen Fan planned to destroy the power of the harem eunuchs, who had acquired power through the favour of Emperor Huan. Under the influence of Cao Jie and Wang Fu, however, the Dowager rejected her father's proposals, and continued to protect the attendants in the harem. As months passed the frustration of Chen Fan and the reformers became more obvious, and Dou Wu was increasingly inclined towards a coup d'tat which would bring a swift and bloody resolution to the stalemate.

In the autumn of 168 matters came to a head. Chen Fan and Dou Wu ordered the arrest of Cao Jie and Wang Fu, but other eunuchs joined together in self-defence and persuaded the boy emperor to support them. The elderly Chen Fan was arrested as he sought to break into the palace, and when Dou Wu went to call troops from the Northern Army he was faced by imperial orders and by the popular frontier general Zhang Huan who had been persuaded to oppose the traitor. Dou Wu's men deserted him and Dou Wu committed suicide. Others of the family were also killed, and remnant relatives and clients were exiled to the far south of the empire in present-day Vietnam. Chen Fan and many of his supporters among the officials were killed, and there was a general proscription against all the Confucian reformists throughout the empire.

The Dowager Dou herself was placed under house arrest in the Cloud Terrace of the Southern Palace at Luoyang. She was not treated well by her eunuch jailers, and although Zhang Huan protested and the emperor himself gave orders, her situation did not greatly improve.

At the beginning of winter in 171 Emperor Ling made a special visit and held court to pay respects to her for having brought him to the throne, and the eunuch Dong Meng again raised the matter of her ill-treatment. The emperor was concerned and gave increasing quantities of supplies and provisions, but Cao Jie and Wang Fu avenged themselves by trumping up charges of impiety against Dong Meng and he was executed.

In 172 the Dowager's mother died in exile in the south and it is said that the empress became ill from grief. She died on

18 July, and one must have some suspicion that she was assisted to her end. The eunuchs, enemies to the last, argued that her funerary rites should be no more those of an Honoured Lady. After debate in the full court between the eunuchs and his senior ministers, however, Emperor Ling determined that the Dowager Dou be buried with full imperial honours, and on 8 August she was placed in the same tomb as her late consort Emperor Huan.

Hou Han shu 10B [the Biographies of the Empresses], Beijing 1965 edition pp. 445-446; de Crespigny, "The Harem of Emperor Huan; a study of court politics in Later Han" in *Papers on Far Eastern History* 12 (Canberra, September 1975), pp. 1-42 at 25-42, and *Emperor Huan and Emperor Ling* (Canberra 1989) I, 64, 88-102, 121-126; also Anna Seidel, *La Divinisation de Lao Tseu dans le Taoisme des Han*, Publications de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient 71 (Paris 1969) and "The Image of the Perfect Ruler in Early Taoist Messianism: Lao-tzu and Li Hung" in *History of Religions* IX.2&3 (November and February 1969-70), pp. 216-247; de Crespigny, "Politics and Philosophy under the Government of Emperor Huan" in *T'oung Pao* 66 (1980), 41-83; Hans Bielenstein, "Lo-yang in Later Han times" in *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 48 (Stockholm 1976); Ch'ü T'ung-tsu, *Han Social Structure* (Seattle 1972), pp. 484-490.

Liang Na (116-150 AD), Empress and Dowager of Emperor Shun of Later Han

Liang Na was a great-niece of the Honoured Lady Liang, who was the natural mother of Emperor He)M of Later Han (reigned 88-106) but had been murdered in 83 by the Empress Dou of Emperor Zhang 39 of Later Han (reigned 75-88). The family had suffered political eclipse, but had been fully restored to political status at the capital in 97, and three brothers of the late Lady Liang were enscoffed as marquises. Liang Na's father Liang Shang succeeded to his own father's fief in 126, and two years later Liang Na was brought into the imperial harem of Emperor Shun.

Her biography claims that a splendid light accompanied her birth, that she was skilled in women's work of spinning and needlework while she was still young, and that she could recite the Analects of Confucius and had studied the *Book of Odes* by the age of nine. It is said, moreover, that she kept portraits of the worthy women celebrated by the Lienü zhuan of Liu Xiang. Liang Na was formally selected for the harem, but her family connections were obviously of major importance in gaining her entry and securing the emperor's attention. She was thirteen years old at the time by Chinese reckoning and Liu Bao, the physiognomist Mao Tong, who took part in the selection, exclaimed at Liang Na's exceptional and most noble appearance, and when the Grand Clerk tested her fortune by the techniques of oracle bones and the *Book of Changes* the signs were remarkably good. She was appointed as an Honoured Lady, highest rank of concubine, and was especially favoured by the emperor. Liang Na urged her consort, however, with erudite quotations from the *Book of Changes* and the *Book of Odes*, not to devote all his attention to her lest she suffer the jealousy and calumny of others, and we are told that the emperor was all the more impressed with her good sense.

Emperor Shun took the cap of manhood in 129, and by 132 the senior ministers were pressing for the appointment of an empress. Liang Na was only one of four concubines to have attracted the young ruler, and the choice between favourites was so uncertain that there was a proposal to decide the matter by casting lots. Hu Guang -J The empress' father Liang Shang was immediately made a Palace Attendant, a supernumerary post with right of regular access to the ruler, and his marquisate was increased in size and value. He also became colonel of a regiment in the Northern Army, central strategic reserve of the empire, and soon afterwards was promoted again to be chief of the police at the capital, comparable in rank to a senior ministry. In 135, moreover, after refusing a previous offer, he accepted appointment as General-in-Chief, formally a military post with command over the Northern Army but, more significantly, providing authority over government at the highest level. On previous occasions under the Han, generals-in-chief had exercised the functions of a regent, and though Emperor Shun was of age he was effectively sharing his rule with Liang Shang.

In the system and traditions of Han there was nothing unusual or inappropriate about the possession of such power by an imperial relative through marriage. As Hu Guang had argued, the empress should be a woman of good family, and one reason for this was the general recognition that she and her male relatives would hold great power and influence at

court. The senior police and military offices which Liang Shang had taken were not necessarily among the official posts which might be held by regular members of the bureaucracy, and in times of peace only members of the greatest families connected to the throne could expect appointment as General-in-Chief: in the structure of government at that time this was a recognised office with wide-ranging powers and influence, and the male head of the consort clan was an appropriate person to fill it. Liang Shang died in 141, but he was immediately succeeded as General-in-Chief by his eldest son Liang Ji, and with the aid of his sister in the inner palace the Liang group continued to dominate the court.

We are told that the Empress Liang continued to behave with intelligence and good will, that she took no false pride in the advancement which her virtues had gained her, that she studied the lessons of the past with utmost care, and that whenever there was an eclipse she would make particular confession of her faults and failings. She did not, however, bear her husband any children, and when Emperor Shun died in 144 his only son was the infant Liu Bing. According to the traditional constitution of Han, when an emperor died leaving a recognised heir under age his empress, now entitled Empress-Dowager, was regent for the infant successor. She took part in formal gatherings of the court, and the relationship was symbolised by the physical arrangements: while an emperor of full age and authority sat in the throne-room facing to the south, when the ruler was a child his place was on the east of the dais, facing to the west, and the regent Dowager was opposite him, behind a screen but in matching position. The Lady Yu, though she came of respectable family and had given Emperor Shun a daughter as well as a son, had not been awarded any special status before he died, and she was now granted only the empty style of Great Lady.

Early in 145, moreover, after only a few months of nominal rule, the infant Emperor Chong (R was dead, and there was now no named heir to the throne. In these circumstances an empress-dowager of Han acquired even greater power, for she had undisputed authority to choose the next emperor from any of the male members of the imperial family. In doing so, she could take such advice as she wished, but the matter was not open to public debate, nor was any minister of state, no matter how his rank, entitled to effective intervention. The precedent for this dated back to Former Han, but had been decisively confirmed by the Dowager Deng in 105 and 106. At that time, after the death of Emperor He, the Dowager announced that he had left two young sons who had been brought up outside the palace, but that the elder brother Liu Sheng So in 145 the Dowager Liang took counsel with her brother within the private quarters of the harem and after three weeks the choice fell upon Liu Zuan Eight years old by Chinese reckoning, Liu Zuan was the son of Liu Hong In opposition to this choice, the Grand Commandant Li Gu 'u)T, highest member of the regular bureaucracy, led a group of officials who urged the claims of Liu Suan As with the Lady Yu, the natural mother of the young emperor, the Lady Chen, was granted the title Great Lady but was predictably excluded from any role in government.

One year later, Liu Zuan too was dead. Despite his youth, he had perceived the tight limits to his notional authority, but he was unfortunately not perceptive enough to appreciate the need to keep silent, and on one occasion he referred publicly to Liang Ji as "an over-bearing general" A short time later the emperor was eating dumplings when he was seized by stomach cramps and died. It was traditionally argued that Liang Ji had poisoned the boy, but it may only have been bad cooking, and Liu Zuan was perhaps naturally weak and sickly. What is most suspicious about the affair is that even before the death of Liu Zuan, Liu Zhi At this time Li Gu and his colleagues, notably Du Qiao 'y3l, again pressed the claims of Liu Suan. Though Liu Zhi was older than Liu Zuan, he was only a marquis, he was yet not of full age, and he was clearly intended to be a puppet of the Liang family. On the other hand, there appeared no other means of determining the succession than through the authority of the Dowager and Liu Suan himself was opposed by a strong faction of eunuchs. Despite forceful arguments, Li Gu and Du Qiao were defeated and Liu Zhi was established on 1 August 146.

At the end of the year, moreover, a small local group attempted to arrange a coup in Qinghe and proclaim Liu Suan as rightful emperor. Though the disturbance was put down without difficulty, and Liu Suan himself had been in no way involved, he was reduced in rank, exiled and committed suicide. Soon afterwards Li Gu and Du Qiao were also implicated, and despite protests from the court they died in the following year.

For the next few years the Dowager Liang held formal control of the government in association with her brother Liang Ji. The historians of Han have accused Liang Ji and his wife Sun Shou [q.v.] of inordinate greed, luxury and extravagance, and they may indeed have extorted great wealth from rival families. The Lady Liang herself, however, is praised for her devotion to duty in the difficult times which followed the second great rebellion of the Qiang people

in the northwest and a series of frontier disturbances with the Xiongnu &I%# of the northern frontier. Inside China, reflecting these troubles, there were frequent small-scale rebellions, increasing feuding amongst local gentry and a gradual alienation from the imperial regime. The government had been in serious financial straits since the first great Qiang rebellion of 107-118; and its general weakness was symbolised by the plundering of the tomb of Emperor Shun outside Luoyang within a year of his burial. The biography of the Dowager in *Hou Han shu*, however, says that she was restrained and frugal, that she appointed good officials, sent out troops to deal with disorder, and that all the empire was settled by her efforts. One may observe a literary contrast between the worthy sister and the wicked brother, and both are no doubt exaggerated, but the Dowager does well from the comparison.

Emperor Huan took the cap of manhood at the beginning of 148, but the Dowager maintained her regency, on the grounds of the disturbances in the empire, for another two years. She formally relinquished her office in the first month of 150, and she died a few weeks later, on 6 April, at the age of thirty-four.

Hou Han shu 10B [the Biographies of the Empresses], Beijing 1965 edition pp. 438-440.

Liang Nüying (d.159 AD), Empress of Emperor Huan of Later Han.

Younger sister of Liang Na 1gJ4 [q.v.], she was a daughter of the General-in-Chief Liang Shang 1g0S and sister to his son and successor Liang Ji. In 146 her elder sister, now Empress-Dowager, and regent, called Liu Zhi Liu Zhi, Emperor Huan .Y, was immediately placed upon the throne, while the Dowager Liang Na maintained the regency. In the summer of the following year Liang Nüying entered the imperial harem, and in autumn, on 30 September 147, she was made Empress. The marriage ceremony was modelled on precedents of 191 BC, when the young Emperor Hui had been under the authority of his natural mother the Dowager nee Lü, former Empress of Gaozu and, perhaps more significantly, those of 4 AD, when the young Emperor Ping, last ruler of Former Han, was married to a daughter of Wang Mang. The betrothal money was 20,000 pounds of gold, while imperial presents to the bride's family included wild geese (because they follow the natural relationship of yin and yang), jade rings, a team of four horses and a quantity of rolled silk. Inside the palace, it appears that the empress shared the extravagant tastes of her brother Liang Ji rather than the frugality of her sister the Dowager: her apartments and pavilions were expensively carved and ornamented, her clothing and jewellery, trinkets and brightly-painted carriages were more ostentatious than any of her predecessors'.

It is not possible to make a firm estimate of the age of the Empress Liang. Her elder sister was born in 116, and her father Liang Shang died in 141. Many women came to the harem at the age of thirteen sui, but the age for general selection went up to twenty, and it is likely that in this special case the empress was in her early twenties, born about 125 and some ten years younger than her sister. With support from her family to deal with eunuchs and other attendants within the harem, and with her own physical attractions to influence her young husband, it is not surprising that, as her biography says, she monopolised Emperor Huan's attentions and favours. During these first years, at least, no other women were permitted to approach him.

Emperor Huan took the cap of manhood at the beginning of 148, aged sixteen sui, but there was no real change to the political system of control: the Dowager justified her continued maintenance of power by emergencies of the frontier and internal rebellion, and Liang Ji controlled the troops and officials at the capital. Early in 150, however, the Dowager Liang formally ended the regency, and a few weeks later she was dead.

In practical terms this made little difference, for Liang Ji's authority over the court as General-in-Chief was unimpaired and the Empress Liang was well placed to supervise the inner palace. On the other hand, Emperor Huan now possessed a little more freedom, which he expressed in first instance by inviting his mother the Lady Yan Ming [q.v.] to come to Luoyang and take up residence in the Northern Palace. At the same time, moreover, his personal relationship with the empress was naturally weakened. The fact that she was expected to maintain some surveillance over him on behalf of her family caused inevitable tension, she had not borne an imperial son and heir; and we may assume that the charms of an older woman were less fascinating to a young man of eighteen than they had been to an ingenu three years earlier.

From this time, therefore, Emperor Huan embarked upon the sexual career which was to make him celebrated in

Chinese history. With little opportunity for political involvement outside the palace, the emperor gave his attention to a large number of concubines, one after another, and sometimes several at once. His fluctuating favours encouraged intrigue amongst the women of the harem, and gave frequent opportunity for patronage and self-advancement to the senior eunuchs who arranged to satisfy his wishes.

In some respects, it served the interests of the Liang family that the emperor should distract himself in this way, and though the empress may have been jealous and frustrated she had no means to affect her husband's choice of partners. What she could do, however, was control the results, and in a telling passage the history remarks that "if a woman of the palace became pregnant, it was seldom she came to full term." How many concubines suffered miscarriage or induced abortion we do not know, nor how many children were still-born or killed at birth. It appears, however, that only one child, the Princess Hua, was born at this time and survived to maturity.

In the autumn of 159, on 9 August, the Empress Liang died. She was probably in her mid-thirties, about the same age as her elder sister the Dowager had been at the time of her death in 150. There is no reason to believe that the Lady Liang did not die of natural causes, but her demise was evidently unexpected and brought an immediate crisis in the central government of the empire. Within a few weeks Liang Ji and his clan had been destroyed by a coup of the emperor supported by his eunuchs, and as the Lady Liang's successor the Empress Deng Mengnü [q.v.] took her place, the former empress was posthumously demoted to the senior concubine's rank of Honoured Lady.

Hou Han shu 10B [the Biographies of the Empresses], Beijing 1965 edition pp. 443-444; de Crespigny, "The Harem of Emperor Huan; a study of court politics in Later Han" in *Papers on Far Eastern History* 12 (Canberra, September 1975), pp. 1-42 at 4-11, and *Emperor Huan and Emperor Ling* (Canberra 1989) I, 8-14.

Sun Shou (d.159 AD), wife of the General-in-Chief Liang Ji.

Liang Ji, brother of Liang Na [q.v.], Empress of Emperor Shun of Later Han, succeeded his father Liang Shang as General-in-Chief in 141. In combination with his sister he dominated the court, and when the emperor died in 144 he shared in her regent government for the infant son and successor Liu Bing. Liang Ji's wife Sun Shou is first mentioned by the histories in 150, about the time of the death of the Dowager Liang Na, when she was enfeoffed as Lady of Xiangcheng A8+0 in Yingchuan, present-day central Henan. With additional revenues from a neighbouring county, her annual income amounted to fifty million cash, while her seal and insignia were equal to those of a senior princess.

The historians acknowledge that Sun Shou was extremely beautiful, but in all other respects she is described in most unflattering terms. Sensual and seductive in appearance and manner, she had her eyebrows shaped and her cheeks painted to give a mournful, languorous look, and wore her hair on one side in a style described as "falling from a horse." Her smiles appeared forced and painful "as if she was suffering toothache", and she walked with delicate, mincing steps as though her feet could barely support her. For his part, influenced by her pretensions, Liang Ji too acquired strange mannerisms, wearing robes of inordinate length and a narrow head-dress which drooped to one side, carrying a great fan and riding in an unusual, flat-topped carriage. Liang Ji also acquired a mistress, You Tongji, who had formerly been a member of the harem of Emperor Shun. He kept her in a house west of the capital, but Sun Shou sent slaves to follow him, found her hiding place, then seized her, beat her, cut off her hair and slashed her face. Sun Shou intended to report the matter to the court, which would have raised a considerable scandal, but Liang Ji managed to get her mother to dissuade her. He continued to visit the Lady You and had a son by her, and though Sun Shou eventually had her own son Liang Yin kill the Lady, but Liang Ji managed to hide his infant son from her. Later, also in the west of the city, and probably in the same area, Liang Ji established a separate complex of pavilions to house the multitude of women who became his concubines. Some came from respectable families, but all became his slaves, and they were known as "Women who have Sold Themselves." We are also told that Liang Ji had a homosexual affair with the slave Qin Gong, whom Sun Shou too took to her bed. Qin Gong acquired inordinate influence in the court and the government, and became one of the couple's most ruthless agents. Despite these tensions and jealousies, we are told that Liang Ji was besotted with Sun Shou, and totally under her influence. In particular, he allowed her to persuade him to replace many of his own kinsmen with members of her family. Some ten

of the Liang were dismissed from their posts in government, ostensibly as a sign of modesty and restraint, but their places were taken by relatives of the Lady Sun, who acquired senior rank in both the capital and the provinces, while many of them adopted the Liang surname. All of them were greedy and cruel, and they sent out private retainers and clients to arrest wealthy men on false charges, then beat them until they offered vast quantities of cash to ransom themselves. Liang Ji behaved in the same way, and was notorious for his seizure of private property and his exploitation of government officers, but through Sun Shou's influence her family shared in the opportunities. And when Liang Ji had a great town house constructed for himself, Sun Shou built a mansion to match it across the street. Both had great pleasure grounds, and husband and wife were wheeled about their gardens in carriages decorated with gold and silver, covered by a canopy of feathers.

About 153 or 154 Sun Shou arranged for the entry of the young Deng Mengnü [q.v.] into the harem of Emperor Huan. The Lady Deng was a step-daughter of Liang Ki, who was the brother of Sun Shou's mother; he was not directly related to the General-in-Chief Liang Ji [and I use the variant transcription Ki to distinguish him from the General-in-Chief]. She was extremely beautiful, the emperor was delighted with her, and she was swiftly promoted to be an Honoured Lady, ranking next only to the empress. Sun Shou evidently planned that Deng Mengnü would act as support for her family within the harem, and at first this plan worked well.

Liang Ki, however, died soon afterwards, and when the Empress Liang Nüying died in 159 and Emperor Huan planned to replace her with the Lady Deng there was a desperate struggle for influence. Liang Ji sought to have the Lady Deng adopted into his own clan as a means to maintain connection, but her natural mother, Xuan, was urged by her son-in-law Bing Zun, who was married to the Lady Deng's elder sister, that she should refuse his proposal and keep the advantages of imperial favour for herself and her own close relatives.

Liang Ji sent his favourite Qin Gong with a band of retainers to kill Bing Zun, and a few days later they attempted to break into the mansion of the Lady Xuan and murder her too. She fled to tell Emperor Huan, and he now called on a small group of trusted eunuchs to plan a coup against Liang Ji. Aided by the fact that with the death of the Empress Liang Ji and his associates had lost much of their contact with the harem and the inner palace, Emperor Huan sent a mixed force of eunuchs and palace gentlemen to surround the residences of Liang Ji and Sun Shou, taking back their insignia of rank and office, and ordering them to exile in the far south of Vietnam. Sun Shou and her husband committed suicide, while their relatives and clients were dismissed from office; many of them were arrested, executed or exiled.

In later generations, the name of Sun Shou became proverbial for beauty and wilful extravagance.

Hou Han shu 34 [liezhuan 24: the Biography of Liang Ji], Beijing 1965 edition pp. 1179-81.

Yan Ming (d.152 AD), mother of Emperor Huan of Later Han.

The Lady Yan was probably born about 110 in the territory of Hejian in the south-east of present Hebei. About 130 she became the concubine of Liu Yi Liu Yi's father Liu Kai [q.v.]. Named King of Pingyuan, a territory west of present-day Tianjin, he had been kept at the capital, but after the death of the Dowager in 121 he was reduced to be a petty marquis and sent back to live in seclusion in Hejian. In 130, on petition from his father Liu Kai, the county of Liwu Dy was taken from Hejian state and granted him as a fief.

Liu Zhi In 146 the young emperor Liu Zuan . In the absence of an appointed Heir-Apparent, the Dowager had the right to choose the successor to the throne, and after the death of Liu Bao's only son, the infant Emperor Chong (R, in 145, the Lady Liang had selected Liu Zuan. Even before his death, however, she had summoned Liu Zhi to the capital and betrothed him to her younger sister Liang Nüying[q.v.]. As soon as Liu Zuan was dead, Liu Zhi was placed upon the throne, and in the following year, 147, he was married to Liang Nüying (he is known to history by his posthumous title as Emperor Huan).

The new emperor's father, the late Liu Yi, was now honoured as Emperor Xiao-Chong [xiao "Filial" being a common part of the posthumous title for all rulers of Han other than the two founders], and the name of his tomb in

Hejian was changed to Boling. The Lady Yan was named Honoured Lady of the Funerary Park at Boling. Honoured Lady was the highest rank of concubine, immediately below the empress, but the appointment to attend her husband's tomb meant the Lady could not live at the capital with her son: the Liang group had no wish to provide an alternative centre of power for any faction which might turn the young emperor against them.

The Lady Ma, full widow of Liu Yi, was also appointed an Honoured Lady of Boling, and she was also appointed as guardian for the emperor's younger brother Liu Shi. In 150 the Dowager Liang died, and Emperor Huan, now eighteen years old, was able to arrange for his mother to be brought to the capital. The Excellency over the Masses Zhang Xin [Xin], one of the highest ministers of state, was sent with authority to grant the Lady Yan an imperial seal and ribbon, and she was escorted to residence in the Northern Palace at Luoyang. Her apartments were known as the Palace of Perpetual Jo. In 152 the honorary Empress-Dowager nee Yan died. Liu Shi was named chief mourner, accompanied by his brother Liu Kui.

Hou Han shu 10B [the Biographies of the Empresses], Beijing 1965 edition pp. 441-442.