

**Exploring the Lives of the Imperial Consorts and Empresses in Qianlong’s Court Through the *Story of Yanxi Palace***

Senior Project

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By

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**ABSTRACT**

**Exploring The Lives of the Imperial Consorts and Empresses in Qianlong’s Court**

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The most googled show on earth in 2018 was a 70-episode Chinese drama titled *Story of Yanxi Palace.* This statistic is a feat since Google is banned in China. Even though *Yanxi* was a mega success internationally and reached over half a billion views in China, it was censored in China shortly after airing.[[1]](#footnote-1) This begs the question; why would China censor its most popular television show in 2018? According to Geng Song, a scholar of gender and identity in Chinese popular culture, *Yanxi* is a drama that falls into the subgenre category of “palace intrigue dramas” (*gongdou ju*).[[2]](#footnote-2) These particular palace dramas are usually set in the Qing dynasty. They feature intriguing secretive, complex, and backstabbing plots from imperial consorts who fight to win the emperor’s favor and vie for power in the court.[[3]](#footnote-3) The show creators use fictional stories with authentic historical events to produce a show that provides viewers with enough drama to keep their interest and accurate historical information to keep them educated on Qing history and culture. Song believes the main reason for the banning is that censorship authorities “found the drama’s unexpected overseas popularity embarrassing because it conveyed an unwanted image of China.”[[4]](#footnote-4) This paper seeks to address whether this “unwanted image” implies that *Yanxi* is so inaccurate that it portrays a fake image of China’s history to the rest of the world. Or is *Yanxi* so authentic that it illustrates a version of Chinese history that the Chinese Communist Party does not want to be highlighted? The speculation for why *Yanxi* could have been censored led to this paper's central research questions: How accurate is the portrayal of Qianlong’s empresses and imperial consorts in *Story of Yanxi Palace?* Furthermore, should historical accuracy be mandatory for historical fiction television shows? When approaching these questions, one must applaud the *Yanxi* writers for pulling viewers into the critical aspects of imperial consorts’ lives while recognizing, not condemning, the embellishments interjected throughout the story. Through *Yanxi*, executive producer Yu Zheng and screenplay writer Zhou Mo created a captivating television series depicting the main events in a woman’s lifetime while in the Forbidden City. This paper uses primary and secondary sources about imperial consorts of the Qing dynasty to describe the historical and cultural points viewers can learn about Qianlong’s reign through *Yanxi*. After watching all 70 episodes, viewers will understand that a consort’s life begins when entering the Forbidden City, for which death is the only way out. Furthermore, as viewers watch the women deal with the highs and lows of the ranking system, they will become familiar with the internal complexities of the Forbidden City.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**INTRODUCTION**

The *Story of Yanxi Palace*, also known as *Yanxi*, is a 70-episode Qing-dynasty-based drama aired on iQiyi and Zhejiang TV in 2018. *Yanxi* was created by Yu Zheng, based on the book *Story of Yanxi Palace* by Zhou Mo, with the original screenplay written by the same author. It was a mega success inside and outside China and was streamed over 15 billion times in total by early 2019. It was also crowned the most googled show on earth in 2018.[[6]](#footnote-6) This statistic is a feat since Google is banned in China. Even though *Yanxi* was a mega success internationally and it was censored in China shortly after airing. This begs the question: why would China censor its most popular television show in 2018? According to Geng Song, a scholar of gender and identity in Chinese popular culture, *Yanxi* is a drama that falls into the subgenre category of “palace intrigue dramas” (*gongdou ju*).[[7]](#footnote-7) The *Yanxi* showrunners use fictional stories with authentic historical events to produce a show that provides viewers with enough drama to keep their interest and accurate historical information to keep them educated on Qing history and culture. Song believes the main reason for the banning is that censorship authorities “found the drama’s unexpected overseas popularity embarrassing because it conveyed an unwanted image of China.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Does this “unwanted image” imply that *Yanxi* is so inaccurate that it portrays a fake image of Chinese history to the rest of the world. Or is *Yanxi* so authentic that it illustrates a version of Chinese history that the Chinese Communist Party does not want to be highlighted?

The latter seems to be the case, since *Yanxi* is a fairly accurate captivating television series depicting the main events that happen in a Manchu woman’s lifetime while in the Forbidden City palace. The most significant aspects focused on in the show is when a woman entered the palace, for which death is the only way out, and the imperial harem ranking system that dictated her quality of life while in the Forbidden City. Nevertheless, the timing of *Yanxi’s* success clashed with Chinese Communist Party (CCP) agenda, which is what led to its removal.

**Introducing the Show**

*Story of Yanxi Palace* follows the lives of the imperial consorts and empresses at the height of the Qing dynasty in Emperor Qianlong’s court.[[9]](#footnote-9) The Qing dynasty was the last Chinese dynasty to exist, ending in 1912. Although the Qing Dynasty is considered a Chinese dynasty, it is also a conquest dynasty. It is a conquest dynasty because the Manchurian Banner people conquered the ethnically Han-based Ming dynasty in 1644. This led the Manchurian Aisin-Gioro clan to become the ruling elite over the Han Chinese population. Due to the nature of the ruling house being of a different ethnic background to the majority of citizens in China, the complexities of keeping Manchurian culture and avoiding sinicization were pertinent during the Qing dynasty. The Manchu tried to keep their traditions alive by having princes, emperors, and ruling military elites marry Manchurian banner women. However, they still struggled with the dilemma of banner women being affected by Han sinicization for generations.

The *Story of Yanxi Palace* incorporates the significance of this ethnic and cultural dilemma during Qianlong’s reign (r. 1735-1796). Qianlong (1711-1799), born with the name Hongli, was the 6th emperor with the second-longest reign and one of the largest harems out of all the emperors that ruled the Qing dynasty. Before Qianlong’s rule was his father, the Yongzheng emperor (r. 1722-35), his grandfather, the Kangxi emperor (r.1661-1722), and his great grandfather, the Shunzhi emperor (r. 1644-61), all of whom ruled over China proper and beyond. The Qing dynasty ended in 1912 with 10 emperors ruling for 268 years in the palace known as the Forbidden City.[[10]](#footnote-10)

*Yanxi* follows the rise of Wei Yingluo, played by actress Wu Jinyan, who enters the Forbidden City palace during Qianlong’s 6th year of reign as a maid on a revenge plot to find the killer of her sister who was previously a palace maid. Viewers watch as the fictional Yinglou portrays the life of Noble Lady Wei (1727-1775) by rising through the ranks in the show to become Imperial Noble Consort Ling and posthumously Empress Xiaoyichun. The show’s narrative arc focuses on the relationships Yinglou forms with Qianlong, Empress Xiaoxian, Step-Empress Nara, and the other consorts, all while navigating the complexities of life in the Forbidden City.[[11]](#footnote-11)

**Relationship Chart:[[12]](#footnote-12)**

**Plot Synopsis:**

At the beginning of the show, main character Wei Yinglou enters the Forbidden City after finding out her sister, a former palace maid, was raped and killed in the palace. The initial evidence Yinglou finds points to Imperial Guard Fuca Fuheng, played by Xu Kai, as the main suspect. Viewers learn that Fuca Fuheng is a high-ranking Manchurian nobleman who has a strong friendship with Emperor Qianlong, played by Nie Yun, and whose sister is Empress Xiaoxian (Fuca Rongyin), played by Qin Lan. Believing that Fuheng has the power and backing to commit such a crime, Yinglou works hard to prove herself as a competent palace maid so she can work in Changchun Palace, the residence of the empress, to get closer to Fuheng. As Yinglou believes Fuheng is the culprit behind her sister's demise, he assumes that his sister, Empress Xiaoxian, used her power to cover up for him. Nevertheless, after spending months with the two of them, she soon realizes they are not involved in her sister's killing. Through her time in Changchun Palace, she forms a close bond with Empress Xiaoxian, who treats her as a sister, and she falls into a secret love affair with Fuca Fuheng.

As Fuheng begins to help her investigate her sister's death, he discovers that his close friend Prince He of First Rank, played by Hong Yao, step-brother to Qianlong, committed the act. He tries to hide this from Yinglou to protect her since Qianlong cares deeply for his brother, and she could not accuse Prince He without harming herself in the process. Fuheng's lie creates a drift between him and Yinglou but does not affect Yinglou's relationship with Empress Xiaoxian. Yinglou, as the clever character she is, still gets her revenge on Prince He and his mother, whom viewers find out was the influential figure in the Forbidden City that covered for him.

While working in Changchun Palace, Yinglou develops enemies such as other Changchun Palace maids, Mingyu and Hiara Erqing (who is secretly in love with Fuca Fuheng). She also takes on enemies of the empress, Noble Consort Gao, played by Tan Zhou, Consort Xian (Step Empress Nara), played by Charmaine Sheh, and Consort Chun, played by Wang Yuan Ke. As her relationship with Fuca Fuheng strains but her relationship with Empress Xiaoxian grows, Qianlong takes a liking to Yinglou as he appreciates how she goes above and beyond for Xiaoxian. As Qianlong falls in love with Yinglou, Fuca Fuheng, without the permission of Yinglou, boldly asks the emperor to grant marriage between him and Yinglou. Yinglou and Fuca Fuheng are punished and shunned by the emperor as he is jealous since he already has feelings for Yinglou. Later in the story, through manipulation from other consorts and eunuchs, Hitara Erqing convinces Fuheng to marry her so that Qianlong does not harm Yinglou for previously loving Fuheng. Fuheng reluctantly agrees to marry Erqing to protect Yinglou. However, Yinglou being the strong-willed person she is decides to cut off all ties with Fuheng since he disregarded her feelings and took matters into his own hands to marry Erqing. Erqing tries to force her love on Fuheng, who embarrassingly ignores her and leaves her on their wedding night. After continuous humiliation from Fuheng, Erqing decides to take her anger out on Yinglou. As Erqing tries to make Yinglou's life as hard as possible, Mingyu, who used to hate Yinglou, realizes how terrible of a person Erqing is and begins to side with Yinglou. Mingyu also takes a liking to Yinglou because she supports the growing love that Mingyu has for Imperial Guard Hai Lan Cha, who is Fuca Fuheng's closest friend. Intertwined with the stories of the palace maids are also the backstories and evil intentions of other prominent women in Qianlong's court. These women include Noble Consort Gao, Consort Xian, and Consort Chun, who all provoke one another with different schemes.

By the time Yinglou becomes a consort, the other consorts of the harem have already plotted against Empress Xiaoxian and Noble Consort Gao, leading to their suicides. Since Empress Xiaoxian died, Mingyu became Yinglou's palace maid, forming a solid friendship. Nevertheless, Mingyu becomes a weakness for Yinglou as conniving consorts target her to hurt Yinglou. In the last few episodes of the drama, Consort Xian and Consort Chun become Yinglou's main enemies in the Forbidden City when it is revealed that they both plotted the murder of Empress Xiaoxian's last son, driving her to suicide. Consort Xian uses Empress Xiaoxian's death to be elevated to Step-Empress Nara. Consort Chun then forces Mingyu to work for her and tortures her with needles secretly. The torture causes Mingyu to develop a chronic disease. Before her wedding night with Hai Lan Cha, which Yinglou and Emperor Qianlong both supported, Mingyu commits suicide to avoid dying from her illness while married to Hai Lan Cha.

Yinglou uses the empress' and Mingyu's death as a catalyst to take down her enemies. Yet, as a high ranking consort, she realizes that revenge is not the only thing she has to propel her life. She grows to love Qianlong, and despite her fear of having children, she bears him multiple children. Yinglou also develops a close relationship with Empress Dowager Chongqing, played by Song Chun Li, with whom Qianlong is extremely filial to. Yinglou uses her relationship with Empress Dowager Chongqing to shield herself from Step Empress Nara’s scheming plots to defame her.

Since Empress Dowager Chongqing was a devout Buddhist, both in the show and in history, she would often travel to temples. Yinglou follows her a few times when she gets tired of life in the Forbidden City. Towards the end of the show, after fighting with Qianlong, out of spite, Yinglou travels with Empress Dowager to a temple. However, she is forced to rush back to the Forbidden City out of jealousy since Qianlong brought a new consort to court. Consort Chengbi, played by Jenny Zhang, a character loosely based on Qianlong's only Ughyur consort, rises quickly to an imperial consort. Viewers learn that Qianlong used Chengbi to bring Yinglou back from hiding at the temple by making her jealous. Eventually, Qianlong and Yinglou fall in love again, and he chooses her son, the 15th prince Yongyan, to become the next emperor. After her death, Yinglou is elevated posthumously to Empress Xiaoyichun, and her son Yongyan rises to become the Jiaqing emperor.[[13]](#footnote-13)

**The Significance of the Opening Sequence: “看” (kàn)**

At the beginning of every *Story of Yanxi Palace* episode, the intro track, “看”(kàn) by musician Lu Hu, begins to play as the camera pans through the Forbidden City, showing moving stills of various characters pan the screen.[[14]](#footnote-14) In Chinese, “看” (kàn) means “to look or to watch,” and it is no mistake that the introductory soundtrack is titled “To Look.” *Story of Yanxi Palace* is what author Geng Song calls a “palace intrigue drama”(*gongdou* *ju*) established around the fact that viewers want a look into the lives of the imperial consorts in the Qianlong emperor's court.[[15]](#footnote-15) According to Song, these particular palace dramas are often set in the Qing dynasty. They feature intriguing secretive, complex, and backstabbing plots from imperial consorts who fight to win the emperor's favor and vie for power in the court.[[16]](#footnote-16) Although *Yanxi* does fall into this genre of television show, the difference between *Yanxi* and other palace intrigue dramas is that *Yanxi* is consort-centric and not emperor-centric. In the drama, the women observe one another and make defining life choices based on the politics of the inner court.

In the opening sequence of *Yanxi,* the show creators make a stylistic choice to reveal the stills of the characters overlaid with a filter that makes the stills look like paintings. When studying the women of the Qing Dynasty, scholars such as Daisy Yiyou Wang and Jan Stuart use the paintings of empresses and imperial consorts to make inferences about their lives.[[17]](#footnote-17) Thus, by envisioning the characters in the show as recreations of Qing dynasty paintings, the creators of the *Story of Yanxi Palace* exert their intent to make an inference about these women's lives.

**“看”(Kàn): A Story of Two Parts**

In the introductory sequence of every *Yanxi* episode, there are two sections that preview the main characters, plots, and overall tone of the show. The first section shows character stills over the instrumental of “看” (kàn), and the second section shows character stills as Lu Hu begins to sing. The song’s instrumental and lyrical portion sets up the melancholic yet alluring climate of the entire show. Most stills show the main character, Wei Yinglou, progressing from a palace maid to an imperial consort and those who affect her journey. Nevertheless, the show creators were intentional with the intertwined placement of other characters' stills showing that Yinglou’s progression within the Forbidden City was not linear. The spiraled progression of Yinglou’s life is meant to bear similarities to Empress Xiaoyichun, on whom Yinglou’s character is based since Xiaoyichun held various ranks throughout her lifetime and interacted with individuals of different statuses.[[18]](#footnote-18)

看: ***Part One***

The first non-Yinglou portrait that viewers see is Empress Xiaoxian (Fuca Rongyin). In her still, she is standing at side-profile in a melancholic demeanor, wearing a white dress and holding a fan covering half her face. The portrait pans out, and so does the fan, revealing her whole face to viewers. Next, viewers are shown Xiaoxian’s foil character, Step-Empress Nara, standing at face profile in a black dress, smiling with extreme joy, in contrast to Xiaoxian she is holding the fan in front of her body rather than covering her face. Then, viewers see Yinglou in her palace maid attire embracing Imperial Guard Fuca (Fuca Fuheng), the younger brother of Empress Xiaoxian. He has a soft smile while holding an umbrella over Yinglou and not himself. This portrait alone describes his character, as he was willing to do anything to protect Yinglou, even if it hurts her. Quickly, the scene pans to Imperial Guard Fuca in all-red wedding attire, reluctantly kowtowing together with his new wife Erqing, former palace maid to Empress Xiaoxian. Subsequently, viewers see Yinglou now in her imperial consort attire, standing sadly by a wall, expressing her dissatisfaction with the fate of her and Fuca’s relationship.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Shortly after the still of Yinglou looking dissatisfied, viewers are shown the portrait of Imperial Consort Chengbi, a character loosely based on Qianlong’s only Uyghur consort, sewing in a demure manner. Chengbi’s still is essential because, towards the end of the show, she becomes one of Yinglou’s biggest rivals regarding the emperor’s affection. The switch from Imperial Guard Fuca’s storyline with Yinglou to Yinglou’s storyline with Consort Chengbi shows the important shift in Yinglou’s thoughts as a consort. From the moment Chengbi enters the show Yinglou’s former reluctance to focus on her new life as an imperial consort is discarded as she realizes the growing affection she has for the Qianlong Emperor. Finally, the first part of the introductory sequence ends with quick flashes with a still of Yinglou, Empress Dowager Chongqing, and Erqing standing by a tree, then two eunuchs in heated discussion as snow falls, Noble Consort Gao pointing her finger with accusatory body language, Step-Empress Nara in her full attire smirking, and Qianlong sitting on the throne in his matching attire to the Step-Empress. The quickness of these last few shots shows that while these characters' scenes may have significance in the dramatic aspect of the show, these particular storylines are embellished and not important when painting the overall picture of the reality of Empress Xiaoyichun’s life from a historical aspect.[[20]](#footnote-20)

看: ***Part Two***

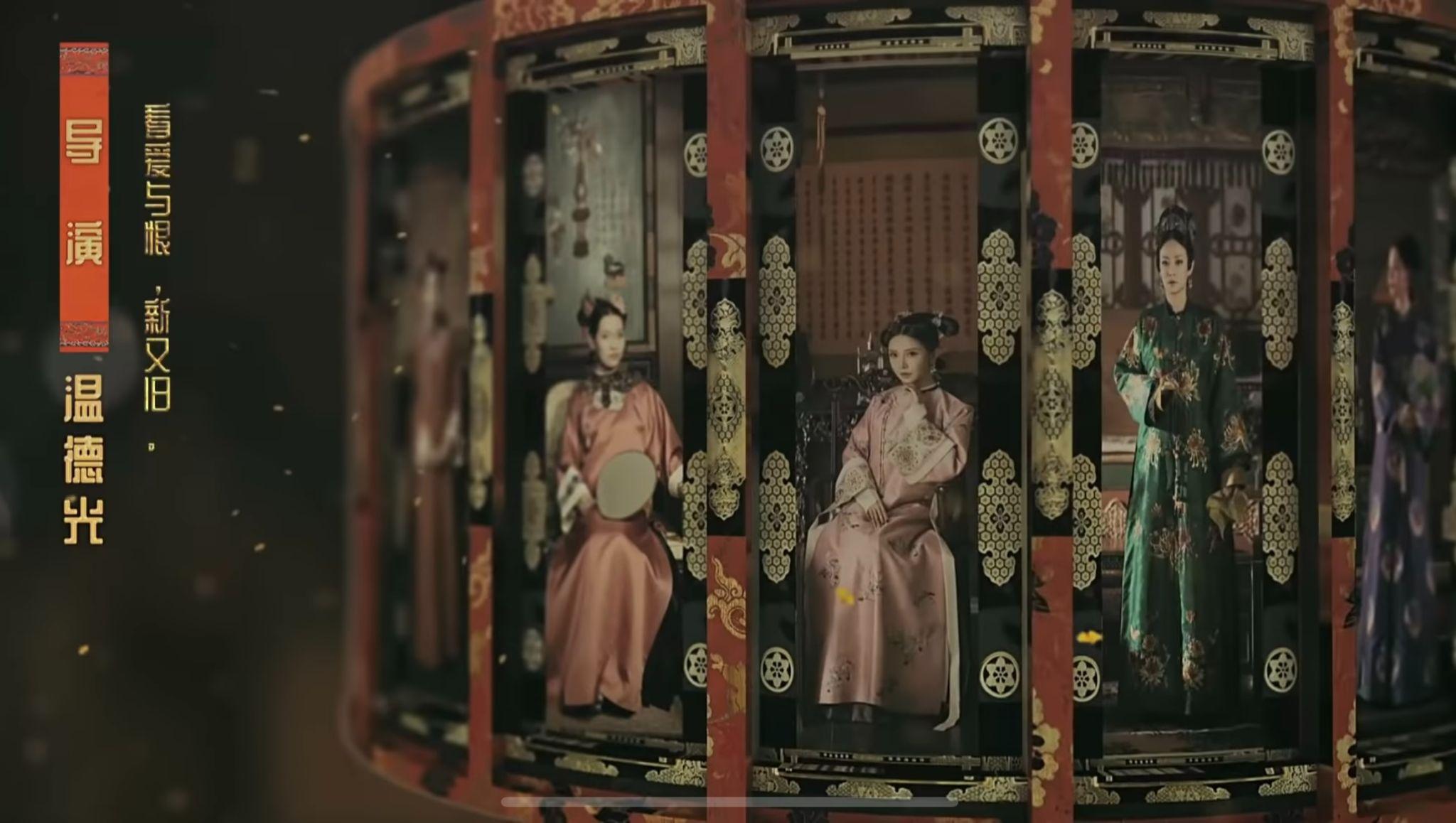
Next, the second half of the introductory sequence begins as artist Lu Hu sings “看” (*kan*); up until this moment, viewers only heard the instrumental. As the lyrics begin, viewers witness a still of Qianlong’s portrait with his back towards the camera, standing on a rooftop of the Forbidden City. Qianlong alone at the top of the roof is a clear director's choice, alluding to the fact that while the emperor is at the top of the world in terms of power, he is still alone. The importance of Qianlong’s loneliness is shown throughout *Yanxi* as viewers find that Wei Yinglou is ultimately the only character with whom the Emperor can talk freely and share his burden.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Nevertheless, the show is not about Qianlong’s loneliness, but rather the loneliness and restrictiveness that every imperial consort feels as they are only one of the many women he has in his life. Lu Hu’s lyrics shed light on the fact that many imperial consorts' lives involved waiting for the Emperor. He sings:

“Watching the person in the mirror’s countenance pale and grow haggard. Examining love together with regret, both new and old. Keeping watch still by a lantern though it is daybreak, drenched with tears. Watching others meet as promised, as twilight falls.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

The still that is shown with the lyrics “examining love together with regret, both new and old” shows a spinning photobook of six inner court women of different statuses in their homes while either standing or sitting. The most striking thing about this photobook of stills is that the photos are reminiscent of “Yinzhens Twelve Ladies.”[[23]](#footnote-23) “Yinzhens Twelve Ladies” is a hanging scroll painting of 12 court women, dated to the Kangxi period. They were commissioned to the Yongzheng emperor when he was still the prince known as Yinzhen.[[24]](#footnote-24) Authors Daisy Yiyou Wang and Jan Stuart describe the photos as “twelve almost life-size images of individual women pictured in stunningly furnished garden residences.”[[25]](#footnote-25) The identity of the 12 ladies is contested due to the lack of an artist’s signature. Still, Wang and Stuart conclude that they are consorts drawn in the *shinu* *tu* (depictions of gentlewomen) style to bestow the traits of a “seductive charm” onto Yongzheng’s favorite wives.[[26]](#footnote-26)

***Introductory spinning book sequence from Yanxi & One of “Yinzhen’s 12 Ladies”[[27]](#footnote-27)***



These 12 portraits, seemingly demure and modest in nature, have a sensual aspect. Viewers can find hidden meanings in the portraits by focusing on their facial expressions, their location, and the meaning behind their poses. A few women in “Yinzhen’s 12 Ladies” portray “a provocatively sexual reading; one women sits on the edge of her curtained bed; another’s sleeve is caught on the back of her chair, tantalizingly exposing her delicate forearm.”[[28]](#footnote-28) Wang and Stuart suggest that there was a particular sexual charge within “Yinzhen’s 12 Ladies” that “bears witness to the passion between a husband and his wives,” an idea that is often left out of modern accounts of consort and emperors' lives, but was most likely an essential aspect of their lives.[[29]](#footnote-29) The creators of *Yanxi* are intentional in their use of vertical stills inspired by these 12 Paintings to display that *Yanxi* sheds light on the sensual nature of a consort waiting upon her husband, the emperor. In the same way “Yinzhen’s 12 Ladies” was interpreted by Daisy Yiyou Wang and Jan Stuart.

The next still shown is of Yinglou and seven other imperial consorts standing with the Empress Dowager in front of a gate. Demonstrating the importance of Empress Dowager’s character later in the show. Subsequently, viewers see the still shown along with the lyrics, “keeping watch still by a lantern though it is daybreak, drenched with tears.” As these lyrics play, the show creators have a still of Yinglou superimposed on top of the Emperor's seal, with multiple other seals moving around her. This still indicates the action of the emperor's job, which involves reading, annotating, and stamping documents with his seal of approval. Seeing Yinglou sit on one of the seals as it moves outwards portrays her as effectively receiving his stamp of approval. This is the director's way of telling viewers that by the end of the opening sequence, the show, and ultimately Yinglou’s life, Qianlong had the largest impact on her. This theory is solidified as we see the final still of Yinglou, after being elevated to Imperial Noble Consort Ling, and Qianlong hugging while looking longingly into one another's eyes. Nevertheless, the journey to her highest rank was not easy, and it all began with Wei Yinglou entering the palace.

**PART ONE**

**Entering the Palace: The *Xiunu* vs. *Gongnu* draft**

The *Story of Yanxi Palace* begins in Qianlong’s 6th year of reign on February 2, 1741. The first scene of the first episode is of Wei Yinglou and other girls entering the palace for the first time to become maids. Viewers see that other girls of a noble rank in the banner system are also entering the palace for the imperial consort contest. According to Shuo Wang, a Qing dynasty scholar on women of the court, Wei Yinglou’s character enters the Forbidden City through the *gongnu* system. In contrast, the higher-ranking girls shown enter through the *xiunu* system.[[30]](#footnote-30) Historically, Qing dynasty rulers chose wives primarily from the banner population through the triennial selection known as the *xiunu* (elegant female) system.[[31]](#footnote-31) It is unclear when exactly the *xiunu* selection system began, as scholars contest the dates. Still, Shuo Wang believes there was a version of the system under the Yongzheng emperor, but it was not standardized until Qianlong’s reign. Near the beginning of his reign, Qianlong issued a decree stating:

“Women of the eight banners must go through *xiunu* selection before being arranged in marriage. All the banner people should follow this [regulation]... Now pass my words on to the eight banners. All the girls are not allowed to marry if they have not gone through imperial inspection.”[[32]](#footnote-32)

***The Ethnic & Cultural Significance of the Xiunu System***

The *xiunu* system was meant to ensure Qing emperors married women only from the banners. During the pre-Qianlong era, the ethnicity of the banner women was not necessarily as important as their cultural significance. However, during Qianlong’s reign, the court believed that the women being married into the Forbidden City should only be Manchu women who were not influenced by Han culture, to keep the Forbidden City as a cultural reservoir for the imperial family.[[33]](#footnote-33) Manchurian identity, however, was not strictly by blood. It was intertwined with the banner system (*baqi* *zhidu, 八旗 制度*), which meant Manchu ethnicity was also a military and social identity.[[34]](#footnote-34) In the Qing dynasty, there were banners (*qiren*, 旗人) and commoners (*minren*, 民人).[[35]](#footnote-35) All banner people were connected not necessarily through ethnic origins since there were Han and Mongolian bannermen and women, but all banners were connected through Manchu cultural, religious, and language traditions. The primary way in which Manchu rulers kept the culture alive despite widespread sinicization of the commoner population was “to create a Manchu world in the inner court for the emperors and princes who were the core figures of the Manchu rule in China.”[[36]](#footnote-36) This led to significant adjustments in marriage policies in the 17th and 18th centuries.[[37]](#footnote-37)

The *xiunu* system became one in which “all young women in banners, except those with certified physical disabilities or deformities, went through the process.”[[38]](#footnote-38) Thus, if these girls were married before participating in the inspection, their “parents, clan leaders, and local banner officials would be punished.”[[39]](#footnote-39) All banner women between the ages of thirteen and sixteen were called upon to be inspected at the Forbidden City in Beijing. It is unclear how exactly the women were examined. Still, physical appearance had much to do with it since some girls were rejected immediately. In contrast, others “who passed the initial inspection were “registered” (*jinming*) or “documented” (*hupai*) and stayed in the palace.”[[40]](#footnote-40) Those who officially make it to the palace must stay there for five years, going through various inspections of their background and birth dates to be sure they were suitable for the person they would be betrothed. At this point, they become “imperial consort candidates” and were left with little freedom and only given one tael of silver per month.[[41]](#footnote-41)

***The Significance of the Gongnu System***

The second method for choosing imperial consorts outside the *xiunu* draft came from the imperial bondservants' (*booi*) daughters. Bondservants were a part of the banner status and thus separated from the Han Chinese population, but they occupied the lower ranks of the banner population.[[42]](#footnote-42) Bondservants were not legally allowed to marry other banner groups and were left to multiply marginal to Qing society.[[43]](#footnote-43) Emperors used this to make bondservants utterly dependent on the imperial family for status. Qing scholar Evelyn Rawski says they “were a hereditarily servile people registered in the banner.”[[44]](#footnote-44) Although they were higher than Han Chinese commoners, their status in Manchu society was no different than that of slaves who mainly worked in domestic service.[[45]](#footnote-45) All the maidservants of the palace were of bondservant origin. Their status in the Forbidden City relied on the position of their master or mistress. They were often mistreated if their master or mistress was not of exceptionally high status.

The daughters of *booi*, “ages thirteen sui or older, were required to go through the process of palace maid selection before they could get married.”[[46]](#footnote-46) The daughters of bondservants had to serve as palace maids rather than directly being inspected for the imperial consort service. But princes and emperors could choose these women as partners as well. Many imperial consorts began as palace maids. It is well known that “the birth mothers of the Yongzheng, Qianlong, and Jiaqing emperors all came from a bondservant background.”[[47]](#footnote-47) According to Evelyn Rawski, 76% of imperial consorts entered the palace through the *xiunu* draft, and 16% came from the *gongnu* draft.[[48]](#footnote-48) Author Shuo Wang argues these drafts were a way to broaden the scope of imperial consorts to the whole banner population regardless of social rank and to focus on “the [Manchurian] ethnic identity of the candidates for imperial consorts.”[[49]](#footnote-49) Although the starting points differed, both groups of women who entered the palace had the chance of becoming an imperial consort. High-ranked banner women were chosen or rejected directly. *Booi* banner women were indirectly chosen to be consorts or not chosen at all. This system subjected *booi* women to years of serving as palace maids before being able to leave the palace at 25 to be married if they completed general service.[[50]](#footnote-50) The age was raised to 35 if they served imperial masters.[[51]](#footnote-51) It is unclear if the *xiunu* and *gongnu* systems happened simultaneously in the Forbidden City, as in the first episode of *Yanxi*, but it is true that they did occur.

***The Difference between Xiunu and Gongnu Women in History & Yanxi: The Story of Palace Maid’s Jiaxian & Yinglou vs. Young Mistress Uya***

The difference between women in the two selection systems is stark in the first episode of *Yanxi.* Those in the *xiunu* selection are dressed in bright silk clothing with flower accessories in their lavishly styled hair, in contrast to the plain blue garments and simple hairstyles donned by the palace maids in the *gongnu* selection.[[52]](#footnote-52) Although the women were all banner women, the difference in status is seen as the *gonnu* women meet the *xiunu* women in the Forbidden City for the first time. When encountering the noble women for the first time, Jiaxian, a palace maid, admires their beauty, saying,

“If I could put on beautiful clothing like that I would be very pretty.”

Out of spite, another maid, Jinxiu, says,

“These are all noble women from prestigious families. They become masters right away after entering the palace. This kind of family background like ours, even if we passed the talent selection and the training, we still can only serve as a palace maid.”

Jinxiu then pushes Jixian as a way to tell her to stop daydreaming. However, Jinxiu’s push causes Jixian to spill the water bucket she was holding onto one of the noble women, Uya.[[53]](#footnote-53) Uya, then slaps Jixian, calling her a despicable palace servant. Jixian pleads with her, saying,

“Young mistress, please spear my life!”[[54]](#footnote-54)

To appease Uya, Aunt Fang, a senior lady-in-waiting in charge of the new palace maids, says,

“Young mistress Uya, these girls all are palace maids who just entered the palace. Stupid like pigs! If you want to beat and want to scold them, both are feasible, but by all means, you must not get angry and ruin your own body.”

Nevertheless, this statement does not appease Uya’s anger. Uya then steps on Jiaxian’s hand to damage her fingers. Uya stepping on her hand is significant for two reasons. First, she does it to show the power of her status in contrast to Jiaxian’s. Second, if she successfully breaks Jiaxian’s hand, Jiaxian would become disabled and unable to perform delicate tasks in the Forbidden City, such as embroidery.[[55]](#footnote-55) Being disabled could cause a palace maid of Jiaxin’s status to lose out on working for a master or a mistress of higher rank, causing her life in the Forbidden City to be one of menial or disgusting tasks. Thus, before Uya can cause too much damage to Jinxian’s hand, Wei Yinglou steps up calmly to distract her.

Yinglou approaches Uya saying that she can place a powder under her foot. Thus, each time she takes a step, her foot will create flower petal art on the ground. This way, Uya can impress the emperor and be chosen as a consort. By saying this, Uya takes her foot off Jinxian’s hand and turns her attention to Yinglou.[[56]](#footnote-56) As Yinglou gets the powder to put under Uya’s foot, another critical dialogue happens.

The two other noble women standing with Uya, Nalan Chunxue (Consort Shun) and Lu Wanwan (Noble Consort Qing), discuss Yinglou’s appearance. Lu Wanwan says,

“This young palace maid is quite beautiful.”

Nalan replies,

“So what if she’s beautiful? She is still a *baoyi* [T/N: a phonetic rendering of the Manchu phrase *booi*] from birth, born to be a servant. Destined to hold up Uya *jiejie*’s shoe.”[[57]](#footnote-57)

The dialogues and interactions between the higher-ranking banner women and those of *booi* status show how the differences in their family’s banner rank affected their lives in Forbidden City from the very beginning.[[58]](#footnote-58)

The original Lady Wei, on whom Wei Yinglou’s character is based, did enter the palace as a *booi* daughter from a military banner family. However, she quickly became a consort of 4th rank.[[59]](#footnote-59) There is insuffiecient historical text surrounding Lady Wei’s life in the palace as a maid. The majority of writing about her begins when she is invested as a consort. Thus, the writers of *Yanxi* use Wei Yinglou’s character struggles as a palace maid, not because it is historically accurate, but to show the differences between *xiunu* and *gongnu* women.

The two differences between consorts recruited through the *xiunu* and the *gongnu* drafts is how they entered the palace and the ranks they were given. Those who entered as consorts through the *xiunu* would be “invested with titles and performed domestic rituals signifying their incorporation into the harem.”[[60]](#footnote-60) Most of the *xiunu* girls would be given one of the first four ranks. Those who entered through *gongnu* would often be given ranks five through seven, and they entered the palace with no patents or sacrifice at the ancestral altars.[[61]](#footnote-61) The investment of rank was significant for a woman’s entrance into the palace. However, since any consort of any rank could be raised to the status of empress or could give birth to the future emperor, once they all became consorts, their chances for upward mobility were virtually the same.[[62]](#footnote-62)

***Banner Women as Cultural Reservoirs in the Forbidden City: The Downfall of Young Mistress Uya & The Rise of Young Mistress Nalan***

In the Qing dynasty, the palace’s ultimate goal when choosing imperial consort candidates was to maintain ethnic purity with the imperial house. Because of this, Qianlong’s court began excluding women from *hanjun* families and “tried to select as few imperial consorts as possible from Chinese banners” to prevent Han sinicization.[[63]](#footnote-63) However, because marriage between Chinese bannermen and Han women had been happening for decades before Qianlong’s era, many girls born into such families had been brought up in a Chinese way rather than a Manchurian way. By the mid-eighteenth century, this assimilation was affecting the imperial consort draft. Eventually, during the selection process, Qianlong began finding girls who copied the Han style of clothing and jewelry.[[64]](#footnote-64) He denounced such behavior in a decree issued in 1759:

“This is truly not the Manchu custom. If they do this before me, what is willfully worn at home?... Although this is a small matter, if we do not speak to correct it, there must gradually be a change in our customes, which are greatly tied to our old Manchu ways.”[[65]](#footnote-65)

In *Yanxi*, the *xiunu* selection ceremony begins with Qianlong, Empress Xiaoxian, and Noble Consort Gao commenting on each girl. As each girl comes in and bows to the emperor, those who he does not like are called “*liao pai*,” meaning “remove her name.”[[66]](#footnote-66) In the show, Qianlong originally only seems worried about the girls' looks as he calls one too skinny, too fat, and too dark in complexion. Nevertheless, viewers soon realize that the emperor greatly cares if the women are emulating Manchurian styles. During Uya’s turn, she steps on the ground using the powder previously given by Wei Yinglou to create flower art on the floor, impressing the emperor. Yet, as the emperor closely examines her foot, he finds that she is a footbinder and punishes her. Footbinding was still common in some Han Chinese households but was forbidden for Manchu women. Uya being caught as a footbinder was the first of many set-ups orchestrated by Wei Yinglou against her enemies. As Uya is dragged out, Qianlong says,

“I have already given the order. Daughters of Han Bannermen are forbidden from binding their feet. In today’s imperial audition, there are many girls with bound feet. And not only is it girls from Han Bannermen families who indulge in such decadence, even the Uya family (TN: they are Manchu) has picked it up.”[[67]](#footnote-67)

Therefore, he punishes Uya and her family for failing to follow his decree. This scene follows history closely. Since Manchurian ethnicity was being tainted by Han Chinese bannermen’s history of intermarriage, the cultural norms were even more stringent for Qianlong. This is seen in *Yanxi*, as Nalan Chunxue came to present herself to Qianlong, who looked closely at her noticing her three earrings, and asked,

“What happened to your ears?”

To which Nalan replied,

“Replying to your majesty. My grandmother says, wearing three earrings and wearing flowers on the shoes, is a long-standing tradition in my family. It is to remind us that even though we may no longer be in our native lands, we should not forget our roots”

Qianlong says,

“Mh. Well said. The Qing dynasty has existed for many years now. This old Manchu habit has gradually been forgotten. I have made them study Mandarin, and learn our ways but I haven’t told them to forget who they are.”[[68]](#footnote-68)

Since Nalan impressed the emperor by wearing three earrings in each ear instead of one like Han Chinese women, the eunuch says, “*liao paizi*” which means “keep her name.” Nalan is able to enter the palace as an imperial consort. Her passage as an imperial consort in comparison to Uya’s failure to pass is a significant moment in which viewers learn about the importance of Forbidden City women as a cultural reservoir for Manchurian tradition.

In the past, after Qianlong died, his successor, the Jiaqing emperor, continued his legacy of being stringent with Manchurian traditions. He had found that certain drafter girls had bound feet, wore one earring, and had wide-sleeved robes like the Han Chinese women. In a decree, he said,

“Wearing wide sleeve robes and having bound feet are changing basic Manchu traditions. Nothing is more serious than this. I demand all banners prohibit it.”[[69]](#footnote-69)

The statement by Qianlong in *Yanxi* about Uya’s bound feet was most likely derived from the Jiaqing emperor’s official decree. Seeing as historically, Qianlong did not establish an official decree against footbinding.

Although it is highly likely that the decree mentioned in the show was loosely based on an official decree made by Qianlong’s son and not himself, this does not make it historically inaccurate. During Qianlong’s time, it was a common taboo for Manchurian women to bind their feet since Hong Taiji, founder of the Qing dynasty, released a decree against it in the mid-1640s.[[70]](#footnote-70) Footbinding did not become a Forbidden City problem until Han culture began bleeding into the imperial consort selection, and it may have been a more common occurrence during the Jiaqing emperor’s reign, which is why he released another decree.[[71]](#footnote-71) Amidst the imperial selection scene in episode one of *Yanxi*, viewers not only learn the importance of Manchurian tradition but also learn the importance of rank as well.

**PART TWO**

**Changing Ranks: The Fall of Noble Consort Gao & Empress Xiaoxian and The Rise of Imperial Noble Consort Ling (Wei Yinglou) & Step Empress Nara (Consort Xian)**

By 1636, the Qing dynasty imperial harem was comprised of complex 8-rank hierarchical system that greatly affected a women’s life in the Forbidden City.[[72]](#footnote-72) This ranking system upheld the status quo surrounding respect and responsibility within the royal family. This ranking system was not new to Chinese culture. In fact, the idea of an imperial consort ranking system was a “Han Chinese structure that Manchu rulers adopted.”[[73]](#footnote-73) The empress, who is addressed as *huánghòu* (皇后), was at the top of the system with the first rank.[[74]](#footnote-74) Below her came the *huanguifei* (皇贵妃), *guifei* (贵妃), *fei* (妃), *pin* (嫔), *guiren* (贵人), *changzai* (常在), and *daying* (答应).[[75]](#footnote-75) In *Yanxi*, these roles were translated into English by ranking order as Empress (1st), Imperial Noble Consort (2nd), Noble Consort (3rd), Consort (4th), Imperial Concubine (5th), Noble Lady (6th), First Attendant (7th), and Second Attendant (8th). The term “Lady-in Waiting” was an additional term for unranked women who served in palace. This “rank” was technically below Second Attendant.[[76]](#footnote-76) According to Rawski, “food, clothing, jewelry, stipends, and maids were allocated to the consorts by rank, with minute gradations exemplifying a ranked hierarchy.”[[77]](#footnote-77) Rank was so significant that once a woman became a consort, she lost her previous identity and became known only by her title and rank. This is why in the official imperial portraits of Qianlong and his 12 wives, the women’s names are written as their titles rather than personal names.[[78]](#footnote-78) A consort’s name reflected her status in the palace, and those of higher rank or those who became mothers often received posthumous names, which frequently raised their position after death. Yet, those who were lower-ranking or childless often disappeared from historical and genealogical records.[[79]](#footnote-79)

A woman’s rank reflected how much royal power she had in relation to the destined heavenly power the emperor claimed to have gained from heaven. The empress’ role was the highest ranked since she was the main wife of the emperor. In theory, she was considered the second most powerful person in the Forbidden City. However, depending on the level of filial piety displayed by the emperor to his mother the empress dowager, she could be treated as the second most powerful person.[[80]](#footnote-80)

***Adhering to Rank & Title: The Identity Loss of Imperial Women***

Although all of the women were considered royal entities by Qing dynasty standards, the system created clear differences in how women were meant to treat those of the same, lower, or higher rank than them. Consorts of the same rank could call one another sister (姐姐 *jiejie*), but when interacting with a consort of higher rank, they had to bow and refer to them by their title. If those of higher rank had a “noble” or “imperial” followed by “consort” in their title, they would be called their title followed by “Your Highness”(娘娘 *niángniáng)*. The empress was considered a legitimate wife of a higher status than the other wives. Thus, all consorts below her had to bow and greet her with, “Greetings to Your Highness the Empress” (恭请，皇后 娘娘圣安 *gōngqǐng, huánghòu niángniáng shèng ān*) each time they met her.[[81]](#footnote-81) The hierarchical system created a situation in which the empress gained better quality items, food, and more servants than the other consorts. The empress was often treated with more reverence by the emperor and empress dowager.[[82]](#footnote-82) Thus, it is not farfetched to assume this preferential treatment led to jealousy from other consorts of lower rank. Jealousy due to rank differences was often a source of conflict in *Yanxi*.

***The Highest Rank Did Not Equate to an Easier Life: Finding The Truth In Empress Xiaoxian’s Portrayal***

Despite her high rank, the life of Empress Xiaoxian was not easy. Every Qing empress was responsible for managing the harem and the six palaces in the Forbidden City. She had to deal with other consorts' needs and issues and manage affairs for large events such as sacrificial rituals and royal birthdays.[[83]](#footnote-83) Furthermore, she had to bear sons for the emperor. Empress Xiaoxian in *Yanxi* is a character whose aura is melancholic. She struggles with her responsibilities as the empress, longs for freedom, and is unable to properly mourn the death of her children since her duties in the Forbidden City took precedence. She loved yet, resented the emperor because she resented her role as the empress and the loss of her children. Although she was shy, austere, and frugal in nature she still tried her best to handle her responsibilities of managing the six palaces and the interpersonal drama that came with it. Aspects of the depiction of Empress Xiaoxian in *Yanxi* fall in line with writings about her from Qing scholars. It was said that Xiaoxian was “known for her modesty and frugality.”[[84]](#footnote-84) She once made the emperor a simple flint pouch, after an old Manchu custom, deliberately avoiding the use of precious materials.[[85]](#footnote-85) She had four children, three of whom died in childhood. Xiaoxian died a few months after the death of her last son while on a trip with the emperor in Shandong in 1747.[[86]](#footnote-86) When Xiaoxian died, it is said that out of love, Qianlong made a box for the flint pouch she made for him and inserted a personal poem her had written for her inside.[[87]](#footnote-87) Qianlong and Xiaoxian’s love was a point of contention for multiple consorts in the drama leading them to vie for Empress Xiaoxian’s position.

***Jealousy & Conflict: The Impact the Ranking System Had on Women in Yanxi***

For the first 40 episodes of *Yanxi,* the main characters followed were Empress Xiaoxian (1st rank), Noble Consort Gao (3rd rank), Consort Xian (4th rank), Consort Chun (4th rank), and Wei Yinglou, who rises from an embroider maid to the personal handmaiden of Empress Xiaoxian in Changchun Palace. Yet, through various conflicts between episodes one and forty, all of these characters either rise or fall in rank changing the dynamics of the harem.

In the beginning half of the show, Noble Consort Gao often clashes with Empress Xiaoxian due to her jealousy of only being ranked as the third highest in the harem. She is convinced that Qianlong refused to raise her to Imperial Noble Consort Gao (2nd rank) because then her power would be too close to Empress Xiaoxian’s. Consort Xian and Consort Chun both outwardly choose to stay neutral during the power struggles between Empress Xiaoxian and Noble Consort Gao. In the first few episodes, Consort Chun eventually sides with the Empress due to the crush she has on Empress Xiaoxian’s brother, Fuca Fuheng. It is revealed that Consort Chun often pretended to be sick to avoid sleeping with Qianlong because she truly loved Fuca Fuheng. Nevertheless, when it is revealed that Fuca Fuheng loves Wei Yinglou, Consort Chun begins to approach the emperor to have a son and move up in rank. She plans to move up in rank to get revenge on Wei Yinglou, Fuca Fuheng, and Empress Xiaoxian.

As the episodes continue, Consort Xian has a misunderstanding with both Noble Consort Gao and Empress Xiaoxian, causing her to become the show’s main villain. Similarly to Consort Chun, Consort Xian eventually makes an effort to elevate her rank and secretly plots the death of both Empress Xiaoxian and Noble Consort Gao.[[88]](#footnote-88) During the imperial consort selection scene in episode 1, in which Uya gets dragged out and Nalan moves up, viewers are introduced to the idea of the ranking system between women in the harem. The rank is so entrenched in the imperial system that it determines where a consort sits with the emperor in any given room, when she gets to speak, and when she gets to stand.[[89]](#footnote-89)

As the scene begins Noble Consort Gao enters the room, the camera pans to the center of the room, in which a table with an assortment of food and a grand throne for Emperor Qianlong to sit is placed. Closely to the right of this grand table is a slightly smaller throne where Empress Xiaoxian sits. As Noble Consort Gao lays eyes on Empress Xiaoxian she reluctantly bows saying “Greetings to Your Highness the Empress,” then she sits in a chair by a small table to the left of the room further away from where the empress and emperors seats are placed. As the Qianlong Emperor enters the room, his presence is announced by the eunuch. Both women and their maids rise from their seats to bow to the emperor. The empress, as the highest-ranking woman in the room, is the only one allowed to greet the emperor vocally. As he enters, he brings his full attention to the empress, staring her in the eyes and grabbing both her hands to raise her quickly from the bow, telling her there is no need for such formality. By focusing on the empress he leaves Noble Consort Gao to bow for a long time. After a while, he finally turns to Noble Consort Gao and waves at her to get up. Gao’s jealousy is vivid during this scene as she glares at the two of them after Qianlong’s overt display of affection towards the empress whom she hates.

In minute 30 of episode one, Noble Consort Gao airs out the reasons why she resents the empress to a junior consort. Gao says,

“Ever since we entered the palace, she became the Empress of the Qing dynasty. Her yearly allowance is one thousand ounces. I have to settle for four hundred ounces less. Changchun Palace uses gold. Chuxiu Palace can only use silver! Her honor guard surpasses mine. When there are festivities or celebrations, I receive a lot fewer rewards thans he does. I can tolerate all of this. What about His Majesty? I was a living person standing there. His Majesty didn’t even look at me, he had only eyes for her! How can one tolerate this!” [[90]](#footnote-90)

In the Qing dynasty a women’s rank did not signify the level of affection the emperor had for her. Therefore being an empress did not mean Xiaoxian would be the most loved by the emperor. However, since an emperor was the only one able to change the ranking of a consort, it is valid to assume those of higher rank were looked upon favorably by the emperor once in their lifetime. This favor could be of a sexual or sensual nature, as Noble Consort Gao suggests for why Qianlong favors Empress Xiaoxian over her. Nevertheless, the favor could also be because of the consort's family achievements or how favorably the previous emperor looked upon the consort as well. Fuca Ronying (Empress Xiaoxian) was granted by Qianlong’s father, Emperor Yongzheng, as the first wife to Qianlong when he was still Prince Hongli.[[91]](#footnote-91) Due to Yongzheng’s care for her, Rongyin was invested as empress when Qianlong rose to become emperor.[[92]](#footnote-92)

Through *Yanxi*, viewers learn that there were multiple women other than Fuca Rongyin who entered Qianlong’s harem when he was still a young prince, but they all gained a different level of rank when he rose to become emperor. Author Kevin McMahon confirms this plot point in his book *Celestial Women: Imperial Wives and Concubines in China from Song to Qing*, for which he describes the differences between women in Qianlong’s early life and his life as emperor.[[93]](#footnote-93) Consort Xian is stated as one of the women who entered Qianlong’s palace when he was still Prince Hongli.

***In an Already Constricted Life, a Higher Rank Gave Women More Power: Consort Xian’s Fight to Become Step Empress Nara***

Towards the end of episode one Consort Xian’s mother visits her to air her grievances. She is upset that her daughter, who served Qianlong when he was a prince, is not ranked higher as a consort. Xian having a lower status in the palace means her family outside the palace receives no benefits from her position. Her mother yells,

“When the current Emperor was still Qinwang Bao, (T/N Hongli, Prince Bao of the First Rank) you and Fuca clan and Gao clan women all entered the prince’s manor together. Fuca clan is a family of generations of high ministers. And she was favored by the late Emperor, so we can’t compete. But that Gao clan’s power is just mediocre! She got to be the second side wife back in the prince’s manor (T/N *Cefujin*, side wife, under Princess Consort [Fuca Rongyin]) to be shoulder to shoulder with you there, but now in the Imperial palace, she was promoted to Noble Consort and is pressing you down. Where’s the justice?”

Consort Xian replies,

“Mother, don’t say anymore. I don’t want to hear this.”

Her mother continues,

“Don’t want to hear it? If you don’t want to hear this, what do you want to hear? You have been with His Majesty for many years and you are still Consort Xian. Chengqian Palace is such a big place.[[94]](#footnote-94) If His Majesty doesn’t visit you, what’s the difference between here and the Cold Palace?[[95]](#footnote-95) Gao clan’s father and brother are moving up in ranks. If you don’t compete, you won’t be able to compete for any benefits for the family. What’s the use of sending you to enter the palace?...Your pitiful father. He’s worked so diligently all his life. He’s already spent two whole decades as a banner commander! For your pitiful father, to put in a few favorable words for him before His Majesty so he can get a transfer too, can’t you?”

Consort Xian replies,

“Mother, this can’t be done in the harem. I must not make it difficult for His Majesty.”

Her mother sighs,

“Zhen’er. Make it difficult for him? Alright. Fine. Just stay here and endure the pain then. I want to see whether His Majesty will take pity on you and look at you!”

She stomps away, pauses, turns around with disgust on her face, and says.

“H-How did I give birth to such an unremarkable daughter like you?”[[96]](#footnote-96)

Despite the concern of her mother, Consort Xian is adamant about sticking to the rules of imperial consorts not interfering with court affairs. According to Qing scholar Bret Hinsch, emperors of the Qing dynasty “demanded that women of the harem abjure from interfering in affairs of the state.”[[97]](#footnote-97) Thus, Consort Xian’s behavior was not abnormal for a traditional rule-following consort. Through this scene, Xian is introduced to viewers as a pitiful character who chooses not to engage in harem or court politics because she loves Qianlong and does not want to do anything to harm or disappoint him. Women like her in the Forbidden City were not only restricted from court politics, but they were restricted from handling family affairs.

Historically, when women joined the harem, any previous power they had from their families or class systems was supposed to dissipate. However, this societal norm was hard to adhere to since most women who were invested in the first through fourth ranks came from the same few clans; Fuca, Gao, Ula Nara, or Hoifa Nara.[[98]](#footnote-98) Nevertheless, when they entered the palace, they were meant to be women of the emperor. Their duties included pleasing him and bearing children to further the royal Aisin-Gioro bloodline of the Qing dynasty. Thus, familial ties were restricted once they became consorts. During his reign, Qianlong released an edict stating:

“It is not permitted to take objects in the palace to bestow on one’s family. It is also not permitted to bring objects possessed by one’s family inside the palace.”[[99]](#footnote-99)

Consorts were forbidden to take or give anything to their family. Their families were not allowed to provide a dowry to avoid the imperial family owing them or being bribed by them.[[100]](#footnote-100) The regulations within the Forbidden City also made it impossible for women in the harem to keep close ties to their families. For these women, “visits home were rare and hedged with protocol, which demanded that a consort’s parents and grandparents prostrate themselves before her instead of reverse.”[[101]](#footnote-101) Typically, a filial daughter or son would prostrate when visiting their parents after a long time away as a sign of respect, but since an imperial consort was the wife of the emperor that role surpassed her role as a daughter. Parental meetings were often only allowed when a consort was pregnant, or her parents were elderly, but these still required imperial permission. Consorts also had to receive explicit permission to send servants to their family homes.[[102]](#footnote-102)

Consort Xian’s character is the metaphorical embodiment of restrictions that consorts in the Qing dynasty faced while living in the Forbidden City. In *Yanxi*, Xian’s family runs into trouble later, and she hesitates to help them because of the palace rules. Her family urgently needed money to help her sick brother. Since her brother became ill while in prison for committing an illegal act, he fell out of favor with Qianlong, so she could not plead with him. Furthermore, since she was only a fourth ranked consort, she had little personal wealth to rely on due to her low allowance. The only option she had left was to sell jewelry, but since Qianlong’s edict prevented women from taking things from the palace to give to their family, she had to use personal items of her own to sell. Sadly, these personal items were accessories given to her by her mother as a secret dowry before she entered the palace. Since Qianlong’s edict also prohibited women from bringing personal items into the palace, Xian kept the accessories secret out of respect for her mother and love for her family. When Consort Xian finally decides to break the rules by having two eunuchs sell her jewelry to get money for her family, she is caught by Noble Consort Gao and is humiliated. Noble Consort Gao says,

“How great is your daring! How dare you to steal from the palace! How can Consort Xian who is respected by all do such a thing?”

Consort Xian’s palace maid realizes the scope of the accusation and attempts to take the fall for her. Noble Consort Gao tries to punish the maid by having her caned one-hundred times. However, due to her love for the maid, Xian stops the punishment from happening by telling the truth. She says,

“Zhen’er didn’t steal anything from the Chengjian palace. I told her to do that.”

Noble Consort Gao replies,

“Regarding your action, why did you do that?”

Xian confesses,

“I was short of money and sold my jewelry.”

Gao scoffs,

“Consort Xian, Consort Xian. Are you confused? *Your* Jewerely? Since when do *you* have any jewelry? These were given to you by His Majesty!”

Xian picks up the bundle of jewelry and says,

“I didn’t touch any of the palace rewards. My mother prepared these for me before I entered the residence of His majesty before he ascended to the throne. None of these are from the palace. I’m short of money now and used them to trade for money. What’s wrong with this?”

Gao smacks the jewelry to the ground saying,

“If anyone were to find out about this, they will be astonished. Consort Xian of the great Qing dynasty is that poor. Such shabby jewelry, how much can you trade them for?”

Xian weakly says,

“This is my business.”

Noble Consort Gao replies,

“Your business? If this is your business, naturally, I will not ask any questions. But you should know there are rules in the Forbidden City. Stealing items from the palace is a major crime! Regardless of the who the jewelry belongs to, as long as they leave the palace, they belong to the palace. The eunuch took these via the Shengwu Gate to peddle them. This is smuggling! It’s theft!”

Xian begs her,

“Noble Consort, my younger brother, who was in prison is very ill. He needs money for treatments. Hence, I’m forced to sell my jewelry. I didn’t violate any intent of the palace. Could you be magnanimous and let me go out to sell the jewelry. Regard this as saving a person’s life. I will always remember your kindness.”

In reply to Xian’s request, Gao scoffs and forces Xian to kneel and beg for her to be magnanimous. Furthermore, Gao tells her that by doing her this favor, she must regard her as a sister and companion. Alluding to the fact that Xian must take her side in the power struggle against Empress Xiaoxian. However, Consort Xian cries, saying,

“I won’t participate in the strife in the harem. I won’t do that!”

This leads Gao to reply,

“Fine. I can only handle this according to the rules of the palace then.”

Gao’s party of eunuchs and maids destroys Consort Xian’s jewelry leaving her and the maid kneeling on the ground crying.

Consort Xian’s hesitations cause her to be caught by Gao and not receive the money to give to her family. A few episodes later, Consort Xian finds out that Empress Xiaoxian previously wanted to help her by sending money secretly, but she is afraid of being caught and tainting her image. Eventually, Xiaoxian finds a way to gift Consort Xian silver publicly, but it is too late, and Consort Xian already grows hatred towards the empress due to her inaction. The humiliation from Noble Consort Gao and inaction from Empress Xiaoxian led to the death of Xian’s brother and father, causing her mother to commit suicide in front of her. Losing her family is the catalyst in which she realizes that she has to engage in harem politics and take power in the Forbidden Palace to avoid being pressed down upon by those of higher rank, as her mother said.

Consort Xian’s obsessive ambitions and manipulation not only led to the death of Noble Consort Gao in the show but also the suicide of Empress Xiaoxian. After taking Gao down, she is elevated to Imperial Noble Consort Xian. As an Imperial Noble Consort, she uses the power of her position to manipulate Consort Chun, who also rose to Imperial Noble Consort Chun after having a child. Xian told Chun that the newly born son of the empress, 7th prince Yongcong, was highly favored and would most likely be the crown prince. Since Chun had just given birth, she wanted her son to be considered for the throne. Thus, Xian implying that the empress’ son was already set as the crown prince, prompts Consort Chun to kill Yongcong in infancy. In history, Empress Xiaoxian did lose both of her sons, Yonglian and Yongcong. The *Yanxi* writers capitalized on the real-life loss of Yongcong to write a suicide storyline for Empress Xiaoxian.

***The Suicide of Empress Xiaoxian in Yanxi: Imperial Noble Consort Xian & Chun’s Fictional Deed Shines a Light on Commoner Women of the Qing Dynasty***

Throughout the show, the fictional Empress Xiaoxian is portrayed as struggling with the death of her children. As well as from the restrictions and heavy responsibilities she had as the empress. In *Yanxi*, the death of Yongcong is the final catalyst that drove her to suicide. Although the real-life Empress Xiaoxian did not die from suicide, the idea that a woman would commit suicide after the death of a loved one, such as a husband or child, was not abnormal during the Qing dynasty. In his book titled *Women in Imperial China* author Bret Hinsch records his findings in the *Qingshi gao* (Draft of Qing History). He finds that women who were commoners committed suicide after the death of a key person in their lives, and they did so also to avoid rape or kidnapping if they became a widow.[[103]](#footnote-103) Hinsch claims in some parts of the Qing dynasty, there was a mania over women’s chastity and faithfulness to their husbands and children.[[104]](#footnote-104) This is why in *Yanxi*, the suicide of the first Empress after the loss of her son is valid since she felt like a bad wife and mother for not protecting her own children. This feeling of not being good enough was amplified due to her role as empress. As the empress, she was considered the mother of the whole dynasty. Although it is not historically accurate, the suicide plot point is one that women in the Qing dynasty may have faced.

Moreover, the jealousy of Consort Chun over Qianlong’s love for Xiaoxian and their child in *Yanxi*, which led her to kill Prince Yongcong, is not farfetched since real-life actions from both Qianlong and Empress Xiaoxian proved they maintained a loving relationship. In an analysis of a poem Qianlong wrote after Xiaoxian died, Jan Stuart and Daisy Yiyou Wang argue that “Xiaoxian was Qianlong’s childhood sweetheart, a soul mate with whom he shared his thoughts and feelings and who had stayed by his bedside for months when he was seriously ill,”[[105]](#footnote-105) sentiments clearly portrayed in episode nineteen of *Yanxi*.

After Qianlong developed chicken pox, all consorts were ordered to stay away from him. Empress Xiaoxian lied to the other consorts that she had it before and could not get it again. She did this as a way to take care of him in his palace while he was sick. For days she nursed him all night long and hurt her wrist from fanning him for too many hours.[[106]](#footnote-106) The real-life Qianlong and Empress Xiaoxian did have touching moments, like in episode nineteen of *Yanxi*, prompting researchers to believe they truly loved one another. For example, when Empress Xiaoxian died in 1747, Qianlong ordered mourning over the whole empire. He punished those who failed to grieve properly, and he wrote poems about her for the rest of his life.[[107]](#footnote-107)

After her death Qianlong visited her coffin “more than fifty times to perform commemorative rites.”[[108]](#footnote-108) When he visited her old residence he often felt overcome with grief. The grief he experienced often translated into the poetry he wrote about Xiaoxian.[[109]](#footnote-109) He wrote over 100 elegies for her and often re-read them in the later stages of his life to remember her.[[110]](#footnote-110) Once after a visit to her old residence he wrote a poem titled “Expressing My Grief” it says,

“During her funeral service,

I grieved to no avail….

Alas! Sorrow laced with sorrow;

To be seperated in life!

Having lost my wife.

Who will follow me now?

When entering her bedroom,

I inhale sadness,

I climb behind her phoenix-bed-curtains,

Yet they hang to no avail.

The romance of the spring breeze

And the autumn moon

All ends here.

Summer days and winter nights

Spent with her.

Will never come again.”[[111]](#footnote-111)

Throughout his lifetime Qianlong was a prolific writer and scholar who authored hundreds of pieces of literature; thus, it is no surprise he wrote to deal with his grief. In the book, *Daily Life in the Forbidden City* by Yi Wan, Shuqing Wang, and Yanzhen Li describe the differences in the works written by Qianlong when he was a prince versus an emperor. As a prince, Qianlong’s poetry is described as having a “freshness and charm” to them.[[112]](#footnote-112) However, after he became an emperor, his poetry was described as simple, straightforward, and often had political undertones.[[113]](#footnote-113) But, through poems like “Expressing My Grief,” Qianlong offers readers his literary charm by comparing his everlasting love for Empress Xiaoxian to the earth’s consistent seasonal changes. The difference in how much reverence he treated Empress Xiaoxian after her death, in contrast to how he treated Step Empress Nara after her death shows that Qianlong cared for certain women more than others. The differences in Qianlong’s love for the various women of the court is highlighted in the latter part of the show.

***Mixing The Truth With Fiction: The Fall of Step Empress Nara & The Pheonix-Like Rise of Wei Yinglou to Empress Xiaoyichun***

Ultimately the suicide of Empress Xiaoxian is the catalyst which forces Yinglou to attack her palace enemies with more force, but as viewers watch her story they learn she is unable to do so without more power. Thus, she uses her close relationship with Empress Dowager Chongqing as a way to convince Qianlong to elevate her status. In episode forty-two, on Empress Dowager Chongqing’s birthday, Yinglou plans a special event to make her happy. Qianlong then proposes raising her from a palace made to a Second Class Attendant (8th rank). However, since the Empress Dowager was so pleased by Yinglou’s actions, she convinces him to raise her to Noble Lady Wei (6th rank).[[114]](#footnote-114) This was a large and unusually quick jump in rank for a palace maid. After becoming a consort, she gains the love and favor of Qianlong, whom she takes a while to warm up to but eventually falls in love with.

Historically, there is not much written about the real-life Empress Xiaoyichun. It is unclear exactly when she entered the palace. Nevertheless, Qing historical scholars often note how fertile she was as an indication of how much time she spent with the emperor as a consort. It is clear the two engaged in fervent sexual activities, which led her to bear “four sons and two daughters in the decade between 1756 and 1766.”[[115]](#footnote-115) The number of children she gave birth to can be an indication of the good relations the two had, but this is not certain. In 1765, she was elevated to the status of Imperial Noble Consort and lived as such for a decade before she died at 47 years old.[[116]](#footnote-116) It could be a pure coincidence or an intentional act from the Qianlong emperor, but in 1765 the same year that Consort Ling was raised to an Imperial Noble Consort, is the same year that Step-Empress Nara greatly angered him and disgraced herself. In 1765 during a trip to Hangzhou with the emperor, it is said that Step-Empress Nara and Qianlong had a dispute, and out of resentment, she cut off her hair in front of him. He then sent her back to Beijing on her own and shunned her.[[117]](#footnote-117)

***The Harshness of Losing Favor: Step-Empress Nara’s Fall From Grace***

The particular event in which Nara angers Qianlong is shown in *Story of Yanxi Palac*e, episodes sixty-nine and seventy. In the show, the argument came about as a result of the Step-Empress’ extreme jealousy of Wei Yinglou (Noble Consort Ling) for being loved by Qianlong, while he barely showed her affection even through she became the empress. This resentment led Step-Empress Nara to work with Qianlong’s brother, Prince He of First Rank, to plan a coup during the Hangzhou trip. Ultimately, her plot was revealed in front of Qianlong, Empress Dowager Chongqing, Noble Consort Ling, and other junior consorts.

Feeling extreme stress after being caught in such a treacherous act, Step-Empress Nara goes manic in a fit of rage. She spews out all the wrongdoings the emperor ever did to her and how no one else truly loved him as she did. She disrespects Qianlong by calling him by his given name Hongli in public. At that point, Qianlong knew she had lost all dignity, and he asked a few guards to take her away to avoid her doing any further damage to her reputation. Yet, as the guards get close, she pulls out a knife waving it around at everyone, including Noble Consort Ling![[118]](#footnote-118)

Qianlong steps in front of her calmly and says,

“Put down the knife. ”

She points it at Noble Consort Ling and says,

“Did you think I would hurt her?”

Nara looks at Qianlong, pauses, shakes her head, and cries,

“The one whom I hate the most, it’s not her. It’s you instead.”

Nara then points the knife threateningly at him and says,

“Aisin-Gioro Hongli. I hate you very much. I hate you.”

After falling to the ground, she pulls her hair out and cuts it right in front of Qianlong, Empress Dowager Chongqing, and the other consorts. Everyone in the room panics, and the junior consorts all bow, yelling,

“Your Highness the Empress!”

Consort Shun, in a panicked state, says,

“Manchu clansmen, other than for a state funeral cannot cut their hair! Crazy. Her Highness the Empress has really gone crazy!”

Empress Dowager Chongqing rises from her throne in a frantic state. She begins shaking and says,

“By doing this, you are cursing me and also the emperor!”

In response, Step-Empress Nara laughs in a crazy manner which causes Qianlong to speak finally. He says,

“The empress is arrogant and displayed signs of insanity. Escort her back to the Forbidden City now.”

The fictional Qianlong in *Yanxi* was extremely disappointed by Step-Empres Nara’s actions. He has her dragged out and removed her title as empress.[[119]](#footnote-119)

*Yanxi* showrunners followed the fall of Step-Empress Nara very closely to history. In real life, not long after the hair-cutting incident, Nara “died of illness while he [Qianlong] was on a hunt north of Beijing,” a hunt which he refused to cancel although he was aware of her illness.[[120]](#footnote-120) It is clear that after the incident, Qianlong held Hoifa-Nara in great disdain because he handled her death and funeral with little care. Although she still held the title of Step-Empress when she died, Qianlong broke the palace norm by having her son take care of her funeral observation. He then issued a statement, with similar sentiments to the last line he said to her *Yanxi*, “accusing her of mental instability.”[[121]](#footnote-121) Rather than shielding her and issuing a lie surrounding her death he publically shamed her by calling her mentally unstable. It is said that before her death, he did want to depose her, as the fictional version of him did in *Yanxi*, but officials encouraged him not to.[[122]](#footnote-122) Furthermore, after she died, Qianlong disgraced her even further by burying her as an imperial noble consort (2nd rank) and not as an empress. It is said that he “placed her in a tomb with a previously deceased imperial honored consort [Imperial Noble Consort Chun], and exiled officials who criticized his refusal to bury her properly, which would have meant interring her in the imperial mausoleum.”[[123]](#footnote-123)

In *Yanxi*, shortly after Step-Empress Nara is deposed, Wei Yinglou’s character is elevated to Imperial Noble Consort Ling, like in real life. Her character is portrayed to be extremely free-spirited, and to avoid restricting her as he did Empress Xiaoxian, he never forces her to become the next empress. The translators of *Yanxi* note after the last scene that as the highest-ranked consort, Yinglou’s character essentially does act as empress, but without the title. Then Qianlong chooses her son to become the next emperor.

To create a full-circle story, the *Story of Yanxi* writers filled in the gaps at the beginning of Empress Xiaoyichun’s life with a fictional plot. Furthermore, they explicitly kept the love Qianlong had for Empress Xiaoxian counter to the love he grew for Empress Xiaoyichun in different chronological points of the drama. Since the real Empress Xiaoxian died in 1747, it is highly likely that the real Lady Wei was a consort by then. If she were the true second love of Qianlong as the *Yanxi* writers try to portray, it would make sense that she spent time steadily rising in the ranks for 9 years after the death of Empress Xiaoxian before bearing her first child. The writers of *Yanxi* kept every important aspect of Empress Xiaoxian’s, Empress Xiaoyichun, and Step Empress Nara’s life despite little being written about each of them in court documents.

Regarding Empress Xiaoyichun specifically, the only consistent points Qing scholars write about her focus on the fact that she was the most prominent of the *booi* consorts in Qianlong’s court and was the mother of the Jiaqing emperor. Multiple facts about her life are missing, which leaves historical fiction shows like *Yanxi* to create plot points to fill in the gaps. They filled in the gaps with her fictional life as a palace maid, love for Fuca Fuheng, and friendship with palace maid Mingyu.

Throughout *Yanxi*, particular moments follow historical events closely. The imperial consort and maid selection systems, the ranking system, the respect and reverence shown between those in different ranks, the early death of Empress Xiaoxian’s children, the disappointment Qianlong felt regarding Step-Empress Nara after she cut her hair, the extremely fertile nature of Empress Xiaoyichun, and the legacy Empress Xiaoyichun and Qianlong left behind through the Jiaqing emperor. Yet, many of the plots created for entertainment purposes surround love, revenge, or resentment, which are hard to define as historically sound.[[124]](#footnote-124) Nevertheless, one thing *Yanxi* writers got right is that Qianlong’s love language was acts of service. Historically the Qianlong Emperor did important things to show his care for specific imperial women, especially after their deaths.

For Empress Xiaoxian, Qianlong mandated the entire nation to properly mourn after her death to ensure she was not disrespected in any way. He cruelly punished those who did not adhere to his rules.[[125]](#footnote-125) In addition, he wrote sentimental poetry for her and continued to write about her long after her death.[[126]](#footnote-126) Qianlong took burial and funeral services seriously, and he was intentional about whom he interred into the imperial mausoleum. There was no other emperor in both the Ming or Qing dynasty that “had as many wives buried in the mausoleum as he.”[[127]](#footnote-127) It is important to note that the women buried in the mausoleum did not have to be an empress or mother of an imperial son, and that “being a favored wife was enough.”[[128]](#footnote-128) Thus, being interred was an act that Qianlong did not have to do. Yet, he intentionally chose to do it for the women of his choice. Those that Qianlong buried in the mausoleum who are featured in *Yanxi* included Empress Xiaoxian, Imperial Concubine Jia, Noble Consort Gao, and *Yanxi* viewer's beloved Imperial Noble Consort Ling.[[129]](#footnote-129) The actions the Qianlong emperor took for specific women of the harem can be interpreted as love.

**CONCLUSION**

**Dissecting the Historical Accuracy of the *Story of Yanxi Palace* & Reasons For Its Cancellation**

After watching all seventy *Story of Yanxi Palace* episodes, viewers are often left with questions about which aspects of the drama are true and which are not. The present work has demonstrated that certain elements of *Yanxi* are clearly grounded in actual historical events. Without more English written research works that can decipher between what is grounded in real history and what is entertainment-based fiction, it is impossible for foreigners interested in the Qing dynasty to learn from more than just television. Rather than being hastily censored, Qing dynasty historical dramas, like *Yanxi,* should be picked apart and given the chance to be praised or critiqued for their best and worst parts.

Furthermore, writers of shows like *Yanxi* often promote their shows as historical fiction, not documentaries. Historical fiction means that the storyline is pure fiction, with the characters and setting being of a historical nature. With characters and settings that already have historical barrings, show writers have the opportunity to pick and choose how much they stick to history and how much they veer off. Shows such as *Yanxi* veer off in multiple aspects; nevertheless, they often chose fictional plot points that would still be culturally relevant during the Qing dynasty. This gives *Yanxi* more credibility than many of its other palace intrigue drama counterparts. Moreover, television shows that portray themselves as historical fiction should be held to a different standard than historical documentaries. Further, they should not explicitly be used as a secondary source unless the author intends to dissect the truth from the fiction in the plot, as this paper has done.

Yet, across East Asia, there is a developing case of television dramas being censored, banned, or prevented from airing due to various reasons, including historical distortion. The *Story of Yanxi Palace’s* censorship in 2018 is just one example of the many dramas being censored in China, and Chinese television officials rarely give reasons why. Yet, after reviewing the major plot points and characters against historical documents, historical inaccuracy could not have been the main reason for its censorship. By looking at the cultural and political climate of China around the time *Yanxi* aired, one will find that its cancellation was due to more than just historical distortion. Geng Song finds a quote from the *Bejing Daily* of an official criticizing the palace intrigue drama sub-genre as a whole but more specifically addresses everything *Yanxi* did wrong for Chinese culture. The quote says,

“[The show] makes the emperor's lifestyle fashionable and something to strive for, pollutes modern society with the concubines' back-stabbing mentality, beautifies imperial China while ignoring the heroes of today, [and] glorifies luxury while attacking thriftiness and hard work.”[[130]](#footnote-130)

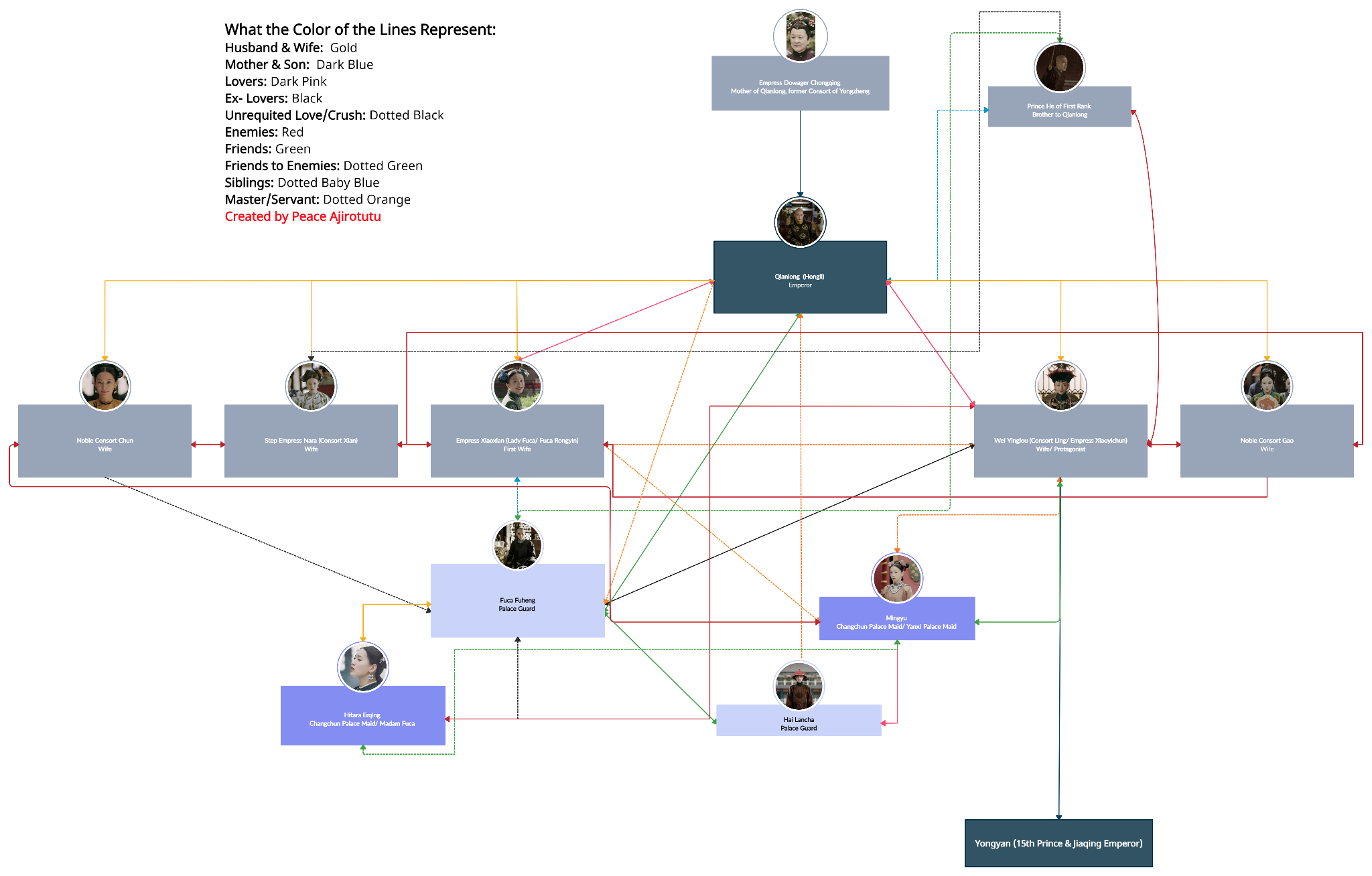
This quote opens up a deeper understanding of why *Yanxi* could have been censored.

In a snowball effect from *Story of Yanxi Palace* and *Ruyi’s Royal Love in The Palace*, both dramas which featured Empress Xiaoyichun and Step-Empress Nara as the protagonists respectively, viewers both outside and inside of China became intensely interested in Qing dynasty harem culture. Usually, added interest in Chinese history due to television programs would not lead to scrutiny from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). However, if a show impacts party movements or programs, the party takes action. The mega-success *Yanxi* and *Ruyi* came in the same year as the CCP celebrated its 40th anniversary of reform and opening up and were ultimately censored around the time the Republic of China celebrated its 70th anniversary.[[131]](#footnote-131) As stated by the quote in the *Beijing Daily*, it was problematic for the success of historical figures from the Qing dynasty to overshadow those of the communist party.[[132]](#footnote-132) It was an issue for the national party by the end of 2018 that Manchurian culture, conquest over China, and polygamy were all being glorified on Weibo and Google, while the national propaganda was focused on communist heroes like Deng Xiaoping. Thus, it was inevitable that *Yanxi’s* extreme success led to censorship.

Ultimately, the *Story of Yanxi Palace* fell due to the crime of being aired in the wrong place at the wrong time. The censorship of *Yanxi* was a great disservice not only to the actors, producers, and airing companies that worked on the show. But for the viewers in China who may have loved the show and can not access it now. *Yanxi’s* international success could have been a teaching moment for foreigners about the history of women in the Qing dynasty. Particularly because shows like *Yanxi* portray bold interpretations of imperial women who are often forgotten in Chinese history. Women in the royal palaces of all great Chinese dynasties are often glanced over or ignored altogether by historians and non-historians alike. In the case of Qianlong’s court, there are extensive court documents regarding the emperor’s poetry, military strategies, and international relations. Yet, there is a sparsity when it comes to the high-ranking women of his palace. Moreover, the palace maids, consorts who did not have a high rank, or consorts who did not have children were often purposefully left out by court historians and genealogists. If historical fiction show creators are not allowed to fill in the gaps left out by history, viewers may never get a chance to learn about the existence of women in imperial China.

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   Note: Within this work “consort” is used as an umbrella term for all consorts, concubines, lady’s, and attendants other than the empress. Through my research I have found that most scholars choose to use either consort or concubine when discussing all women of the harem other than the empress. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Baptista,“Will China’s hit period drama ‘Yanxi Palace’ face censorship?” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Song, “Womanhood and the Many Faces of Chineseness,” 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
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14. The Story of Yanxi Palace, “Episodes 1-70.” [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Song, “Womanhood and the Many Faces of Chineseness,” 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Song, “Womanhood and the Many Faces of Chineseness,” 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Daisy Yiyou Wang and Jan Stuart, “Rediscovering the Empresses of Qing China, 1644-1912” in *Empresses of China’s Forbidden City 1644 - 1912,* ed. Daisy Yiyou Wang and Jan Stuard (Salem: Peabody Essex Museum, 2018), 21-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The Story of Yanxi Palace, “Episodes 1-70.” [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The Story of Yanxi Palace, “Episodes 1-70.” [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. The Story of Yanxi Palace, “Episodes 1-70.” [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. The Story of Yanxi Palace, “Episodes 1-70.” [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The Story of Yanxi Palace, “Episode 1.” [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Daisy Yiyou Wang and Jan Stuart, “Rediscovering the Empresses of Qing China, 1644-1912” in *Empresses of China’s Forbidden City 1644 - 1912* ed. Daisy Yiyou Wang and Jan Stuart. (Salem: Peabody Essex Museum, 2018), 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Daisy Yiyou Wang and Jan Stuary, *Empresses of China’s Forbidden City*, 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Daisy Yiyou Wang and Jan Stuary, *Empresses of China’s Forbidden City*, 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Daisy Yiyou Wang and Jan Stuary, *Empresses of China’s Forbidden City*, 70; The Story of Yanxi Palace, episodes 1-70. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. MZTV Exclusive Chinese Drama, YouTube, accessed September 2nd, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rEqXv7Ln_Pk&list=PLpghCOjR4QqrXK0LFFZTRWderhQ4vkzVa&ab_channel=MZTVExclusiveChineseDrama>; “Hanfu Drawing - Twelve Beauties of the Qing Dynasty.” NewHanfu, accessed January 7, 2023, <https://www.newhanfu.com/6432.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Daisy Yiyou Wang and Jan Stuary, *Empresses of China’s Forbidden City*, 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Daisy Yiyou Wang and Jan Stuary, *Empresses of China’s Forbidden City*, 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Shuo Wang, “Qing Imperial Women: Empresses, Concubines, and Aisin Gioro Daughters,” in *Servants of the Dynasty: Palace Women in World History*, ed. Anne Walthall (Berkely: University of California Press, 2008), 137-154. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Shuo Wang “Qing Imperial Women,” 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Shuo Wang, “The Selection of Women for the Qing Imperial Harem,” *The Chinese Historical Review* 11, no.2 (Fall 2004): 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Wang, “The Selection of Women for the Qing Imperial Harem,” 83-84. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Shuo Wang, “Qing Palace Women and Manchu Ethnicity,” *Symposium on the Imperial Court of China, Japan, and Korea: Women, Servants, and the Emperor’s Household (1600-early 1900s)*, (San Francisco: n.p. 2013), 7 [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Wang, “Qing Palace Women and Manchu Ethnicity,” 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Wang, “Qing Palace Women and Manchu Ethnicity,” 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Wang, “The Selection of Women for the Qing Imperial Harem,” 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Wang, “Qing Imperial Women,” 141-142. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Wang, “Qing Imperial Women,” 141-142. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Wang, “Qing Imperial Women,” 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Wang, “Qing Imperial Women,” 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Evelyn Rawski, “Palace Servants” in *The Last Emperor: a Social History of Qing Imperial Institution*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). 166 - 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Evelyn Rawski, “Palace Servants,” 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Evelyn Rawski, “Palace Servants,” 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Evelyn Rawski, “Palace Servants,” 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Shuo Wang, “Qing Imperial Women: Empresses, Concubines, and Aisin Gioro Daughters,” 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Shuo Wang, “Qing Imperial Women: Empresses, Concubines, and Aisin Gioro Daughters,” 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Shuo Wang, “Qing Imperial Women: Empresses, Concubines, and Aisin Gioro Daughters,” 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Shuo Wang, “Qing Imperial Women: Empresses, Concubines, and Aisin Gioro Daughters,” 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Evelyn Rawski, Chapter 5: Ch’ing Imperial Marriage and Problems of Rulership in *Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society,* ed*.* Rubie S. Watson, Patricia B. Ebrey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).184. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Evelyn Rawski, Chapter 5: Ch’ing Imperial Marriage and Problems of Rulership in *Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society,* ed*.* Rubie S. Watson, Patricia B. Ebrey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).184. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. The Story of Yanxi Palace, "Episode 1," *Viki* video, 45:26, July 19, 2018, <https://www.viki.com/videos/1140335v-story-of-yanxi-palace-episode-1>. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. The Story of Yanxi Palace, “Episode 1.” [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Ibid; Note: Since Uya’s family banner status is higher than Jixian’s she must call her “young mistress” even though Uya has not yet been selected as an imperial consort. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. The Story of Yanxi Palace, “Episode 1.” 16:55 - 25:50. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. The Story of Yanxi Palace, “Episode 1.” [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. The Story of Yanxi Palace, “Episode 1”; T/N means “Translators Note” which are written notes in the subtitle from the “The Gentle Empress Team” on Viki giving context, definition, or meaning to certain concepts. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Note: between noble women, they referred to one another as 姐姐 (*jiejie*), which translates to sister, this carried over into the imperial consorts addressing those of the same rank or those of higher rank they were close to. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Keith McMahon, “From Yongzheng to Xianfeng, 1722-1861,” in *Celestial Women: Imperial Wives and Concubines in China from Song to Qing* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 191; Rawski, “Ch’ing Imperial Marriage and Problems of Rulership,” 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Evelyn Rawski, “Imperial Women” in *The Last Emperor: a Social History of Qing Imperial Institution*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Evelyn Rawski, “Imperial Women” in *The Last Emperor: a Social History of Qing Imperial Institution*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Rawski, “Ch’ing Imperial Marriage and Problems of Rulership,” 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Note: *Hanjun* are individuals who had a Manchu paternity and Han Chinese maternity; Wang, “Qing Imperial Women: Empresses, Concubines, and Aisin Gioro Daughters,” 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Wang, “Qing Imperial Women: Empresses, Concubines, and Aisin Gioro Daughters,” 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Wang, “Qing Imperial Women: Empresses, Concubines, and Aisin Gioro Daughters,” 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. The Story of Yanxi Palace, “Episode 1.” [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. The Story of Yanxi Palace, “Episode 1.” [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. The Story of Yanxi Palace, “Episode 1.” [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Wang, “Qing Imperial Women: Empresses, Concubines, and Aisin Gioro Daughters,” 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. John R.Shepard, “The Qing, the Manchus, and Footbinding: Sources and Assumptions under Scrutiny,” *Frontiers of History in China* 11, 2 (July 2016): 279. doi: <https://doi.org/10.3868/s020-005-016-0014-5> [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. John R.Shepard, “The Qing, the Manchus, and Footbinding: Sources and Assumptions under Scrutiny,” *Frontiers of History in China* 11, 2 (July 2016): 279. doi: <https://doi.org/10.3868/s020-005-016-0014-5> [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Rawski, “Imperial Women,” 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Rawski, “Imperial Women,” 131-132. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Rawksi, “Imperial Women,” 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Rawski “Imperial Women,”132. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. The Story of Yanxi Palace. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Rawski, “Imperial Women,” 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. See: “Portraits of the Qianlong Emperor and His Twelve Consorts” at [The Cleveland Museaum.](https://www.clevelandart.org/art/1969.31) [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Rawski, “Imperial Women,” 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Lin Shu,“Empress Dowager Chongqing and the Palace of Longevity and Health,” in *Empresses of China’s Forbidden City, 1644-1912.* ed. Daisy Yiyou Wang and Jan Stuart (Salem: Peabody Essex Museum, 2018), 84.; Ying-Chen Peng, “Empresses and Qing Court Politics,” in *Empresses of China’s Forbidden City, 1644-1912.* ed. Daisy Yiyou Wang and Jan Stuart (Salem: Peabody Essex Museum, 2018), 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. The Story of Yanxi Palace, “Episodes 1-70.” [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Rawski, “Imperial Women,” 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Luk Yu Ping, “Qing Emperesses as Religious Patrons and Practitioners” in *Empresses of China’s Forbidden City, 1644-1912.* ed. Daisy Yiyou Wang and Jan Stuart (Salem: Peabody Essex Museum, 2018), 112-113. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. McMahon, “From Yongzheng to Xianfeng, 1722-1861,” 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. McMahon, “From Yongzheng to Xianfeng, 1722-1861,” 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. McMahon, “From Yongzheng to Xianfeng, 1722-1861,” 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. McMahon, “From Yongzheng to Xianfeng, 1722-1861,” 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. The Story of Yanxi Palace, “Episodes 1-40.” [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. The Story of Yanxi Palace, “Episodes 1-40.” [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. The Story of Yanxi Palace, “Episode 1.” [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. McMahon, ““From Yongzheng to Xianfeng, 1722-1861,” 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. McMahon, ““From Yongzheng to Xianfeng, 1722-1861,” 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. McMahon, ““From Yongzheng to Xianfeng, 1722-1861,” 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. Note: Chengqian Palace was one of the 6 palaces in the Forbidden City where many imperial consorts resided. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Note: There was no physical “Cold Palace,” it was a metaphorical term used in the Forbidden City to refer to a consorts residence when she had fallen out of favor with the emperor or he had not visited her in a long time. This term was used a great deal in *Yanxi* to signify to viewers when a consort was out of favor with Qianlong. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. The Story of Yanxi Palace, “Episode 1.” [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. Bret Hinsch, “Pondering Possibilities: Qing China,” in *Women in Imperial China*, (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Note: The particular maiden name and clan that Step-Empress Nara is portrayed as in *Yanxi* is from the Hoifa-Nara clan, there was also an Ula-Nara clan. Scholars debate over whether the real life step-empress maiden name as Ula or Hoifa. *The Draft History of Qing* names her as Ula, but this is a contested version of history. Rival 2018 Chinese drama about Qianlong’s court, *Ruyi’s Love in the Royal Palace,* portray Step-Empress Nara as “Ula-Nara” while *Yanxi* chooses “Hoifa-Nara.” [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. Rawski, “Imperial Women,” 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Rawski, “Imperial Women,” 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. Rawski, “Imperial Women,” 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. Rawski, “Imperial Women,” 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. Hinsch, “Pondering Possibilities: Qing China,” 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. Hinsch, “Pondering Possibilities: Qing China,” 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. Daisy Yiyou Wang and Jan Stuart, “Plates” in *Empresses of China’s Forbidden City 1644 - 1912,* ed. Daisy Yiyou Wang and Jan Stuart (Salem: Peabody Essex Museum, 2018), 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. The Story of Yanxi Palace, “Episode 19.” [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. The Story of Yanxi Palace, “Episode 19.” [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. Wang and Stuart, “Plates,” 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. Wang and Stuart, “Plates,” 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. Wang and Stuart, “Plates,” 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. Wang and Stuart, “Plates,” 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. Yi Wan, Shuqing Wang, and Yanzhen Li, “Cultural Activities,” in *Daily Life in the Forbidden City* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1988). 211. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. Yi, Wang, and Li, “Cultural Activities,” 211. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. The Story of Yanxi Palace, “Episode 42.” [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. McMahon, “From Yongzheng to Xianfeng, 1722-1861,” 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. McMahon, “From Yongzheng to Xianfeng, 1722-1861,” 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. McMahon, “From Yongzheng to Xianfeng, 1722-1861,” 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. The Story of Yanxi Palace, “Episode 70.” [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. The Story of Yanxi Palace, “Episode 70.” [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. McMahon, “From Yongzheng to Xianfeng, 1722-1861,” 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. McMahon, “From Yongzheng to Xianfeng, 1722-1861,” 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. McMahon, “From Yongzheng to Xianfeng, 1722-1861,” 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. McMahon, “From Yongzheng to Xianfeng, 1722-1861,” 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. The Story of Yanxi Palace, “Episodes 1-70.” [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. McMahon, “From Yongzheng to Xianfeng, 1722-1861,” 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
126. Wang and Stuart, “Plates,” 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
127. McMahon, “From Yongzheng to Xianfeng, 1722-1861,” 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
128. McMahon, “From Yongzheng to Xianfeng, 1722-1861,” 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
129. McMahon, “From Yongzheng to Xianfeng, 1722-1861,” 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
130. Song, “Womanhood and the Many Faces of Chineseness,” 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
131. Lu Xixi, “China's Costume Drama Television Ban Is A Political Mystery” *World Crunch*, July 13, 2019. <https://worldcrunch.com/culture-society/china39s-costume-drama-television-ban-is-a-political-mystery> [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
132. Song, “Womanhood and the Many Faces of Chineseness,” 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-132)