

The Selection of Women for the Qing Imperial Harem

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THROUGHOUT Chinese history, emperors and their decedents often possessed countless women in the harem as a symbol of power. Where did these women come from? What criteria were used to find women for the harem? In the early period of Chinese history, emperors usually selected their marriage partners from the families of high-ranking officials.¹ Establishing marriage relations between imperial family and the social elite was an effective way to consolidate the power of the ruling house. Yet there are many examples that illustrate that consorts' relatives often tried to take advantage of their connections to develop their own power at court. After the Song dynasty (960-1279), imperial consorts were generally selected from the lower rank of elite and even from commoners in order to reduce the potential power of consort families.² As for the conquest dynasties established by non-Han people, ethnic background of

¹ Jennifer Holmgren, "Imperial Marriage in the Native Chinese and Non-Han State: Han to Ming," in *Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society*, eds. Rubie S. Watson and Patricia Buckley Ebrey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 58-96.

² Zhang Bangwei, "Shilun Songdai 'hunyin bu wen fayue'" [Examination of the Song words "not considering family rank in marriage"], *Song Liao Jin Yuan shi* [History of Song, Liao, Jin and Yuan Dynasties], 2 (1986), 21-36; Ellen Soulliere, "Palace Women in the Ming Dynasty" (Ph. D. dissertation, Princeton University, 1987).

consorts was also emphasized to maintain the ethnic purity of the ruling house.³ In the following pages, I will discuss the selection of imperial consorts during the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), when the Manchus ruled China as an ethnic minority. I will focus on the *xiunu* (秀女) system, the most well-known system to choose women for the harem.

What Was the *Xiunu* System?

XIUNU can be literally translated as “elegant females” or “beautiful females”.⁴ According to Qing statutes, every three years all the Manchu women between thirteen and sixteen *sui* were required to present themselves at the Forbidden City in Beijing for imperial selection.⁵ Before the selection, the Board of Revenue sent requests to the banner officials in the capital and in the provincial garrisons. With the help of clan heads, the banner officials submitted a list of all the available women to the Banner Commanders Headquarters in Beijing (*dutong yamen* 都统衙门) and the Board of Revenue (*hubu* 户部). The Board of Revenue then set a date for

³ After the tenth century, there were five conquest dynasties: Liao by Khitan (907-1125); Xi Xia by Tanguts (990-1227); Jin by Jurchen (1115-1234); Yuan by Mongols (1260-1368); and Qing by Manchus (1644-1911).

⁴ “*Xiunu*” in Manchu is called *sargan jui*, simply meaning “the daughters.” Mark Elliott points out that the Chinese term is more sophisticated than it is in Manchu language. Mark C. Elliott, *The Manchu Way: The Eight Banners and Ethnic Identity in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 473, note 84. The different wording may help us to better understand the cultural implications by the Chinese and Manchus.

⁵ I consider all the people in banners as Manchus, regardless of their original ethnic background. A comparison between a Chinese in banners and the one outside reveals the broad distinctions between them while there was little difference between bannermen in different division of banners. Therefore, the key point of being a Manchu was to register in banners. For more information about ethnic identity of banner people, see Pamela K. Crossley, “*Manzhou yuanliu kao* and the Formalization of the Manchu Heritage.” *Journal of Asian Studies*, 46.4 (Nov. 1987); Frederic Wakeman, *The Great Enterprise: The Manchu Reconstruction of Imperial Order in Seventeenth-Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), vol. 2, 1017; Ding Yizhuang, *Manzu de funu shenghuo yu hunyin zhidu yanjiu* [The Study of Manchu Women’s Life and Marriage System] (Beijing, 1999), 331; Jin Qicong, *Beijing jiaoqu de Manzu* [The Manchus in Beijing Suburb], (Huhhot, 1989), 40-41; and Elliott, *The Manchu Way*, 14-15, 133.

the selection. On the appointed day, girls were brought by their parents or relatives, together with their clan heads and local banner officials, to the Shenwu Gate of the Forbidden City to await selection.⁶ Qing statutes do not state how and by whom the *xiunu* would be inspected. Other sources indicate that they were first inspected by court officials who matched those present against the list and chose as many as they needed to serve the palace.⁷ Some were immediately rejected and then were free to marry other bannermen with approval of their parents and the banner leaders. Those who passed the initial inspection were called *jiming* (记名, registered) or *liupai* (留牌, keep the card) and would stay in the palace.⁸ During the next five years, they would go through a series of further inspections for their family background and birth dates to see if their *bazi* (八字, eight characters) would match with the person they were about to marry. Those eliminated at this time were called *liaopai* (撂牌, turn down the card). Those that remained in the palace as imperial consorts candidates had no daily expenses and were provided one tael of silver per month as stipend until they were either promoted to the harem or released from the palace.⁹

The purpose of *xiunu* selection was to guarantee the Qing emperors and princes the best marriage partners. One may wonder why the Manchu rulers did not choose *xiunu* from all the population they ruled, but limited the selection from banners. Actually, the first Qing emperors did choose their consorts from a broader stratum. The *xiunu* system came out decades later after the Qing dynasty was founded in order to accommodate the new social and cultural circumstance.

Background of Establishing the *Xiunu* System

ONE of the key points of the *xiunu* system was that all the women being inspected had to register in banners and be Manchu. In other words, the

⁶ *Da Qing huidian shili*, (Qianlong edition, 1764), 154:13a-b.

⁷ Elliott, *The Manchu Way*, 254.

⁸ According to Wu Zhenyu, each girl had an informational card with her when she was brought in the palace. The card had her father's name on it, as well as the banner she belonged to, and her age, etc. Wu Zhenyu, *Yangjizhai cong lu* [Notes from the Yangji studio], (Hangzhou, 1985, reprint), 274.

⁹ *Da Qing huidian shili*, (Guangxu edition, 1899), (Shanghai, 1934, reprint), 1114:12.

ethnic identity of future imperial consorts was emphasized. However, during the first years of their settlement in China proper, the Manchu rulers chose their wives and concubines from a broad social and ethnic stratum, with the majority coming from Manchu or Mongol elite families.¹⁰ For example, two women among the nineteen consorts in Shunzhi emperor's harem were Chinese.¹¹ The Kangxi emperor also took a Chinese woman, the local official Wang Guozheng's daughter, as a concubine.¹² The Yongzheng emperor had a Chinese concubine when he was a prince and granted this concubine an official title (*Qi fei*, 齐妃) after succeeding to the throne in 1723.¹³ It seems that during the first decades of the Qing dynasty, ethnic background of imperial consorts was not considered such a significant matter.

In the early Qing, the Manchu rulers had no intention to monopoly marriage over all the Manchu women, like what they did later under the *xiunu* system. The law tolerated Manchu women marrying Chinese men as long as they informed the responsible officials. According to an imperial decree issued by the Shunzhi emperor in 1648, "Manchu officials' daughters who want to marry Han should inform the Board of Revenue . . . common bannermen's daughters who want to marry Han, if they have registered in Board of Revenue, need to get approval from the Board of Revenue. If they have not registered with Board of Revenue, the captain of

¹⁰ No source is available about how the Manchu rulers selected their wives and concubines before the *xiunu* system was established. According to the bibliography of imperial consorts of *Qingshigao*, most of high-ranking consorts in the Shunzhi and Kangxi's harems were from Mongol and Manchu elite families while the lower-ranking consorts showed various social and ethnic backgrounds.

¹¹ One of them, *Ke fei*, was the daughter of Chinese official Shi Shen who served the Qing court as *shilang* (vice president) of the Board of Personnel. Zhao Erxun, *Qingshigao* [The draft of Qing history], (Beijing, 1976-77), 214:8910. The other Chinese consort in the Shunzhi emperor's harem was *Chen shi*, whose father's name is unknown. See Wang Peihuan, *Qinggong houfei* (The empresses and concubines in the Qing palace), (Shenyang: Liaoning daxue chubanshe, 1993), 335. The number of consorts only reflected those recorded in the imperial genealogy and buried in consort tombs. According to another source, the total number of the Shunzhi emperor's empresses and consorts was thirty-two. See Evelyn S. Rawski, *The Last Emperors: A Social History of Qing Imperial Institutions*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 142, Table 6.

¹² Wang, *Qinggong houfei*, 337.

¹³ Wang, *Qinggong houfei*, 341.

the banner company (*niru janggin*) to which they belong has the right to marry them out.”¹⁴

It is not known when the Qing court issued new policies prohibiting Manchu women from marrying Chinese men. It is also uncertain when the Manchu rulers established a marriage system in which all the young women in banners had to be selected by the imperial house before their marriages were arranged. What we do know is that adjustments of marriage policies during the Qing dynasty always reflected the urgent need of the rulers to further Qing political and ethnic interests. By the eighteenth century, the Manchu rulers began to see signs of sinicization among the common banner population. Once-feared Manchu bannermen were becoming “soft” and fascinated by Chinese language, literature, art, and food. By the mid-eighteenth century, “martial skills among city-dwelling bannermen hit new lows; ability in the Manchu language withered; horses were slaughtered for soup meat. From a cultural perspective, the differences between conqueror and conquered were fading fast.”¹⁵ Starting from the Yongzheng emperor (r. 1723-1735), saving the race of Manchu by maintaining its culture and ethnic identities had gradually become priority of the state. *Guoyu qishe* (国语骑射, Manchu language and shooting arrows from horseback) was emphasized because bannermen’s “children and grandchildren, unable to ride, will become useless people.”¹⁶ Despite all the emperors’ efforts, Manchu acculturation continued to take its toll. At the same time the number of intermarriages between Chinese and the Manchus was increasing. Facing this problem in the general banner populations, the Manchu rulers increased vigilance of ethnic boundaries between the inner court and the outside world. They attempted to keep ethnic purity of the imperial lineage and make the inner court an ethnic preserve for the emperors and princes—the core Manchu elite.

Inquiry on the Date When the *Xiunu* System Started

¹⁴ *Da Qing Shizu Zhang (Shunzhi) huangdi shilu* [The veritable records of the emperor Shizu], (Taipei: Huanwen shuju, 1964, reprint), 40:14 a-b.

¹⁵ Mark C. Elliott, “Manchu Widows and Ethnicity in Qing China.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. 41.1 (January 1999), 65.

¹⁶ *Qianlong chao Manwen zhupi zouzhe* [Palace memorials in Manchu from the Qianlong reign], First Historical Archives, Beijing. Cited in Elliott, *The Manchu Way*, 271.

WHEN discussing the practice of the *xiunu* selection, scholars of Qing history believe that the system dates to the Shunzhi reign (1644-1662).¹⁷ This conclusion is based on the Guangxu edition of the *Da Qing huidian shili* (大清会典事例, Collected institutes and precedents of the Qing), which recorded that “the *xiunu* system began in the Shunzhi reign”.¹⁸ However, when we look closer, some questions come up. First, the earliest primary sources mentioning the Qing *xiunu* selection are found in *Guochao gongshi* (国朝宫史, History of Qing court), *Qinding baqi zeli* (钦定八旗则例, Regulations of the Eight Banners), and *Da Qing huidian zeli* (大清会典则例, Collected regulation and precedents of the Qing), all these books were edited during the Qianlong period (1736-1795).¹⁹ If *xiunu* selection indeed started in the Shunzhi period, why was there no record about it in earlier editions (Kangxi and Yongzheng) of *Da Qing huidian shili*?²⁰ Why was there also no record about it in other sources before the Qianlong reign, for example, in *Qing shilu* (清实录, Qing veritable records)—a reliable source about court lives, imperial decrees, policies, and significant events?²¹ Lack of contemporary records of *xiunu* selection implies that the system did not exist until later.

¹⁷ Shan Shiyuan, “Guanyu Qing gong de xiunu he gongnu” [Xiunu and gongnu in the Qing palace]. *Gugong bowuyuan yuankan*, (1960), 2:98; Wang Shuqing, “Qingdai houfei zhidu zhong de jige wenti” [Some questions about the system of imperial consorts in the Qing dynasty]. *Gugong bowuyuan yuankan*, (1980), 1:40; Wang Daocheng, “Cong Xue Pan song mei daixuan tanqi—guanyu Qingdaide xiunu zhidu” [The case of Xue Pan’s sending his younger sister to await selection — On the Qing *xiunu* system]. *Beijing shiyuan*, [Beijing History] (Beijing, 1985), 3:307; Rawski, *The Last Emperors*, 131 and “Ch’ing Imperial Marriage and Problems of Rulership,” 183, in Watson and Ebrey, *Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society*, 170-203. Another scholar believes that the first *xiunu* selection took place in 1653 when the Shunzhi emperor chose his second empress. See Wei Qi, “Qingdai diyici xuan xiunu” [The first *xiunu* selection in the Qing]. *Zijin Cheng*, (1984), 26:20.

¹⁸ *Da Qing huidian shili*, (Guangxu edition), 1114:12.

¹⁹ *Guochao gongshi* was edited by Ortai and Zhang Tingyu in 1742 and finished twenty-seven years later. *Qinding baqi zeli* was also edited by Ortai and published in 1742. *Da Qing huidian zeli* was published in 1747.

²⁰ Ding Yizhuang originally raised the question in her book. Ding, *Manzu de funu shenghuo*, 225.

²¹ The first record of *xiunu* selection in *Qing shilu* is found in *Qing Gaozong Chun (Qianlong) huangdi shilu* [The veritable records of the emperor Gaozong], 120:39a-b.

Under the *xiunu* system the majority of the chosen young women were married to Qing princes and other men of the imperial clan. However, there is no record about how these women's marriages were arranged until 1801 when the Jiaqing emperor issued a decree regarding this matter. "My deceased father [the Qianlong emperor] gave them to the men from the twenty-four lineages that derived from Shengzu [the Kangxi emperor]. I shall follow this tradition and give them to the men who derived from Shizong [the Yongzheng emperor]. It shall be set as law hereafter."²² This is the earliest record I have found.²³

Other sources also raise questions about the date when the *xiunu* system started. According to Qing statutes all the young women in banners, except those with physical disability or deformity, went through the process of *xiunu* selection. If they were engaged or married before the imperial inspection, all the involved personnel, including parents, clan leader, and local banner officials, were punished.²⁴ However, in the sixth year of Qianlong (1741), General-governor De-pei presented a memorial to the throne asking for emperor's permission on the marriage of his seventeen-years-old son Heng-zhi and Mar-tai's daughter who had yet not gone through the *xiunu* selection.²⁵ Reviewing this memorial, The Qianlong emperor issued a decree emphasizing that "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."²⁶ It seems that as late as the first years of the Qianlong reign, people did not take *xiunu* selection seriously. Otherwise, the General-governor would not have submitted such request to the emperor. In another case, ignorance of the system is indicated. In the ninth year of Qianlong (1744), General-governor Ar-sai submitted a self-accusation to the emperor condemning himself for having arranged marriages for his two daughters and one granddaughter without informing the court. He claimed that he had never

²² *Da Qing huidian shili*, (Guangxu edition), 1114:18.

²³ A late Qing scholar Zhang Naiwei (b. 1880) also mentioned that this tradition was traced back as far as the Qianlong period. See Zhang Naiwei, *Qinggong shuwen* [Jottings in Qing palace], (Beijing, 1990), 425.

²⁴ *Da Qing huidian shili*, (Guangxu edition), 1114:12.

²⁵ Manchu names presented in texts in Chinese are hyphenated to help distinguish Manchus from Chinese.

²⁶ *Da Qing Gaozong Chun (Qianlong) huangdi shilu*, 146:15b-16b.

heard of the regulation [referring to the *xiunu* selection] and was willing to accept any punishment because of the violation, including sending his daughters and granddaughter to Beijing for imperial inspection. When the memorial reached the throne, the Qianlong emperor wrote on it, “due to ignorance of the regulation, Ar-sai arranged marriages for his daughters and granddaughter before they were sent to the capital for imperial inspection. Tell him that there is no need to send these women to the capital.”²⁷ The emperor seemed to have forgiven Ar-sai because he did not violate the regulation on purpose but simply due to not knowing it. If the *xiunu* system started in practice from the Shunzhi period, was it surprised that Ar-sai, as a high local official, had never heard of the regulation after it had been set for almost one hundred years and the emperor even forgave his ignorance?

It is important to try to determine when the *xiunu* system was established because it closely related to the bigger picture of the political, social, and cultural development of the Qing dynasty. It is especially important if we examine *xiunu* system in the context of Manchu awareness of maintaining their ethnic identities, considering the adjustments in the scope of selecting women for the harem as part of the effort to slow down the process of acculturation, at least among the Aisin Gioro nobles.

Development of the *Xiunu* System and Its Cultural Implications

THE *xiunu* selection was the most popular channel to choose imperial consorts in the Qing dynasty. It changed over time, however, especially in the scope of selection. In addition to other adjustments, such as discrimination against women from provincial garrisons and low social status, some women from *Hanjun* (汉军, Chinese-martial banners) were excluded from *xiunu* selection.²⁸ This adjustment seems to reflect the Qing

²⁷ *Da Qing Gaozong Chun (Qianlong) huangdi shilu*, 209:10b-11a.

²⁸ *Hanjun*, sometimes translated as “Chinese-martial”, were composed of those who were ethnically Chinese. When the banner system was initially created in 1601, there were only four banners and then the number was expanded to eight in 1615. It was added another eight banners, called the Mongol Eight Banners in 1635, when a great number of Mongols joined the system. In 1642, the Qing organized Chinese soldiers into *hanjun* (Chinese Eight Banners). For more information about formation of the banner system, see Elliott, *The Manchu Way*, 56-63; Rawski, *The Last Emperors*, 61-63.

court's view of a cultural threat and its reluctance to consider Chinese bannermen/women as true Manchus.

According to the *xiunu* system, “daughters of all the officials and common bannermen of Manchu, Mongols, and *Hanjin*, as well as soldiers registered in separated files and those who are currently not officially taking the post, must go through the triennial *xiunu* selection.”²⁹ However, some problems came up, discounting the ethnic purity of the potential imperial consorts. It is known that after the Kangxi period the Qing actually tolerated intermarriage between bannermen and Chinese women. In the eighteenth century and after, it was not uncommon for bannermen, especially *Hanjin*, to marry Chinese women.³⁰ Traditionally, the children of such unions were registered in banners and were considered Manchus. If the child were a girl, she would then be obligated for *xiunu* draft when she came of age. Many *xiunu* who entered the palace as candidates of imperial consorts actually had Chinese mothers and relatives, and might have been raised in a Chinese way. It became a serious problem by the mid-eighteenth century. When the Qianlong emperor inspected the *xiunu*, he found girls who wore Han Chinese clothing and jewelry. Therefore, he issued a decree in 1759, stating, “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 customs, which are greatly tied to our old Manchu ways. Take this and have the banner high officials proclaim it to the bannermen.”³¹ Later in 1804 the Jiaqing emperor found some *xiunu* even had bound feet, wore only one ear-ring (the Manchus customarily wore three ear-rings in each ear), and wore wide-sleeve robe like Chinese women.³² As result, the Qing court narrowed down the scope of *xiunu* selection to exclude some *Hanjin*'s daughters from *xiunu* selection. Starting in 1806, while Mongol and Manchu soldiers were still required to send their daughters for *xiunu* selection, the girls from common *Hanjin* families were exempted from the inspection, unless their fathers were

²⁹ Ortai, ed. *Qinding baqi zeli* (Regulations and precedents of the eight banners), (Qianlong edition, 1742), 7:7.

³⁰ Ding, *Manzu de funu shenghuo*, table 13 from page 335 to 336; table 14 from page 337 to 340.

³¹ *Da Qing huidian shili*, (Guangxu edition), 1114:19. Here I used Rawski's translation. Rawski, *The Last Emperor*, 40.

³² Zhang, *Qingong shuwen*, 951.

sixth-rank or higher banner officials.³³ Although the court claimed that the new policy was “based on the consideration of financial problems and other difficulties of the common Chinese bannermen.”³⁴ I see this change in the broader context of the court’s consideration of ethnic and cultural implications for the imperial house.

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IN Chinese history, imperial marriage was a political issue. The *xiunu* system is not an exception. After the Manchus established the Qing dynasty and moved to China proper, they experienced the process of acculturation. Although from the very beginning of their rule in China the Qing rulers made every effort to keep a balance between adopting Chinese culture and maintaining their own ethnic identity, they clearly saw the signs of sinicization among the general banner populations by the beginning of the eighteenth century. The *xiunu* system was created under this historical circumstance to emphasize ethnic boundaries and guarantee the right women were selected from the banners for imperial marriage. While the Qing court came to tolerate general bannermen’s marriage of Chinese women, they attempted to create a Manchu world within the Forbidden City by prohibiting intermarriage between Aisin Gioro males and Chinese women. This helped minimize Chinese cultural influence in the inner court and slow down the speed of acculturation.

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³³ *Da Qing huidian shili*, (Guangxu edition), 1114:19

³⁴ *Da Qing huidian shili*, (Guangxu edition), 1114:19

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