Early China (2026), page 1 of 46
doi:10.1017/eac.2026.10038

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

On Deng Sui 鄧綏, A Complex Figure

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Abstract

Study of the early rhetoric commenting on the reign of Empress Deng Sui 鄧綏 (in supreme power, 106–121) should cause us to rethink the stereotypes some have long entertained about successful female rulers, such as Wu Zetian 武則天 (r. 690–705) and Cixi Taihou 慈禧太后 (regent, 1861–1908), which do not reflect the Han gender norms. The essay argues that Deng Sui, in her own self-conscious and independent way, managed still to adhere faithfully to the Eastern Han gender norms of her time, while refusing to bow to inconvenient court conventions. Like many other learned women of her time—that her confidant and advisor was Ban Zhao 班昭 (45–116) is hardly coincidental—she knew how to deploy classical learning to achieve her own goals; and her reign, like that of Dowager Empress Lü 呂 (d. 180 BCE) of Western Han, won high praise for its capable governing of the realm.

Keywords: gender history; omen theory; cosmology; legal and political theory; Ban Zhao; pardons; rewards and punishments as governance tools; Dowager Empress Lü

Numerous aspects of the biography of Empress Deng Sui (later Dowager Empress) should compel the attention of modern scholars, especially those with an interest in feminist studies, law, omen reading, and cosmology. Deng Sui is one of the few women who effectively ruled with full powers, for nearly sixteen years, from February 106 CE,[1] as soon as her husband Hedi (r. 88–106) died, if not before, until very shortly before her own death in 121.[2] Twice Deng Sui determined the legitimate successor to the

Michael Nylan 戴梅可, University Of California Berkeley, mnylan@berkeley.edu. Trenton Wilson, of Princeton University, and I co-authored an original essay on Deng Sui, which was accepted by *Frontiers of Chinese Philosophy*, but days before publication, the journal's editor was informed that it would be shut down by the PRC, along with all the other *Frontiers* journals that regularly published pathbreaking essays of broad interest. Wilson's research interests have since shifted; mine have not. For this reason, I take full responsibility for the contents of this version of the essay. At the same time, I happily acknowledge Wilson's earlier assistance, and my own choice would have been to acknowledge my debt by the designation "with." CUP house rules do not provide me with that option, regrettably.

[1]All dates that follow are CE, unless otherwise marked as BCE.

[2]Possibly, she ruled during the later part of Hedi's reign but that is speculation.

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throne, and both times she chose the youngest likely candidate from the group of possible candidates, presumably to retain power for as long as circumstances allowed.[3] Even then her second choice, the future Andi, who when established on the throne was aged thirteen *sui* or twelve years by Western reckoning, had to wait fully fifteen years, until he was twenty-seven years old, before he was allowed to pronounce policy on his own.[4] Like Dowager Empress Lü 呂, with whom she has been implicitly and explicitly compared from the start,[5] Deng Sui was a thoroughly capable ruler, whose edicts evinced genuine concern for the common people. Unlike Dowager Empress Lü, Deng Sui displayed a willingness to check the aspirations of the male members of her own natal family, to adjudicate legal cases and issue amnesties, while bestowing unusual honors and benefactions upon to her closest female friends, her mother (posthumously), and a eunuch, in addition to one or two Liu-clan supporters.[6]

The patterns she exhibited during her tenure are often viewed in light of the gender norms in a supposedly "Confucian" or "Confucianizing" Eastern Han. In fact, presumptions about what constituted a Han "Confucian" position on any given political issue are often mistaken, a reflection of late imperial Neo-Confucian precepts rather than Han-era norms.[7] This article suggests that the empress perfectly epitomizes female success in her era: strong women showed no marked deference to those who were inferior in power but generally avoided direct confrontations with their superiors by one of the many interlocking yet cross-cutting hierarchies in place under the two

[3]Several adult surviving sons of Zhangdi could have succeeded Hedi, were it not for the theoretical imperative of the *zhaomu* order mandating that a new generation succeed the older. On *zhaomu*, see Michael Loewe, *Problems of Han Administration* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), Part I, dealing with the concept versus the practice. A second explanation has been floated: that one obvious candidate for the throne was disabled, and so could not serve in the ancestral temple, by a longstanding principle, lest the ancestors feel dishonored (*ji bu wei hou* 疾不為后). For details, see Feng Wenwen 馮聞文, "Qin Han teshu shehui fuli yanjiu" 秦漢特殊社會福利研究 (Ph.D. dissertation, Wuhan daxue, 2016), 188–95. *Bohu tong*, *juan* 1, explicitly categorizes the rank of Tianzi ("Son of Heaven") as a noble rank (天子者，爵稱也).

[4]See Rafe de Crespigny, *Fire over Luoyang: A History of the Later Han Dynasty, 23–220 AD* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 207, for details. *Hou Han shu* 10A.401n5, supplies Andi's age at his accession.

[5]Dowager Empress Lü was undoubtedly one of the most capable Western Han rulers; she succeeded to power after the Han founder's death in 195 BCE. One of the most striking comparisons to Lü was drawn by Deng Sui herself, then palace Lady rather than Empress, when Sui compared her persecution as a favored concubine to the unhappy fate suffered by Lady Qi 戚, the "human pig" (*renzhi* 人彘) tortured by Dowager Empress Lü, for the "crime" that Gaozu had favored her and considered substituting as heir Lady Qi's son for the son of Empress Lü (*Shi ji* 9.397).

[6]Deng Sui probably had the executions of the Lü clan family members in mind when she placed severe limits on her own male relatives.

[7]As I have argued in numerous publications beginning in 1999, Ru 儒 has at least three meanings in Han; see, e.g., Michael Nylan, "A Problematic Model: The Han 'Orthodox Synthesis,' Then and Now," *Imagining Boundaries: Changing Confucian Doctrines, Texts, and Hermeneutics*, ed. Kai-wing Chow, On-cho Ng, and John B. Henderson (Albany: State University of New York Press), 17–56. To take another example, Trenton Wilson has shown that most classically trained scholars and statesmen (not "Confucians") objected strongly to amnesties, on the cogent grounds that "benevolent government" required less arbitrary methods of rule that did not leave local communities liable to the re-introduction of criminals. See Trenton Wilson, "Empire of Trust" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2021), 123, 198–213. Michael Loewe, since his 1974 publication *Crisis and Conflict in Han China* (London: Allen & Unwin), consistently queried the standard narrative by which Eastern Han abided by "Confucian" norms; see his *Imperial Institutions in Ancient Rome and Han China* (London: Bloomsbury, May 2025), passim, for a reaffirmation of those views.

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Han dynasties.[8] (Indeed, this norm was equally true of successful elite males in Han times, which helps to explain why powerful ministers frequently adopted feminine poses, as Paul Rouzer has shown, and why the ideal ruler is both "father and mother" to his people, as many texts insist.)[9]

The principal subject addressed in this essay is what Deng Sui's reception history reveals about yin/yang cosmology (today automatically converted to male/female and *nei/wai*),[10] and legitimate governing, as even some of the best authors writing on feminism and cosmology have ignored Deng Sui, to their loss, preferring to discuss the much better known figure of Ban Zhao 班昭 (ca. 45 to ca. 120), who was Sui's closest advisor on a host of policy matters, including classical learning and foreign policy.[11]

[8]As Dowager Deng assumed the reins of power after the death of Emperor He in 106, Lady Ban Zhao continued to be her close companion and advisor, while Lady Ban's son, Cao Cheng 曹成, sometime after 106 was enfeoffed as a secondary marquis. In 106, too, Deng Zhi, Deng Sui's elder brother, moved into the imperial apartments, to support his sister in governing the realm. The following year, Sui's brothers were awarded fiefs, each of which drew the income from 10,000 households, aside from Deng Zhi, who was awarded 13,000. In 110 Deng Zhi with the three other elder brothers of the Dowager (Li 悝, Hong 弘, and Chang 閶) begged leave to relinquish their high positions at court, citing the need to mourn the death of their mother, Lady Yin. At first reluctant to accede to their request, the Dowager consulted Lady Ban, who convinced her of the wisdom of such a show of self-abnegation (*Hou Han shu* 84.2785). When Ban Zhao died in ca. 120, at over seventy years of age, the Dowager Deng wore mourning for her and dispatched officials to supervise her funeral. Note, meanwhile, that Deng Zhi never held authority over the palace Secretariat (Shangshu 尚書), unlike many heads of *waiqi* clans who amassed their powers. See Rafe de Crespigny, *Biographical Dictionary of Later Han to the Three Kingdoms* (*23–220 AD*) (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 39–40, 135–37.

[9]See "Administration of the Family," in *China's Early Empires: A Supplement to the Cambridge History of China*, ed. Michael Nylan and Michael Loewe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), esp. 280, for norms of elite conduct; see also "Sites and Applications of Classical Learning during the Early Empires," chapter 5, in the forthcoming vol. 1 of *A Global History of Confucianism*, ed. Kiri Paramore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, scheduled for 2026), outlining the fourteen cross-cutting hierarchies that made gender a less important factor in determining status during the early empires in China than it would later become. On early gendered rhetoric, the best source remains Paul F. Rouzer, *Articulated Ladies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001). A quick search in CHANT (ICS Concordance Series) for the phrase *min zhi fumu* 民之父母 shows 21 texts and 49 mentions of the phrase in pre-Han and Han sources, including two in the *Odes* and one in the *Documents* classic.

[10]Take the seemingly obvious *nei/wai* 內外 distinction: the binary can refer to domestic life/court life, invisible/visible, women/men, official/ruler, penis/other organs, and so many other referents as to render our modern binaries downright occluding in discussions. On this, see Jane Geaney, *On the Epistemology of the Senses in Early Chinese Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), and Michael Nylan, "Water in the Early Medical and Cosmological Theories," a talk given at Ligerz, Switzerland September 29, 2025.

[11]See *Hou Han shu* 84.2784–85. Recall that Ban Zhao's brother, Ban Chao, served in the Western Regions west of Dunhuang representing the Han forces until his return to Luoyang in 102, at 70 years of age, and a full nine years after his twin brother Ban Gu 班固 (32–92) had died in a Luoyang prison. After Chao returned to Luoyang, Deng Sui consulted his son on foreign policy with the Northern Xiongnu (de Crespigny, *Biographical Dictionary*, 125). Deng Sui appears at some length in de Crespigny, *Fire over Luoyang* (with a few problems, as noted below). She also makes a cameo appearance in Keith McMahon, *Women Shall Not Rule: Imperial Wives and Concubines in China from Han to Liao* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), 102–5. There are, by contrast, countless essays on Ban Zhao, few of them informed by a deep knowledge of history. Some popular websites do not even acknowledge Deng Sui's regency or importance (see, e.g. www.learnchinesehistory.com/emperor-andi-shundi-han/). That website acknowledges that the Yans 閻, the clan of Andi's principal wife, ruled the realm in his stead, but little is said of Deng Sui's authority.

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Still, Deng Sui's reign saw a range of spectacular reforms and innovations, including the establishment of what was effectively the first capital institution to acculturate to classical learning seventy children (female, as well as male) from the imperial and *waiqi* families (a virtual *guozi jian* 國子監); the invention of paper in 105 by Cai Lun 蔡倫, under her direction; and an attempt at court to fix authoritative versions of the Classics, led by a member of the imperial family, echoing an earlier attempt under Han Chengdi (r. 33–7 BCE).[12]

The first section of this essay sets the stage for her reign. It draws mainly from her *Hou Han shu* biography, ascribed to Fan Ye 范曄 (338–445), which is plainly based on earlier *Hou Han shu*, especially that by Xie Cheng 謝承 (182–254).[13] The second section examines a second source, the omen treatise ascribed to Sima Biao 司馬彪 (d. before 306), to assess the omens that were reported for her tenure in office, to see what those may reveal about her success as ruler and "regent," about the gender norms of the time, and about the proper vs. improper relations between the imperial and consort clans. The final section revisits the *Hou Han shu*, the omen treatise, and other relevant sources to examine Deng Sui's actions as sovereign head of the judicial branch in the Eastern Han administration, insofar as her role in this capacity substantially contributed to her posthumous reputation as legitimate ruler. As the picture these sources present is complex, rather than overtly moralizing or rooted in crude gender stereotypes, it seems wise to treat these early sources as supplying pieces of a mosaic that eventually yields a more or less coherent portrait of a much admired figure. The conclusion argues against adopting the simplistic assumptions about gender roles that still dominate academic studies.[14] Appendix I then supplies in slightly truncated form a preliminary translation of her *Hou Han shu* biography, which has never been translated before, so that readers may assess the extant evidence for themselves. As readers will soon discover, her biography largely consists of her responses to frequent natural disasters, responses that require her to "balance" yin/yang by suitably

[12]*The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 1, *the Ch'in and Han Empires*, ed. Denis Twitchett and Michael Loewe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), in its 878 pages, mentions briefly her selection of male heirs (283–84); her decision to set up a school to train the nobility's offspring in classical learning (citing *Hou Han shu* 10A.428); her decision, in 116, that the most senior officials and regional commissioners should be required to withdraw from imperial service upon the death of parents, which reform, though supported by the Superintendent of Ceremonial Liu Kai, a member of the imperial family, only lasted as long as Deng Sui lived (300); her reduction of expenses at the court festivities; and her policy decisions for the border defense as they related to cost-cutting measures (301–3). Curiously, however, Deng Sui is omitted from its list of "women in politics and consort families." For the earlier attempt under Chengdi, see Michael Nylan, *Yang Xiong and the Pleasures of Reading and Classical Learning* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 2011), esp. chap. 4. That earlier attempt may have had some post-facto difficulties associated with it, given Liu Xin's 劉歆 (d. 23 CE) part in the project, as Liu Xin was such a strong supporter of Wang Mang 王莽 (45 BCE–23 CE) until shortly before his death.

[13]Here I draw upon the unpublished working papers by Michael Loewe on this topic. While the seven earlier *Hou Han shu* (*qi jia* 七家) exist now only in fragments, large parts of the Deng Sui biography matches her biography in fragments found in Xie Cheng's work (see below). For comparison, see *Qi jia Hou Han shu* 七家後漢書, ed. Wang Wentai 汪文臺, rev. Sun Maode 孫茂德 (Yixian: Sun shi Guxiang ge 孫氏古香閣, 1902 revised from 1882 ed.); *Bajia Hou Han shu jizhu* 八家後漢書輯注, ed. Zhou Tianyou 周天游 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1986; rpt. 2020) [hereafter *Bajia*].

[14]The Japanese databases, including CiNii, suggest that no research has been devoted to Deng Sui. Of course, numerous *kanbun* editions of *Hou Han shu* exist.

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adjusting rewards and punishments. Appendix II supplies a translation of two edicts ascribed to her that were discovered in the excavated Wuyi guangchang 五一廣場 cache (present-day Changsha, PRC).[15] Those edicts show that no particular rhetorical flourishes indicate that a woman has issued them, rather than a man.

Preliminaries

Mine is a complicated tale about rhetoric, as much as about reality, in the full knowledge that gender constructions—one important feature of the antique rhetoric—invariably both reflect and shape realities on the ground. Equally, mine is a complicated tale about history-writing during the early period, for two reasons: the evidence from both received and excavated sources crosses modern genre-boundaries, for the same members of the governing elite wrote poems, essays, and eulogistic histories, and some of the principal evidence appears to date to different centuries, although it may not.[16] This section therefore seeks to "clear away the underbrush,"[17] suggesting how poorly adherence to today's "common wisdom" serves us when examining antiquity, so that readers may bring fresh eyes to this counter-narrative.

To appreciate the subtleties of Deng Sui's story, this section must register two points, before turning to the extant evidence bearing witness to the early views regarding the reign of Empress (later Dowager) Deng Sui: First, based on present evidence, it appears to be the case that the received *Hou Han shu* biography repeats lengthy passages from earlier histories, which means that the apparent substantial gap in time between Sima Biao's *Xu Han shu* 續漢書 treatises and Fan Ye's *Hou Han shu* compilation collapses, if in unpredictable ways. Additionally, the conditions of early manuscript culture were such that authorship *de novo* was not a prime desideratum for historians during the centuries under review here.[18] Indeed, those in the governing

[15]In this connection, highly recommended is Thiess Stack, "Single- and Multi-Piece Manuscripts in Early Imperial China: On the Background and Significance of a Terminological Distinction," *Early China* 41 (2018), 245–95.

[16]B. J. Mansvelt Beck has provided a good account of the complexities in his *The Treatises of Later Han: Their Author, Sources, Contents, and Place in Chinese Historiography* (Leiden: Brill, 1990). Below I summarize the complicated textual history of Sima Biao's treatises, now included in standard editions of the *Hou Han shu*, alongside Fan Ye's compilation, which was apparently largely based on earlier histories of Eastern Han that now survive only in fragments; see note 13.

[17]This is a common metaphor in early China, used for obstacles to better understanding.

[18]As Paul Veyne has remarked of histories in classical Greek, the early historians did not aim for originality *per se* nor did they feel the need to verify their sources; rather they aimed to present plausible silhouettes of the past for the edification of readers believed to be similarly in the know and to share their preoccupations about governance. See Paul Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths? An Essay on the Constitutive Imagination*, trans. Paul Wissing (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 33, 38. The Han sources in every case need very careful handling. For example, Liu Zhiji's *Shitong* 12:2/13, following earlier historians, makes Xun Yue's *Han ji* work a mere "condensation" of the Bans' *Han shu*, a fairly inconsequential change occasioned by the decision to "adapt the contents … to the Chronological form," due to a dislike of prolixity (*Shitong*, 1:1/11, 2:2/5). By contrast, the projects of both histories of Western Han were shaped, if not dictated, by the different courts their compilers served. All references to *Shitong* follow Liu Zhiji, *A Thorough Exploration of Historiography/ Shitong*, trans. by Victor Xiong (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2023), which adopts the standard paragraphing of Pu Qilong 浦起龍 (*Shitong tongshi* 史通通釋), an authoritative Qing compilation. References in Chinese are to the *Shitong shiping* 史通釋評,

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elite who were heavily invested in "high cultural literacy" tell us that they expected to produce and to read manuscripts that wove together elegant phrases and classical allusions (*zhu wen* 屬文 or *zhui wen* 綴文) in compositions interlacing pre-existing units via complex prosodic and semantic rules, only some of which are understood today. Thus, we can never presume that Fan Ye did not borrow from earlier historians or that today's *Hou Han shu* transmits Sima Biao's treatises verbatim. Of course, that manuscripts from the pre-printing era often represent artful pastiches of previous works does not preclude later compilers from recasting the passages they adopted to different ends or new styles.[19]

Given the paucity of passages drawn from earlier compilations styled as histories of Eastern Han that are still extant, we can only speak to the opening lines of Deng Sui's biography.[20] There her mother chides Sui for her love of classical learning, believing that her child had better attend to her needlework and domestic affairs, if she is to attract a suitable husband of comparably high standing.[21] (From the start, the prominence of the Deng family can be taken for granted, since one of Sui's forebears married Liu Yuan 劉元, elder sister of Guangwudi, the Eastern Han founder, r. 25–57.)[22] And while her *Hou Han shu* biography provides additional information about Sui's siblings, once Sima Biao launches into the story of Sui's own childhood, he provides essentially the same story in nearly identical language as Fan Ye. On her early love of learning (starting at seven *sui*, rather than at six, says Sima Biao), both texts deploy nearly identical language to show that Sui easily bested her brothers in both her dedication and smarts. Regarding her mother's upbraiding, the two histories likewise deploy the same set phrases, followed by the same caustic question, "Are you planning to be elevated to the position of court Academician?,"[23] i.e., a court-sponsored expert in classical learning. When describing Sui's dutiful response that she will learn her domestic duties during the day and read her beloved classics by candlelight, Sima Biao expands a bit more on the scene, yes, but once again the order of sentences and the vocabulary employed is strikingly similar, and the reports of her clans' nickname for her ("the would-be scholar") and of her father's quiet approbation coincide.

annot. Pu Qilong 蒲起龍 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji 1973; rpt. 1988). Compare the contrasting projects of *Hou Han shu* and *Hou Han ji*, as noted in footnote 24 below.

[19]For one excellent exploration of the ways that different compilers could shape the very same materials, see Paul van Els and Sarah Queen, eds., *Between History and Philosophy: Anecdotes in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017). Christian Schwermann, in one of the best essays in that collection (pp. 147–92), contrasts the argumentation in the *Hanshi waizhuan* and *Shuoyuan*, whose anecdotes exhibit huge overlaps, but differing stances.

[20]As so many other Dengs populate this essay, I refer to Deng Sui sometimes by her personal name, although this level of familiarity would have earned me the capital sentence of *da bujing* 大不敬 (lèse majesté) in Han law.

[21]*Hou Han shu* 10A.418.

[22]See Michael Loewe, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Qin, Former Han and Xin periods, 221 BC–AD 24* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 58, for Deng Chen 鄧晨 of Nanyang, who served as Governor of neighboring Runan commandery during the early part of Guangwudi's reign (25–57); cf. *Hou Han shu* 後漢書, compiled by Fan Ye 范曄 (398–445/446), commentary Li Zhao 劉昭, et al. 12 vols. (Beijing: Zhongshu, 1965), 15.582. References are to the punctuated edition, ed. Li Xian 李賢, et al.

[23]*Bajia*, 1:317.

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It seems such rhetoric was fairly standard by the time of compilation of the post-Han histories, if not earlier.

Second, as readers will discover, the portrait of Deng Sui assembled here from disparate sources builds upon earlier insights, but also departs from the few secondary works that have treated her reign substantially (in English, chiefly de Crespigny and McMahon).[24] Those two authors principally focus on what they take to be the court realities[25] and "Confucian principles" or norms[26] in contrast to this essay, which takes more seriously and even cross-reads such heavily rhetoricized constructions as appear in post-facto omen reports.[27]

[24]De Crespigny's *Fire over Luoyang* and *Biographical Dictionary* are the most substantive treatments of Deng Sui in English-language sources. McMahon, *Women Shall Not* Rule, 105, highlights her harsh treatment of Du Gen but says also that "Fan Ye describes her in glowing terms" (104). (See Appendix I). Bret Hinsch's *Women in Early Imperial China* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 51, mentions Deng Sui, but only in connection with Ban Zhao; additionally, Hinsch tends to import presumptions about gender norms from late imperial China.

[25]Patricia Crone, *Pre-Industrial Societies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 45, says: "The ideology that depicted him as an autocrat more often than not was *designed to compensate* for a deficient governmental machinery" that spelt a lack of power (italics mine). Michael Mann's first volume of *The Sources of Social Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) provides much the same picture. Comparing the *Hou Han ji* account by Yuan Hong with that in Fan Ye's *Hou Han shu* is instructive, for we can then see how much different rhetorical styles can alter the impression given by narratives supplied for the very same events. Around 198, Xun was commissioned by Cao Cao to prepare a digest of the *Hou Han shu*; that work was completed by 200. Because the Eastern Han court had lost control of the provinces after 147, if not before, and was widely seen to be in the clutches of the *waiqi* families, the *Hou Han ji* insists that all decision-making powers were in the hands of the male emperors, even if they were children or pawns, or high-ranking officers. A single memorial by Li Gu 李固 protesting the dowager empress' monopolization of policymaking powers during the first half of Andi's reign is given, although the passage never names the dowager empress explicitly. Far more common are the implicit comparisons made between good rule under Deng (if nominally under Andi) and good rule during other imperial reigns; and little comment is made when Deng Sui's male family members figure in the action. By the *Hou Han ji* narrative, to take one example, Deng Yu 禹, Deng Sui's father, then Senior Tutor, with great tact ensured that ritual honors were paid to the Yin empress whom Deng Sui had replaced. In other words, even in the *Hou Han ji*, the Deng family in general and Deng Sui in particular are celebrated mainly for her care of infant sons (few of whom survived into maturity) and her reliance on two of her male relatives in policymaking. See Yuan Hong, *Hou Han ji* 後漢紀, in *Liang Han ji* 兩漢紀, ed. Zhang Lie 張烈 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 2002), vol. 2, *juan* 16.310, 16.313, 16.315, and 14.288, for examples. For the foregoing reasons, I regard the *Hou Han ji* account as less reliable, generally speaking. For the watershed date of 147, see Michael Loewe, "Land Tenure and the Decline of Imperial Government in Eastern Han," 49–100, in *The Technical Arts in the Han Histories: Tables and Treatises in the Shiji and Han shu*, ed. Mark Csikszentmihalyi and Michael Nylan (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2021).

[26]De Crespigny, *Biographical Dictionary*, 128, assumes these initiatives attest her "Confucian principles," instead of considering other motives. That members of the governing elite, especially the Bans, did not necessarily see themselves as "Confucian," just because they were steeped in classical learning, is an argument I have made, based on Ban Gu's own writings, in *Lives and Power*: *Biographical Writing in the Ancient Chinese and Greco-Roman Worlds*, ed. Béatrice L'Haridon and Grégoire Espesset, 217–61 (Paris: Coédition Hémisphères/Maisonneuve & Larose, 2025).

[27]How to read the omen reports has been the subject of innumerable essays, the most influential of which include Hans Bielenstein, "An Interpretation of the Portents in the *Ts'ien-Han-Shu*," *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 22 (1950), 127–44; Martin Kern, "Religious Anxiety and Political Interest in Western Han Omen Interpretation: The Case of the Han Wudi Period (141–87 BC)." *Studies in Chinese History* 10 (2000), 1–31; Yang Shao-yun, "The Politics of Omenology in Chengdi's Reign," *Chang'an 26 BCE*:

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One example should give moderns pause when they feel the impulse to slap the label "Confucian" on Deng Sui's actions. In 116, Deng Sui decided to extend the time allotted for mourning for the "great officials" to three years (actually twenty-seven months, or into the third year).[28] Immediately, moderns schooled in the Classics think of *Mencius*, Books 3A–B, urging three year's mourning upon Lord Wen of Teng 滕文公 (r. 324–316 BCE), or a *Documents*' tradition encouraging the new ruler to remain silent for three years.[29] However, at least two chapters in the *Guoyu* 國語 (Advice to the States) urge those newly risen to power to abstain for three years from policy-making (*san nian shi qi zheng* 三年釋其政), and the *Guoyu* is hardly a Confucian text.[30] Moreover, the memorial urging Deng to adopt this policy frames it as an expansion of a precedent set during Xuandi's 宣帝 reign (r. 74–49 BCE), but Xuandi as emperor was famously critical of the influence the Ru 儒 exerted at court.[31] Nor is it likely that the *Xiaojing* 孝經 citation adduced in support of the measure is originally "Confucian," given its time of compilation.[32] Against this measure other impeccable precedents were weighed, especially those set by two emperors promoting the principle of "frugal burials," especially in times of crisis.[33] While Deng Sui had recent trends on her side, with several court conferences enjoining three years' mourning for high officials,[34] her decision was no doubt tied to her steady determination to reduce expenses, in part by rotating officials, as officials not on active service need not be paid their full stipends.

For the convenience of readers, below is given a bare-bones chronology for the major events in Deng Sui's period in power, mainly drawn from Fan Ye's *Hou Han shu*.

An Augustan Age in China, chap. 12 (pp. 323–46); and Nylan, "On *Han shu* 'Wuxing zhi' 五行志 and Ban Gu's Project," 213–80, in *Technical Arts in the Han Histories*, ed. Csikszentmihalyi and Nylan.

[28]Earlier, she had extended the mourning period for her brothers, giving them a face-saving option by which they could relinquish their fiefs and her elder brother's command of the joint armies. De Crespigny, *Biographical Dictionary*, 128, assumes this attests her "Confucian principles."

[29]See the "Wu yi" 毋逸 (Have No Ease) *Documents* chapter. By hallowed traditions, the Shang king Wuding 武丁 abstained from making policy pronouncements during the three-year period after his accession.

[30]See *Guoyu* 4.13 ("Jinyu, shang" 晉語上 chap.); *Guoyu* 20.01 ("Yueyu, shang" 越語上).

[31]The Chinese reads: 元初三年有詔，大臣得行三年喪，服闋還職。忠因此上言：「孝宣皇帝舊令 . . . 大父母死未滿三月，皆勿徭，令得葬送。請依此制。」 For Xuandi's attitude, see *Han shu* 9.277.

[32]See Harry Hsin-I Hsiao, "A Study of the *Hsiao-ching*, with an Emphasis on its Intellectual Background and Its Problems" (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University Press, 1973). Hsiao dates the formation of the *Xiaojing* to the Qin court of Qin Shihuang, on good grounds.

[33]The two emperors were Emperors Wendi of Western Han and the Eastern Han founder. In *Hou Han shu* 46.1560, the chief proponent of the three years' mourning, Chen Zhong 陳忠, argues that to attend to military affairs during the mourning period is "selfish" (careerist?). Gentlemen are one flesh with their parents, to whom is owed a greater obligation than that owed to one's ruler, even in times of emergency.

[34]The participants of both the *Shiqu* 石渠 (Stone Canal) and *Bohu* 白虎 (White Tiger) conferences had approved mourning periods that were relatively protracted, as compared with early Western Han practices seen in the Mawangdui mourning diagram. The later norms were enshrined in the *Liji* 禮記, a late Western Han compilation targeted at princes and high officials. See Nylan, "Confucian Piety and Individualism," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 116.1 (1996), 1–27.

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92, Deng is considered for selection as palace lady, but her father, Deng Xun, dies, giving ample cause to postpone her entry into the palace.

95, Deng Sui enters the palace; a year later, when she is sixteen *sui*, she is raised to the post of "Honored Lady" (*guiren* 貴人).

102, summer, the reigning Empress Yin 陰 is tried and deposed for *wugu* (black magic), ending the persecution of her chief rival for Hedi's affections, Deng Sui.

102, winter solstice or shortly thereafter,[35] Deng Sui is installed as empress at Hedi's court.

105, Hedi dies; Deng Sui names a successor who is roughly 100 days old, but he soon dies.

106, Hedi is buried in his mausoleum town; several palace ladies sent out from the palace to the mausoleum town are given lavish gifts, comparable to those of kings. She pardons palace ladies charged with conspiring against her; she also pardons members of the Ma 馬 and Dou 竇 families who had been proscribed from office-holding. (The Mas and Dous had been rivals to the Dengs in several earlier power struggles, and this measure seeks to reduce inter-clan violence.) She greatly reduces palace expenditures. She also releases the old and infirm ladies lodged in other mausoleum towns, so that they can return to their families.

106 (late September), the future Andi, Liu You 劉祐 [or Hu 祜] is installed as new emperor. She then rewards her mother, Lady Yin 陰, Ruler of Xinye 新野君, with additional honors.

107, a drought occurs in the capital environs; Deng Sui releases prisoners from the local jails; she also extends the period for death penalty appeals.

109, early in the year, the future Andi is capped. In autumn, Deng Sui feels discomfort. Believing that the *yin* and *yang* are not in balance, she further reduces palace entertainments and cuts down on exotic animals in the palace. Soon, in response, the harvests return "as before." She then undertakes one new major venture: she orders the palace holdings to be organized and collated by a Liu-clan member.

110, Lady Yin, Deng Sui's mother dies. Deng Sui responds by (a) giving her relatives additional grants to offset the funeral expenses; (b) issuing no edicts during the mourning period; and (c) visiting the Luoyang prisons, where, after careful review of the court cases, she pardons some thirty-six of the prisoners charged with committing capital crimes, and an additional eighty-one charged with lesser crimes. This last initiative is taken in response to a prolonged drought in the capital, normally ascribed to excessive *yang*. There follow some ten years of floods and droughts.

ca. 110, Deng Sui establishes a capital school for noble girls and boys.

112–118, Han imperial forces gradually defeat the Qiang rebels, after several setbacks

118, a history of her reign is commissioned, after Andi agrees to this.

[35]That is, the tenth lunar month, the *xinmao* 辛卯 day, probably 13/15 by the revised Chinese calendar. See *Hou Han shu* 4.190.

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121, Deng Sui becomes ill enough to be unable to manage an audience without being carried to court by sedan chair. Soon afterwards, she dies.

Equipped with the foregoing chronology, readers may now turn to Deng Sui in her dual roles as omen creator and respondent, which supplements our picture of her as female ruler. Before doing that, however, readers may wish to know three facts: in Eastern Han, Andi (and so Deng Sui) issued nearly twice as many edicts responding to natural disasters as other emperors.[36] At the same time, long before Deng Sui's reign, there were entirely standard ways for rulers to be seen to respond to omens, and Sui's responses conform to those patterns.[37] Finally, Deng Sui herself issued many more edicts than other dowager empresses of Eastern Han; she was no retiring figure.[38]

Reading Omens and Assessments

Of late, much scholarly work has been devoted to various "Wuxing zhi" 五行志 (*Wuxing* treatises), which appear first in the Ban family's *Han shu*, and thereafter in nearly every standard history after *Han shu*, despite Liu Zhiji's 劉知幾 (661–721 CE) fierce objections to the inclusion of this sort of material in the standard histories.[39] Predictably, however, the recent work has not focused on Deng Sui as a woman on the throne responding to omens and omen theorists or as a woman who is regarded as the potential source of cosmic dislocations. Before proceeding, readers must register the point that male emperors—even exemplary male emperors—are frequently portrayed as the source of serious cosmic dislocations.[40] Under certain Han emperors,[41] the number of omens reported could rise to very high levels, as Bielenstein noted decades ago, and the reports do not always accurately reflect natural disasters or eclipses, as we know. What patterns, if any, do we discern in the omens reported for Deng Sui, inside or outside of her *Hou Han shu* biography?

[36]Andi issued thirteen edicts altogether, a figure matched only by Huandi (r. 146–168), with the next highest number that for Shundi (r. 126–144), with seven edicts; most Eastern Han emperors issued four on average. For these figures, see Ye Qiuju 葉秋菊, *Qin Han zhaoshu yu zhongyang jiquan yanjiu* 秦漢詔書與中央集權研究 (Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui kexue, 2016), 231.

[37]Ye Qiuju, *Qin Han zhaoshu yu zhongyang jiquan yanjiu*, 231–35, lists eight ways.

[38]In power for seventeen years, twelve edicts issued in her name are recorded in *Hou Han shu*, and no fewer than five in the year 106.

[39]As argued by Su Dechang 蘇德昌, the *Han shu* treatise reveals the difficulty of merging the earlier *wuxing* 五行 traditions that refer to five material resources with later Five Phases theory. See Su's *Han shu Wuxing zhi yanjiu* 漢書五行志研究 (Taipei: Guoli Taida, 2014). For further details, see note 27, plus Nylan, "The 'Treatise on the *Wuxing*' (*Wuxing zhi*)," in *Monographs in Tang Official History*, ed. Karine Chemla, Damien Chaussende, and Daniel Patrick Morgan (Cham: Springer, 2019), 181–233. Endymion Wilkinson, *Chinese History: A Manual* (Cambridge: Harvard-Yenching Institute, 2000), 512, shows a few exceptions. For Liu Zhiji's objections to the inclusion of omen treatises in standard histories, see *Shitong*, *juan* 卷 10, *pian* 篇 19 ("*Han shu* 'Wuxing zhi' cuowu" 漢書五行志錯誤; English title: The Errors of the Omen Treatise), 2.

[40]See, e.g., Guangwu's reign, for eleven solar eclipses, with eclipses one of the worst of all possible bad omens (*Hou Han shu zhi* 6.3357–60); Hedi racked up five solar eclipses (ibid., *zhi* 6.3362–63); and Andi, under Deng Sui's term, nine solar eclipses, with at least one of them marking *her* death (*Hou Han shu zhi* 6.3363–64).

[41]See note 27 for Bielenstein.

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The omen treatise reports a total of nine solar eclipses for the span of time that Deng Sui was in power, while Andi was nominally on the throne. This total number, as it happens, is smaller than the number recorded for the Eastern Han founder, a celebrated male; additionally, the fact that Deng Sui was given warnings via solar eclipses seems to acknowledge that she is the real ruler, not Andi. Certain patterns are evident in these reports, usually reserved for male occupants of the throne. For example, the frequency of the solar eclipses increases over time: the longer Deng Sui refuses to cede power to Andi, the greater the number of solar eclipses within a given reign period; by the end of her regency, these eclipses are happening at the incredible rate of once per year. Unquestionably, these reports criticize Deng Sui for manipulating the succession after her husband's death, as one record baldly states: "at this time the dowager empress Deng monopolized policymaking" (是時鄧太后專政).[42] But not all the reports of solar eclipses target Sui for wrongdoing. For example, one solar eclipse is traced to the young Andi's infatuation with Lady Yan 閻, with an explicit reading attached that neither Lady Yan nor Andi are to be trusted with determining the line of succession.[43] That the omen treatise draws attention to the fact that two of the nine solar eclipses were not seen at court seems worth considering as well.[44] And curiously, it is not always easy to tell from the omen accounts whether the bad omen targets Deng Sui's actions or those who plotted against her, in hopes of either putting Andi (her appointee) in power or replacing him with a better candidate for the throne. Then, too, a bad omen seems to presage her eventual death, giving her implicit credit for a good and just reign.[45]

An interesting entry on a solar eclipse provides more detail than most,[46] in describing Deng Sui in these terms:

> 十五年四月甲子晦，日有蝕之，在東井二十二度。東井，主酒食之宿也。婦人之職，無非無儀/議，酒食是議。去年冬，鄧皇后立，有丈夫之性, 與知外事，故天示象。是年水，雨傷稼。
> In the fifteenth year [of Hedi's reign], on the last day of the fourth month, a *jiazi* day, it grew dark. There was a solar eclipse in the twenty-second degree of the East Well, the lunar lodge in charge of wine and food. [As the Mao ode 189 says,]
>
> These are the tasks of wives,
> Without error, without undue ceremony,[47]

[42]*Xu Han zhi* 18.3363 ("Wuxing zhi" 6). Multiple omen readings condemn her decisions to put younger Liu clan candidates on the throne so that she could extend the length of time she held power, a personal character flaw resulting in damage to the Fire Phase (*yang qi*). See *Xu Han zhi* 14.3293 ("Wuxing zhi" 2).

[43]*Xu Han zhi* 18.3364 ("Wuxing zhi" 6).

[44]Of the solar eclipse reports in the years 116 and 118, the record says, "The eclipses were not seen by the court archivists" (*shi guan bu jian* 史官不見), but were instead reported to the court by the remote commanderies of Liaodong 遼東 and Zhangye 張掖. Possibly this registers ill-intent on the part of those who reported eclipses that did not exist. At this remove, it is difficult to tell.

[45]*Xu Han zhi* 14.3293 ("Wuxing zhi" 2).

[46]*Xu Han zhi* ("Wuxing zhi" 6).

[47]Mao ode no. 189 ("Si gan" 斯干), last stanza. Or, as Karlgren prefers, "With nothing but simplicity" (reading *yi* 儀 oddly as "simplicity," when it more likely refers to "ceremonies" 儀 or possibly to "attention to duty" 義, as Han texts did not invariably bother with radicals or determinatives); see Bernhard Karlgren, "Glosses on the Odes," *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities*, 18 (1946), 70–71. entry #506. If the

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> The provision of wine and food—that is their concern.[48]
>
> In the winter of the previous year [on November 21, 102 CE], the Empress Deng was installed. She has the innate disposition of an able-bodied male,[49] plus a knowledge of affairs outside the domestic sphere. Therefore, Heaven shows this sign. This year there were floods, and rains damaged the crops.[50]

Note that the ode itself celebrates the "auspiciousness of daughters" (*nüzhi zhi xiang* 女子之祥), as well as of sons, both of whom maintain the family line, if their comportment is correct. That Deng Sui did attend well to these wifely affairs is amply proven, for, on the advice of trusted members of the court, in response to bad omens she sought to reduce the palace expenses on multiple occasions, first in 106, then in 107, 109, and 113, and then in her final year.[51] In some of these policy changes, she was plainly inspired by the "Monthly Ordinances" or *Yueling* 月令 (early versions of a farmer's almanac), a work whose impact we moderns have yet to fully appreciate.[52] To understand these economies, we must also look to the proximate situation in those years to discover why Deng Sui thought it prudent for the palace to set an example of greater frugality. In 113, for example, she was probably thinking of the enormous expenses the border defense entailed, in both men and materiel, to which famine in

graphic variant 議 attested in some versions is chosen (as was done in Ban Zhao's *Lienü zhuan*), it produces the interesting reading, "there is nothing not discussed or analyzed." See *Xu Han zhi* 18.3363 ("Wuxing zhi" 6). This line, as Karlgren shows, is read in two contradictory ways: as a description of an exemplary woman and of a woman who is not expected to do anything good. Mao takes this to describe a good woman full of dignity.

[48]Emending Legge's trans., which is reproduced in https://cti.lib.virginia.edu/shijing/AnoShih.html.

[49]One wonders if *xing* 性 here could refer to her stature; at 166 cm, Deng Sui was a good two inches taller than the average man of her time. I thank Reader 1 for drawing my attention to an essay discussing the development of the concept *da zhangfu* 大丈夫 during Han, which phrase could be a term of praise for women. See Peng Wei 彭衛, "Handai da zhangfu yuhui kao" 漢代大丈夫語匯考, *Renwen zazhi* 人文雜志 5, (1997), 73–75.

[50]*Hou Han shu* 18.3363 "Wuxing zhi" 6).

[51]In 106, she suspended the palace entertainments called the "Fishes and Dragons" and celebrating the "Manyan" 曼延 monster; see Derk Bodde, *Festivals in Classical China: New Year's and Other Annual Observances, during the Han Dynasty, 206 B.C.–A.D. 220* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 159–61; cf. Xiao Tong, *Wen xuan, or, Selections of Refined Literature*, trans. with annotations and introduction by David R Knechtges (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 230. In 107 she enrolled some of the palace entertainers in the ranks of the Yulin 羽林 palace guards, in order to save money. She restricted the luxury items produced by the palace workshops and ordered reduced rations for the palace horses, unless they were pulling carriages. The festivities having to do with the New Year's Great Exorcism (Da Nuo 大儺) were reduced; see Bodde, *Festivals in Classical China*, 75. Some noble titles and official ranks were put up for sale. For multiple edicts preoccupied with such concerns, see *Hou Han shu* 4.189, 5.226, 229 (all likely to originate with Deng Sui).

[52]Three pieces of recent scholarship have introduced the "Monthly Ordinances" in highly approachable ways: (1) Charles Sanft, "Edict of Monthly Ordinances for the Four Seasons in Fifty Articles from 5 C.E.: Introduction to the Wall Inscription Discovered at Xuanquanzhi, with Annotated Translation," *Early China* 32 (2008/9), 125–208; (2) Liu Ming 劉鳴, *Yueling yu Qin Han Shijian zhixu* 月令與秦漢時間秩序 (Xi'an: Xibei daxue, 2022), a small gem; and (3) Xue Mengxiao 薛夢瀟, "Zaoqi Zhongguode Yueling wenxian yu Yueling zhidu: yi 'zhengzhi shijian' de zhizuo yu shijian wei zhongxin" 早期中國的月令文獻與月令制度: 以政治時間的制作與實踐為中心 (Ph.D. dissertation, Wuhan daxue, 2014). For early evidence of this focus, see Wendi's edict in *Han shu* 4.113. Deng Sui is cited in Liu Ming, *Yueling yu Qin Han Shijian zhixu*, 136. Ma Rong tends to argue that particular years are special (so disasters can be accounted for); Chen Fan (and later Zheng Xuan) tends to be looking for more constant rules in history (ibid., 137).

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the north was added.[53] As de Crespigny notes, "In 113, there was another forced transfer of grain from the commanderies south of the Yangzi to afflicted territories in the north, while grain was also requisitioned .... to replenish the Ao Granary [near Chang'an]."[54] As her subjects were short of supplies, the imperial court lived on the coarsest of foods, and eschewed every sort of luxury.[55] Only two years later, in 115, "the vulgar Ru" pressed her (and through her attacked her brothers) to "elevate the civil above the martial" by doing away with the imperial hunting rituals altogether,[56] a proposal that elicited vigorous objections by the classical master Ma Rong, pupil of Ban Zhao, who was then working in the palace. In a hymn, Ma Rong contended that a recent good harvest should signal to the dowager that the time had come to see that the farmers were training for war.[57] Proceeding with the customary palace hunting rituals would likely encourage them in this. More generally, Deng Sui's decision to devote the throne's benefices to disadvantaged groups conformed with precedents set during her time in the back palace, in the prior reigns of Zhangdi (r. 75–88) and Hedi, especially as concerned the care of the aged.[58]

Plainly, there is more at work here in these debates than conventional pieties, and we witness through them Deng Sui's refusal to retreat entirely from the Han territories in the far north, despite the significant loss of life in the early years of her regency, especially in the years 107–112; that Deng held firm, when her courtiers were urging her to cease and desist, demonstrates her considerable strength of character. But thereafter, during her later years, no military exercises took place under her. Relevant here may be the age-old problem confronted by *waiqi* families: how to show to others, their rulers and their peers, that their extraordinary privileges were duly merited? To mitigate this mismatch between sociopolitical status and achievement, many *waiqi* senior males begged to be appointed to lead frontier armies, so that success on the battlefield might demonstrate their worth, but Deng Sui's elder brother, Deng Zhi 鄧騭/陟 had made a right royal mess of his commission in the northwest. As supreme commander with rank equivalent to the Three Lords (*san gong* 三公), Deng Zhi had led several armies against the rebel Qiang, but each campaign failed to quell them. While Zhi was "promoted" to be General-in-Chief in 108 ("bumped upstairs," if you will), he was never again put in charge of a military campaign.

[53]In 112, the situation was very unstable at the northwestern borders, as the forces of the Qiang leader Dianlian had yet to be defeated; thanks to his death in 112, eventually the Han forces regained the advantage.

[54]De Crespigny, *Biographical Dictionary*, 126.

[55]*Hou Han shu* 5:228: 人離荒戹，朝廷躬自菲薄，去絕奢飾.

[56]*Hou Han shu* 60A.1955. The imperial hunts were called *soushou* 蒐狩. Cf. *Hou Han shu* 60A.1974; the Chinese is: 息戰陳之法. For these, one may consult Bodde, *Festivals in Classical China*; Sharon Sanderovitch, "Presence and Praise: Writing the Imperial Body in Han China" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2017).

[57]See Liu Ming, *Yueling yu Qin Han Shijian zhixu*, 136.

[58]See Feng, "Qin Han teshu shehui fuli yanjiu," 58. In this connection, de Crespigny, *Biographical Dictionary*, 126, deems the conferral of coffins for the poor (*Hou Han shu* 5.222) "macabre." However, such conferrals are right in line with other social welfare measures designed to provide financial help to the realm's disadvantaged subjects. See, for example, the prescriptions in *Shisan jing zhushu* 十三經注疏, compiled by Ruan Yuan 阮元 (1764–1859) (Preface dated 1815), *Zhouli*, 秋官司寇下，小行人, 569-1, accessed at http://hanchi.ihp.sinica.edu.tw/ihp/hanji.htm; cf. the Zhangjiashan "Statutes on Conferrals" (賜律).

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In addition to the nine solar eclipses, a total of nine other bad omens are recorded for Deng Sui's tenure. These were typically floods (signifying an over-abundance of *yin*) and droughts, but any type of crop failure counted, really, insofar as tradition assigned women the role of supervising the provisioning of food for the living and the dead.[59] In Sima Biao's *Xu Han zhi*, seven omens altogether explicitly mention Deng Sui's regency, but one of those omens records the death of Shangdi 殤帝 (r. 106 only), through no fault of her own. Four times an omen is connected with the phrase "At this time, Dowager Empress Deng held the reins of government as regent" (是時鄧太后攝政).[60] Twice the phrase is "Dowager Empress Deng monopolized policymaking" (鄧太后專政).[61] Once Deng Sui is charged with "using *yin* to monopolize power over *yang*" (以陰專陽).[62] Strangely, however, several of the omens seem to have partly exculpated her, either by hinting that she was a much better *waiqi* member than some others or by showing that she exercised much better judgment than Andi, her chosen successor.

Can the omens reported within her biography, in the omen treatise, and elsewhere in the *Hou Han shu* be regarded as simple pronouncements on her gender, then? For the readers' perusal, I cite what I take to be the four worst omens reported of her, since the omens are serious, as these things were judged, and all are ascribed to Deng Sui personally.

1. *Hou Han shu zhi* 16.3328 ("Wuxing" 4), dated to the first year of Andi's reign, 107 CE

安帝永初元年，郡國十八地震。李固曰。「地者陰也，法當安靜。今乃越陰之職，專陽之政，故應以震動。」是時鄧太后攝政專事。訖建光中(121),太后崩，安帝乃得制政。於是陰類並勝，西羌亂夏，連十餘年。

In the first year of Andi's reign (in 107), an earthquake occurred in eighteen commanderies and kingdoms. Li Gu said, "The earth is *yin*. The model ought to be peaceful and still. Now, we have transgressive *yin* that has monopolized *yang* [or focused on a *yang*-style of governing]. Ergo, the response has been an earthquake. At that time, the Dowager Empress Deng held the reins of government as regent and she monopolized affairs of state. During the Jianguang period, in 121, the Dowager Empress died, and Andi only then was able to get hold of the reins of governing. Thereupon, those in the *yin* category were repeatedly overcome, and

[59] *Hou Han shu* 18.3363 ("Wu xing" 6). For the climate in Henan in Eastern Han, see Fu Kui 符奎, *Chutu ziliao yu Zhangguo Qin Han juluo xingtai yanbian yanjiu* 出土資料與戰國秦漢聚落形態演變研究 (Beijing: Renmin, 2024), esp. 165–69, which suggests these natural disasters were outside Deng Sui's control.

[60] *Hou Han shu zhi* 16.3328 ("Wuxing" 4), reporting an earthquake and barbarian incursions; *Hou Han shu zhi* 16.3335 ("Wuxing" 4), reporting a great wind that occurred when Andi was chosen, said to predict (much later) Andi's execution of eight or nine members of the Deng clan (which was manifestly wrong, as prompted by slander); and *Hou Han shu zhi* 18.3363 ("Wu xing" 6), a solar eclipse in the "Barrens" lunar lodge, which signified that the (male) throne was empty of power.

[61] *Hou Han shu zhi* 16.3333 ("Wuxing" 4), reporting the death of Shangdi, which was no fault of Deng Sui; and *Hou Han shu zhi* 16. 3363, where a different solar eclipse in the "Stomach" lunar lodge registers a famine in the fall, which left granaries empty. (The "Stomach" lodge is in charge of granaries, we are told.).

[62] *Hou Han shu zhi* 15.3314 ("Wuxing zhi" 3), reporting a hailstorm that ruined the crops. Liu Xiang took this type of omen to be associated with "yin threatening yang" (陰脅陽也).

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specifically the Western Qiang, who had thrown the Xia [i.e., the court-allied lands] into chaos, for several decades."[63]

The backstory: Li Gu (b. 94) was but a teenager when this omen occurred, so Li Gu's comment cannot directly bear upon this particular omen. Li Gu is chiefly famous for his forthright opposition to Liang Ji 梁冀 (d. 159), head of another *waiqi* clan, decades after Deng Sui's death.[64] Informed readers of omens would understand that here an omen that occurred during Deng Sui's regency is being judged and utilized after another earthquake, in 133, provided the occasion for Li to wrest a few reforms from the court, making him a formidable opponent of Liang Ji. Most importantly, perhaps, Li Gu managed to persuade Shundi to send away his wet-nurse, Song E 宋娥 (which recalls Andi's failure to do so, with his wet-nurse Wang Sheng 王聖).[65] Possibly, then, informed readers would only have contrasted the corruption of Liang Ji with the earnest endeavors of Deng Sui. And certainly, they would have laid the blame for the Qiang incursions on Andi, as is clear from entry no. 3 translated below.

2. *Hou Han shu zhi* 18.3363 ("Wuxing" 6), dated to the first year of Andi's first reign period, 107 CE

安帝永初元年三月二日癸酉，日有蝕之，在胃二度。胃主廩倉。是時鄧太后專政。去年大水傷稼，倉廩為虛。

In the first year of Andi's reign, on the third month, second day, *guiyou* day, there was a solar eclipse, in the second degree of the lunar lodge Stomach. The Stomach is in charge of granaries. At this time, the Dowager Empress Deng monopolized policymaking. The year before, a great flood harmed the crops, and the granaries were empty.

This omen would have recalled to early readers Deng Sui's swift response to the disaster: enforcing strict economies on the court, by repeated measures over successive years. In the philosophical masterworks that have come down to us, it is not the fact of bad omens, but the rapid response to addressing problems that hegemons and kings

[63]Translation extremely tentative, insofar as the Western Qiang had been decisively defeated twice before Deng Sui's death, in 117 and in 120, by able Han generals, although the final mop-up of the rebel forces did not happen until 122. (In 140, the Qiang rebelled again, but their forces were mainly put down by 142.) For Xia, one may consult *Shuihudi* D156, 157.

[64]In 147, Li Gu was one of the leaders of an unsuccessful rebellion against Liang Ji; he had repeatedly been trying to put on the throne another candidate (Liu Suan 蒜, King of Qinghe), rather than the one who became Huandi (Liu Zhi 志), the person backed by Liang Ji and Cao Teng 曹騰. Implicated in a rebellion in 147, Li Gu was duly arrested and executed, with his corpse displayed in public, identifying him as the worst sort of traitor, although his reputation was that of a good official. (Li Gu had been recommended by Chen Fan; he was allied with Du Qiao, and Du Qiao died in prison.) Li Gu got into the bad graces of Liang Ji by charging a governor with giving bribes to Liang Ji, the new General-in-Chief in ca. 140. Li Gu had a few minor successes with Shundi, but none at all once Liang Ji became regent in 146 for the infant son of Shundi. Li Gu had arranged for the dismissal of more than 100 officials (de Crespigny, *Biographical Dictionary*, 414).

[65]For this event, see de Crespigny, *Biographical Dictionary*, 412, 752.

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are lauded for, proverbially. The idea is, "Should a polity be visited by baleful portents, [the inauspicious] cannot overcome good governing" (國有妖祥，不勝善政).[66]

3. *Hou Han shu zhi* 16.3335 ("Wuxing" 4), dated to the first year of Andi's first reign period, 107 CE

> 安帝永初元年，大風拔樹。是時鄧太后攝政，以清河王子年少，號精耳，故立之，是為安帝。不立皇太子勝，以為安帝賢，必當德鄧氏也。後安帝親讒，廢免鄧氏，令郡縣迫切，死者八九人，家至破壞。此為鄙吝也，是後西羌亦大亂涼州十有餘年。
>
> In the first year of Andi's reign [107], a great wind uprooted trees. At this time, the Dowager Empress Deng held the reins of government as regent. The son of the King of Qinghe was young in age, but he had a reputation as a clever boy. Therefore, she established him on the throne; this was Andi. She did not raise the imperial heir Sheng [eldest son of Hedi], as she thought Andi the worthier, a perfect match for the character of the Deng clan. Later Andi grew close to slanderers and he dismissed and demoted the members of the Deng clan, allowing the commandery and county officials to oppress them cruelly, so that eight or nine died, and the family fortunes were ruined. This was an instance of petty meanness.[67] After this, the Western Qiang laid waste to Liang province for more than ten years.

This entry refers, of course, to the second time Deng Sui put a Liu-clan scion on the throne, the first being the three-month old Liu Long 隆 (105–106), born of an unknown concubine to Hedi, whose elder brother Liu Sheng 勝 was passed over, on the grounds that he was suffering from an incurable illness. (By custom, the infirm were not to serve in the imperial ancestral temple. Liu Sheng was awarded the title King of Pingyuan instead.) When Liu Long died in less than a year, Liu Sheng was again passed over, and the son of the King of Qinghe 清河王 was named instead. Here, Deng Sui commits an error of judgment, although an easily understandable one, given Andi's appearance of cleverness and the chronic illness of Liu Sheng. However, the worst critique levelled by the omen seems to indict Andi for his vindictiveness against the Deng family, whose males were largely innocent of any wrongdoing and whom Deng Sui had tried to protect by sending them away from court. That this is the best explanation of this entry is suggested by an omen recorded of Andi once he took power, where he is charged with the deaths of many innocent people.[68] When Sui was confronted with no good options in the all-important selection matter, her error had serious consequences, but the ill-intentioned wrongdoing was done by her vindictive successor, encouraged by his empress and her clan; by Han law, after all, the actor's intention was one of the most important factors to consider in judging the severity of

[66]This is proverbial wisdom. This example comes from *Huainanzi*, *juan* 10 ("Miu cheng xun" 繆稱訓). Many anecdotes about famous people illustrate this principle.

[67]Tentative translation of *koumeng* 鄙吝, which is equated with *bilin* 鄙吝, which has a whiff of stinginess. Perhaps the passage hints at Andi's confiscating their goods, as well as charging the innocent with crimes.

[68]*Hou Han shu zhi* 15.3314 ("Wuxing" 3) that begins 延光元年四月，郡國二十一雨雹.

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the crime.[69] (As we will see, Sui's *Hou Han shu* biography credits her with almost divine-like perspicacity in other matters, especially in legal cases.)[70]

4. *Hou Han shu zhi* 18.3363 ("Wu xing" 6), dated to the fifth year of Andi's first reign period, 111 CE

> 五年正月庚辰朔，日有蝕之，在虛八度。正月，王者統事之正日也。虛，空名也。是時鄧太后攝政，安帝不得行事。俱不得其正，若王者位虛，故於正月陽不克，示象也。於是陰預乘陽，故夷狄並為寇害，西邊諸郡皆至虛空。
>
> In the fifth year, first month, on the *gengchen* day, which was the first day of the lunar month, there was a solar eclipse, in the eighth degree of the Barrens lunar lodge. The first "properly aligned" month marks the "proper" days when the true king manages affairs. *Xu* is one name for "emptiness." At this time, the Dowager Empress Deng held the reins of government as regent. Andi was not allowed to carry out the affairs of governing. Neither person was "properly aligned." It was as if the true king had been established in a barrens, i.e., in a false position or exiled. Thus, in the first lunar month, the *yang* was not able to dominate [*yin*], and so it showed this sign. At this, *yin* was fully prepared to ride on *yang*. Therefore, the Yidi [barbarians] together rose to invade and do harm. All the commanderies at the western frontiers were brought to the state where they were emptied out [i.e., depleted of subjects loyal to Han].

Once again, Deng Sui's regency is tied to incursions by the nomadic and semi-nomadic groups living on the frontiers, who did indeed strike deep into Han territory during part of her rule. The association is clear: as a woman she is *yin* and so are the barbarians, and both are making significant incursions into the heartlands. Plainly, the dowager empress is blamed for "being fully prepared to ride on *yang*," in a manner analogous to the invading forces. The backstory is this: the chieftain Dianlian 滇零 had led the members of his own Qiang group, plus other groups, against the Han in 107, making incursions deep into Hanzhong and cutting off the Long Road that the Han armies traveled from the Wei River valley to defend the northwest. At this juncture, Deng Sui sent her elder brother Deng Zhi to defeat them, with Ren Shang 任尚 (d. 118) a colonel by his side. When neither commander made headway, Deng Zhi was recalled to the capital and Ren Shang was left to hold the line against the invading forces. Ren Shang was forced to retreat to Chang'an in 110, but he was sent back out to the front lines in 111. By 112, Ren Shang had given up on frontal attacks, and was relying on mobile cavalry forces acting as guerrillas. By 117, the rebellion was

[69]This way of judging crimes goes back to the "Kang gao" 康誥 chapter of the *Documents* classic, and specifically the lines: "Let us suppose someone commits a minor crime, which is not an inadvertent error, but rather an intentionally unlawful act carried out to the end. I warn you, even though the crime be minor, you cannot but kill him for it. By contrast, let us consider the case when someone commits a major crime, but he does not persist in it to the end. You then should deem it an 'inadvertent' or 'accidental' mistake, given that it was not intended. Then, to judge it appropriately, according to the severity of the crime, you may never kill him" (translation mine).

[70]*Hou Han shu* 10A.422: 以為聖明.

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effectively ended.[71] So while it is true that the nomadic and semi-nomadic troops joined forces, "together" invading the lands claimed by Han, it is a gross exaggeration to claim that the resources of "all the commanderies at the western frontiers" were drained to this extent.

To this picture, we must factor in the opposition to Deng Sui's decision to forego the Great Exorcism as an example. It had long been the custom at year's end to hold a banquet and dispatch the palace guards, to hold a Great Exorcism to expel the epidemic demons, who were likened to barbarian invaders.[72] The dowager empress believed that the *yin* and *yang* were not in balance, and the troops had mutinied several times. She summoned people to the banquet, but did not commission the customary entertainments and musical performances. She reduced the young boys involved in the expelling-epidemics performance by half. She got rid of such exotic animals as elephants and camels, along with their keepers. "In fact, good harvests returned as before"[73] in response, and that phrase is laden with significance, for by the Han theories, all good rulers receive bad omens, thanks to Heaven's grace, so that they can be alerted to their failings, make the required course-corrections, and thereby secure more favorable signs (chiefly abundant harvests but also healing of all sorts in the body politic). Thus, by the cosmological logic of the day, the mettle of a ruler was best gauged not by the frequency of omens but by the speed with which the powerful admitted their errors and reformed their own conduct in the public and domestic spheres.[74]

Finally, the death of Deng Sui induced no fewer than three omens, which apparently unsettled the empire.[75] Notably, too, her death was marked by an eclipse of the sun, not the moon, indicating her status as a true ruler. We can appreciate why the empire bemoaned her loss, when we more closely attend to the social correctives that characterized her reign. Apparently, the gods granted her good fortune, due to her timely responses to ill omens.

Deng Sui as Judge

One of the most important functions of the Han emperors was to serve as final arbiter in criminal and administrative cases.[76] By the classics and masterworks, especially the *Documents* and *Xunzi*, how rulers administered justice virtually defined how

[71]De Crespigny, *Biographical Dictionary*, 719. Ren Shang eventually returned to the capital, where his own underling accused him of serious malfeasance (taking bribes and exaggerating his successes) and he was executed in 117, despite support from Deng Zhi and other members of the Deng clan (with one notable exception).

[72]For this, see Bodde, *Festivals in Classical China*, 84, 104, 114–16.

[73]*Hou Han shu* 10A.424: *fu gu* 復故 (literally, "returned to their old [ways])."

[74]E.g., *Hanshi waizhuan* 韓氏外傳 2.17: "To reform after having committed faults is not to be at fault"; see James Robert Hightower, *Hanshi wai chuan: Han Ying's Illustrations of the Didactic Application of the Book of Songs* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), 94; cf. *Fengsu tongyi*, *juan* 9 (世間多有見怪驚怖以自傷者 entry), on Duke Huan of Qi, citing the *Guanzi*). In this connection, one might consider also *Hou Han shu* 30B.1976, on Xiang Kai 襄楷, a famous astrologer under Huandi; and the case against the "good eunuch" Cai Lun, who invented paper (*Hou Han shu* 43.1487; 68.2513–14).

[75]*Xu Han zhi* 11.3238 ("Tian wen" 天文, *zhong* 中); *Xu Han zhi* 18.3364 ("Wuxing zhi" 6), 2x.

[76]Of course, difficult cases could be referred to court conferences convened with experts, and emperors typically consulted others before rendering a decision.

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legitimate those rulers were.[77] It was incumbent upon any legitimate ruler to develop three capacities: the capacity to judge individual cases fairly, even when angered by forthright remonstrances; the capacity to change policy course in flexible response to crises;[78] and the seemingly contradictory capacity to "stay the course," when prudence demanded this. In crediting her with all three capacities said to define the "great man,"[79] Deng Sui's biography, alongside other relevant sources, generally commends her actions implicitly and explicitly. We learn, for example, that Deng Sui "stayed the course" in the early years of her reign, when news of defeats at the northwestern frontier came in rapid succession; her father doubtless discussed his exploits and those of her grandfather with her when she was but a child, as he deemed her more capable than her feckless brothers.

What intrigues is the prominence Deng Sui's biography gives to her role as judge, as life-giver (when she issued amnesties and mandated gift conferrals on the populace) and as death-dealer (when she sentenced a few to harsh punishments), with these dual roles epitomizing in the social world the interdependence of ritual and law and, in the cosmic sphere, *yin* and *yang qi*. These were, of course, the two faces to be worn by any legitimate ruler, who must shepherd and guide his subjects, as "[stern] father and [compassionate] mother."[80] By early Western Han times, if not before, a neat way was found to reconcile these two antithetical aspects of good rule: by *yin-yang* theories, in the spring and summer months the throne would emphasize life-giving activities, but in autumn and winter the same power would dole out such mutilations and death as needed to maintain societal order.[81] Only the timely alternation between roles could maintain the appropriate interplay between *yin* and *yang qi*, which, in turn, would prompt timely rains and good harvests for the realm. Jia Yi 賈誼 (201–169 BCE) and Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179?–104 BCE) were but two of the court thinkers to elaborate these notions, which situated *yin*/*yang* theories, the "Monthly Ordinances" (like our farmers' almanacs), and ritual timing at the very heart of classical learning.[82] The stated goal of imperial judgments was to reduce to a minimum "hatred" (*hen* 恨), "resentment" (*yuan* 怨), and "grievances" (*yuan* 冤), to thereby secure the staunch allegiance of the grateful populace.[83]

[77]For example, in Han times, the two most often-cited chapters of the *Documents* classic, the "Proclamation to Kang" (Kang gao 康誥) and the "Punishments" (Fu/lü xing 甫/呂刑), take the ruler's role in administering justice as their main theme.

[78]The difference between understanding the constants and understanding what the situation demands, and the need to correlate both, threads through numerous early texts, including, most famously, the *Gongyang* 公羊 *Tradition* for the *Annals*.

[79]One typical description, found in *Xunzi* 荀子, "Jie bi" 解蔽 (chap. 21), describes this as being able to make decisions from a still and disinterested place.

[80]The Chinese phrase, repeated in multiple pre-Han and Han texts, with slight variations, turns up twenty-two pre-Han and Han citations, with perhaps the earliest found in "Hong fan/ Great Plan" chapter of the *Documents* classic (天子作民父母，以為天下王).

[81]See, e.g., *Xu Han zhi* 15.3308n1 ("Wuxing zhi" 3), citing an early local gazetteer (now lost) on the subject. This omen, a great flood, is blamed on Hedi, who "secretly" wished to replace his empress with Lady Deng, as he eventually did.

[82]See note 52 above for three exemplary studies on the "Monthly Ordinances."

[83]In a recent workshop paper for Leuven (June 30–July 2, 2025), I outlined the enormous role played by "revenge," "retribution," and "resentment" during the early empires in China. The paper has been accepted by *Oriens Extremus* for a special issue edited by Markus Haselbeck (in press).

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> Now to set up the proper relations between ruler and subject … so that the frameworks have order and all six relations live in peace and harmony is not something Heaven does [*ci fei Tian zhi suo wei* 此非天之所為]; rather it is set up by human beings [*ren zhi suo she ye* 人之所設也].[84]

Understandably, then, specific decisions rendered by emperors and their courts while adjudicating legal cases dominate the histories and masterworks of the early empires in China.[85] And emperors were thought to merit particularly high praise when they mandated (as did the Eastern Han Emperor Zhang) that ritual practices and legal norms be strictly observed, lest the desirable balance between *yin* and *yang qi* be disturbed.[86]

It is in this historical context that historians must place Deng Sui's actions, if they hope to do her justice. Her husband Hedi had earned an unsavory reputation for his reckless slaughter of the Dous and their allies, regardless of their true guilt or innocence.[87] By contrast, one of Deng Sui's first official acts was to pay a personal visit to the Luoyang prisons, to see if there were cases to be overturned, in the name of restoring justice. Here is the entry:

> In summer of the second year [107], there was a drought in the capital. Deng Sui personally visited the Luoyang bureau …, where there were prisoners who in truth had killed no one, but under questioning had implicated themselves by lying. The mounting distress was palpable, but so frightened were the functionaries that they did not dare to say anything. As she was on the point of leaving, one of them raised his head as if he wanted to impeach himself. The dowager empress, discerning his meaning, then questioned him about the dossiers. All had been prepared falsely, so she put the Luoyang Prefect himself in prison, charging him with crimes. Before she had even returned to the palace, abundant rain fell as a result.[88]

The cosmic response to her restoration of legal order is sign enough that she handled this affair brilliantly. Deng Sui went on to carefully adjudicate many cases: "she took great trouble lest she make a mistake; she was petrified to go against the body of precedents in writing."[89] But perhaps it was during mourning for her mother that she most exemplified the compassionate ruler in legal matters:

> The dowager empress issued no formal edicts during the entire mourning period, but then there followed a protracted drought. The dowager empress for three

[84]See *Han shu* 22.1030 ("Li yue zhi" 禮樂志 2).

[85]I adopted this nomenclature for the period 323 BCE–316 CE, and explained why in an essay entitled "Empire in the Classical Era in China (323 BC–AD 316)," 1–36, in *Conceiving the Empire: China and Rome Compared*, ed. Fritz-Heiner Mutschler and Achim Mittag (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 34–64.

[86]*Hou Han shu* 3.153. Emperor Zhang, probably the best Eastern Han emperor, expressly forbade killing after the winter solstice, as he intended to observe the rules laid down by the antique kings regarding the "true king's" roles in bestowing life and death.

[87]*Hou Han shu* 4.173.

[88]*Hou Han shu* 10A.424.

[89]*Hou Han shu* 10A.424.

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> days visited Luoyang, where she reviewed the records of prisoners, freeing thirty-six who had been judged to have committed capital crimes and eighty others who deserved the punishment of shaving (*nai* 耐). The rest had their sentences reduced to penalties ranging from lopping off the right foot to serving as guards for the convict labor details.[90]

The context and rationale for these actions is clear: Like earlier exemplary rulers from time immemorial, she maintained silence during the mourning period, relying on her chief ministers to proclaim policy, in the precise manner that the *Documents* classic urged.[91] Like Emperor Zhang before her, she believed that the throne's civilizing model was best promoted by shows of empathy and generosity.[92] Her biography suggests that she adopted Zhangdi's own determination to "relax punishments," in a play on her own name of Sui 綏.[93] "Everywhere she promulgated teachings that relied upon tolerance and generosity." In company with her advisers Ban Gu 班固 and Ban Zhao, the dowager empress was sure that one should err on the side of mercy, in all cases where that was possible. In Ban Gu's two treatises on rites and music and on penal law, the injunction to give the accused the benefit of the doubt is unmistakable: humaneness and ritual (*ren* 仁 and *li* 禮) must always take precedence over a strict sense of duty (*yi* 義),[94] for "the true king's relation to his realm ... is that if even a single person does not get a fair trial, it makes for a sorrowful heart."[95]

To put Deng's actions in their proper mid-Eastern Han context, with the wars of transition to Eastern Han over, "People were mindful of taking pleasure in life and living [*ren you lesheng zhi lü* 人有樂生之慮] ... Those condemned to prison were fewer than two-tenths of those who had been in prison in late Western Han."[96] Deng Sui was determined to follow the ideals of her time. When an enemy committed a capital crime, she tended to pardon him or her, to the astonishment of the members of her court. After his reprieve, one grateful official acknowledged her act of clemency: "Heaven, earth, and my parents gave me life, but they were unable to bring me back from the dead."[97] By his reckoning, it was Deng Sui alone who had allowed him to return to the world of the light and the living. At the same time, her acts of unselfishness modeled on the Dao itself were

[90]*Hou Han shu* 10A.424.

[91]This conduct was ascribed to Wuding 武丁 of Shang (d. ca. 1200 BCE), an exemplary ruler, in the "Wu yi" 毋逸 (Have No Ease) chapter of the *Documents*. The catchphrase *liang'an buyan* 諒闇不言 (also written as *liangyin* 亮隱), which describes Wuding's exemplary silence, became a powerful rhetorical tool for erudite officials intent upon circumscribing the autocratic exercise of imperial power.

[92]One of the precedents for Zhangdi's actions was provided earlier, ca. 80 BCE, by Lu Wenshu 路溫舒 (during the reign of Han Zhaodi); see *Han shu* 51.2371. For Zhangdi, see *Hou Han shu* 3.140; for Deng Sui, see *Hou Han shu* 4.197: 道化在前，刑罰在後.

[93]*Hou Han shu* 10A.424. *Erya* 爾雅, *juan* 1 ("Shigu" 釋詁) (CHANT 1.72), gives the concept cluster that includes *sui* as 豫、寧、綏、康、柔、安, all words describing high-functioning ease and great prosperity. That this connection was in their minds can be seen from *Hou Han shu* 10A.426: 綏靜四海 (see below).

[94]E.g., *Han shu* 22.1033.

[95]*Han shu* 23.1110.

[96]*Han shu* 23.1110n1.

[97]*Hou Han shu* 45.1524. The *Bohu tong*, *juan* 4 ("Zhu fa" 誅伐 section), explains that heaven-and-earth (the cosmic order) plays at least as much a role as the parents in giving birth to and sustaining a child: 人為貴，人皆天所生也。託父母氣而生耳。王者以養長而教之，故父不得專也.

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offset by her unforgiving attitude toward any of her clansmen who were guilty of wrongdoing. In this she exemplified the ideal character, "exacting with oneself while making allowances for others" (*xiang nei er lüe wai* 詳內而略外).[98] Possibly, consideration of the early precarity of her lofty position outweighed authoritarian impulses, as it had with some emperors earlier on. We will never know. What is clear is this: while her acts of imperial grace and unstinting praise for "reasonable officials"[99] imparted a particular tone to her reign, it did not mark her as a unique ruler with particularly feminine qualities—just a much finer ruler than her husband Hedi or her successor, Andi, by all accounts.[100] Note, too, that in her judiciousness she was faithfully honoring the model set by Deng Yu 禹, her paternal grandfather, who insisted that any good fortune that came to his progeny was due to his scrupulous conduct as judge: "I have led crowds of millions, and I never let an unfair sentence of murder be inflicted. In later generations, surely the family fortunes will have occasion to rise!"[101]

Still, two incidents show Deng Sui in a less forgiving light, and both events loom large in the modern biographies supplied for her by Keith McMahon and Rafe de Crespigny: the first is her initial response to Du Gen's forthright memorial reproving her for not putting Prince You [or Hu] (the future Andi) on the throne as soon as he came of age, and the second, her harsh punishment of her cousin Deng Kang. Let us examine these incidents a bit more closely, for throughout her long tenure in power, Deng Sui only twice lost her temper, if the extant narratives can be trusted. When goaded by Du Gen, a male member of an allied family who was far too free with his criticisms of her failure to relinquish the throne to a Liu-clan heir,[102] Deng Sui's brutal beating of Du Gen seems an exceptional outburst, very much out of character in an otherwise mild and benevolent reign, perhaps a display of anger calculated to send a forceful message to her restive male relatives: the Deng clan males should expect to receive no unearned titles and gifts, simply because she wielded supreme power at court. In any case, similar outbursts had been displayed by exemplary male emperors before her, Wendi and Chengdi among them.[103] What mattered, in the end, was whether the throne could be persuaded to regret the outburst and feel chastened by it.[104] Then, too, the Dus were hardly

[98]Ruan Yuan, *Gongyang zhuan*, 245-2; *Zuozhuan*, 12-1, for Lord Yin, Year 1.

[99]*Hou Han shu* 76.2469. These officials made accommodations to local customs.

[100]This is confirmed in *Hou Han shu* 5.203 (校 1): 和、安、順、桓四帝無功德，不宜稱宗.

[101]*Hou Han shu* 10A.419.

[102]*Hou Han shu* 10A.430.

[103]Wendi was famous for his appreciation of fair-minded and upright judges (*pingzheng zhi li* 平正之吏), as in *Han shu* 49.2294, but when he was frightened, he called for the death penalty for a careless official; his most famous judge, Zhang Shizhi opposed his call (*Shi ji* 102.2754). The case of Zhangdi has been treated extensively in Michael Nylan and Trenton Wilson, "A Brief History of Daring," in *Emotions across Cultures: Classical Greece and China*, 75–142, ed. David Konstan and Yang Huang (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2022). Deng Sui described herself in an edict as in constant fear and trembling, as she helped her husband to make policy (*Hou Han shu* 4.197 [朕且權佐助聽政，兢兢寅畏]).

[104]One famous case recorded in *Shi ji* 102.2754 concerns Zhang Shizhi 張釋之 (fl. 177–170 BCE), who served as Superintendent of Trials under Wendi: as an imperial procession was crossing a bridge, a local onlooker emerged from under the bridge and startled Wendi's horse. Wendi ordered the person to be detained and sent to Zhang Shizhi for interrogation. As a written law stipulated a fine as the correct punishment for a failure to clear the road during an imperial procession, Zhang sentenced the person accordingly. Wendi was outraged, as he wanted the offender executed, but Zhang Shizhi persuaded him to relent by reminding Wendi of the importance of preserving people's faith in the reliable application of the

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disinterested parties, and the fact that the Dus joined forces with a group from Yingchuan 潁川 is suggestive, since Nanyang and Yingchuan were hotbeds of factionalism.[105] That Du Gen went into self-imposed exile in Nan 南 commandery, far to the south of the capital, where he worked as a wine-maker, but promptly claimed a reward from Andi, upon his accession in 121, is also suggestive.

In deciding how to proceed, Deng Sui had to weigh court convention against the probable consequences of putting an immature person such as Andi on the throne. For by this time Deng Sui would have realized that Andi's initial promise as a clever child had not borne fruit, and so she had to consider the interests of the empire when deciding to stick to or reverse her course of action.[106] Certainly, later events confirmed that Andi was not cut out for the onerous role of ruler, as multiple passages in the early histories attest.

Turning to Deng Kang, a cousin of Sui, we find that late in Deng Sui's reign (ca. 120), Kang was very concerned that the dowager empress had so long attended court and made policy. Terrified that he would be implicated in her wrongdoing, on the pretext of illness, he failed to attend the required court audiences. When the dowager empress sent a palace attendant to inquire of him, the young woman, as it turned out (not unlike other palace servants of the time), had been too free in her comings and goings and had earned a bad reputation; still worse, the person Sui dispatched had also been a former servant in Deng Kang's household, who had then had affairs with the so-called Great Men of the Palace.[107] When Kang learned that she had come, he upbraided her, saying, "You left our house! How dare you come bringing your foul self here!" The woman was furious, and upon her return she reported that Deng Kang was only pretending to be ill and that his words had been anything but contrite. The dowager empress then had Kang dismissed from office. He was sent home to his fief, and his name was struck from the registers of eligible candidates for office. He then went into self-exile until the coast was clear and Deng Sui was dead.

Earlier in her reign, not coincidentally, Deng Sui had sent a formal notice to her paternal nephew Deng Bao 豹,[108] Overseer of Henan, and to Deng Kang, then Cavalry Colonel, among others, saying,

> The reason I have ordered your sons to be placed in this institution of learning is this: in truth of late they showed signs of inheriting the bad habits exhibited by many princes, and with time they will become accustomed to coarse and lax behavior. I note that their cunning and artifice is increasing constantly. As they are deficient in Five Classics learning, they are not being guided by those

laws. Rather than enforcing the will of the ruler, Zhang argued, the law was to be "shared" by the ruler and his people.

[105]*Hou Han shu* 67.2183ff. The Deng base was Nanyang; the Dus, in Chang'an and Yingchuan.

[106]Du Gen lambasted her for relying on palace eunuchs, but the Eastern Han founder had set the precedents here.

[107]The older among the palace attendants were called Great Men of the Palace (suggesting how much informal power they had accrued).

[108]Deng Bao, a cousin of Sui, killed himself shortly after Andi ascended the throne in 121. Initially, the court architect, in which position he won plaudits, Deng Bao later became Overseer of Henan 河南尹, despite the objections that such a sensitive post should not be filled by a member of a *waiqi* clan.

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> precepts. They are on the point of losing their elevated positions .... They do not know right from wrong. This is, in fact, the origin of calamity .... Earnestly I order the young ones to emulate their forebears' virtues above and ponder below the basic ideas embedded in the edicts and other authoritative writings.[109] .... Let them get down to work in earnest![110]

Here Deng Sui, if anything, proved her exemplary status, insofar as she, like so many other classical authors, was not only aware of the importance of classical learning to the continuing health of the body politic and its ruling line, but she acted upon those insights. Notably, three years after this incident, in 112, Deng Kang was permitted to succeed to his father's marquisate after the death of his elder brother Lang 良. Not quite a decade later, during Andi's reign, Deng Kang not only escaped criticism, but eventually was awarded the honorific title of "Specially Advanced," which allowed him to stay at court rather than retire to his fief, presumably on the principle of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." Nonetheless, it is abundantly clear from the record that Deng Kang never cultivated a sense of decorum. Deng Kang's language was intemperate and profoundly disrespectful to an imperial messenger. Under another regime such an outburst might have earned Kang a charge of *lèse-majesté*, as he was *yin* to her *yang*, a subordinate. Not for the first time, he had overstepped his authority and needed to be taught prudence and better manners.

Conclusion

Readers must rely mainly on posthumous assessments of Deng Sui (most drawn from Fan Ye's *Hou Han shu*) to weigh the startlingly different accounts of her reign, aside from a eulogy praising Deng Sui to the skies and Deng Sui's own self-appraisal, composed during her final illness. As readers will soon discover, these summaries of her rule are not much easier to parse than the omens reported of her time in power.

Her *Hou Han shu* biography includes this flattering assessment:

> From the time when the dowager empress began overseeing the court as regent, there had been floods and droughts for ten years; also, invasions from the barbarians on all the frontiers, and banditry was on the increase in the inner provinces. **Every time she heard people were starving, she would perhaps not sleep until daybreak and reduce her expenses, in order to rescue others from the deprivations and disasters. Therefore, the empire was eventually restored to peace and the harvests once more became abundant.**[111] .... Once again there were floods. And in the eastern provinces, there was mass starvation. The simplest fare of green onions she lived on, setting a personal example for the

[109]See Sarah Allan, "On *Shu* 書 (Documents) and the Origin of the *Shang shu* 尚書 (Ancient Documents), in Light of Recently Discovered Bamboo Slip Manuscripts," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 75.3 (2012), 547–57.

[110]*Hou Han shu* 10A.428. NB: I have here merged two separate edicts, as both were directed to the thoughtless members of the nobility, with Deng Kang and his wayward children prime examples of this group.

[111]*Hou Han shu* 10A.425–26.

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> crowds below. She reduced the tasty delicacies, and she forfeited her fast horses, so that all the food could be donated to the masses. **Such was her care and concern for them that she treated them like newborn babies in swaddling clothes. She conquered her own inclinations; she sought out people to tell her of her faults. From obscurity she raised up good men to prestigious posts. She upheld government policies that facilitated ease for everyone. Everywhere [like the sage-kings Yao and Shun] she promulgated teachings that fostered tolerance and liberality**.[112]

As all these phrases marked in bold are the types of praise used of exemplary male rulers, from the time of the *Documents* classic compilation onward, this assessment is indisputably favorable. Moreover, much of the portrait supplied here can be verified by other sources, especially her emphasis on curtailing the imperial expenses.[113]

Deng Sui herself, on the point of death, offered a somewhat less rosy self-appraisal in her final edict, which nonetheless emphasized her willingness to serve others and her concern for the reputation and longevity of the ruling Liu clan:

> We consider that We ourselves lack virtue. Entrusted with the task of acting as mother to the entire realm,[114] We have been stingy with gifts of grace, unlike Heaven, and so it is that your empress is to depart early from this life [as well-deserved punishment], which is a source of great sorrow.
> During the Yanping period [106], the realm was without a proper ruler. We had a frightening prospect before us of vile misfortune, it being more precarious than the proverbial pile of eggs. Diligently, most diligently, We worked Ourselves to the bone, never daring to consider my 10,000 carriages a source of true pleasure. Above We wanted not to cheat Heaven or be disgraced before the previous emperors. Below [on earth] We did not want to offend others or turn Our back on cherished ambitions. Truly We were focused on rescuing and regulating the Hundred Families,[115] in order to settle and give peace to the Liu clan.

To these portraits of Deng Sui, we might add a third testimony, this time from a near contemporary. In discussing the laudatory posthumous title chosen for Deng Sui, Cai Yong 蔡邕 (132–192) commended her for making people see how useless it was to

[112]*Hou Han shu* 10A.426. This phrase "relying on liberality," borrowed from the "Yao dian" chapter of the *Documents* classic, appears repeatedly in the edicts of Zhangdi, Hedi, Deng Sui's child emperors, and her own final edict; see *Hou Han shu* 3.133, 4.180, 10A.426. Compare the edicts from Wuyi guangchang, dated to 108 and 110, which also speak of working hard to uphold lenience and harmony, while reducing punishments, in imitation of Heaven's gracious model (勉崇寬和，敬若浩天). Zhu Mu's 朱穆 (100–163) essay in "In Praise of Liberality" ("Chong hou lun" 崇厚論) shows that this concept was not gendered.

[113]Cf. *Xu Han zhi* 6.3151n1 ("Liyi" 禮儀, xia 下), citing Ding Fu's 丁孚 *Hanyi* 漢儀 (Han Ceremonial) describing the impressive ceremonies in Mingdi's reign, in 64, after his mother died. Deng Sui thought the burial services too extravagant, and after this, the expenses were reduced from earlier precedents (自此皆降損於前事也).

[114]This may explain why Deng Sui gifted principled women with special honors; see *Hou Han shu* 5.229.

[115]*Baixing* 百姓 has two well-attested meanings in Han: (1) the families of the highest standing; and (2) the farming population. Here the ambiguity works well, for Deng Sui labored tirelessly on behalf of both groups.

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play the sycophant with the members of her inner circle (*bu'e jinqi* 不阿近戚).[116] In this connection, we should note that those who expected access to the court through bribery and flattery were put on notice that it would be futile to try to utilize their connections with the Deng males. That the Deng clan later fell was hardly Deng Sui's fault: while in Fan Ye's view, the downfall of the Deng clan was virtually pre-ordained, it being in "the nature of things," responsibility clearly lay with Andi himself, who was notoriously cruel, and with the clan of Andi's empress, the Yans 閻, who quickly began calling the shots at court. Sensing danger, the members of the Deng clan continued to defend themselves on the reasonable grounds that strict limits had been placed on their family's privileges. The Yans were adamant: the Dengs must go.

Whether we speak of commands, structure, feelings, or powers, the predicament of the consort clans in general or the Dengs in particular, Fan Ye's sketch alerts us to the tragic dilemma of female power: the very existence of the *waiqi* 外戚 necessary to continue imperial rule could not but threaten the ruling house, due to the calculations about the succession generated by a heady mix of familial love, high status, sexual attraction, and the relentless urgency to produce viable heirs.[117] Even when empresses did much to allay others' fears, rival consort clans were quick to seize upon any pretext to oust them from court. Deng Kang was, in fact, the sole member of the Deng clan who was spared in the aftermath of the Yan-clan vengeance. Nonetheless, there were instances in Han history when a bloodbath did not follow a change in heirs and empresses, since many empresses were chosen from prominent intermarried allies of the ruling house, so Deng Sui was hardly deluded when she did her best to spare her siblings and cousins from execution.

In view of the foregoing, we should tread lightly when parsing the harsh concluding Assessment offered by Fan Ye, as translated in the Appendix I. After all, the Annals chapter for Andi[118] condemns Andi as a person "whose character was immature."[119] Deng Sui, it implies, as a classicist, should have heeded the old proverb that says, "If a hen gives the morning call, then, it means that the ruling house has been drained [of effective power]."[120] Nor was her response to Heaven's omens appropriate, according to Fan Ye's compilation: offices were sold, people were forced to move away from the lands liable to invasion, too often she had high-ranking officials take the blame for her mistakes. Nonetheless, we are told, Andi, once in power, made more consequential errors, by ceding power to the wrong sort of officials (e.g., Andi's favorite Feng Shi

[116]See *Cai Zhonglang wenji* 蔡中郎文集 (*Collected Works of Cai Yong*), *juan* 8 (Hexi Denghou Shiyi 和熹鄧后謚議 entry).

[117]See *Hou Han shu* 10A.400. That no Eastern Han empress from Ming to Huan produced a son led Bielenstein to conclude that emperors refused relations with their official consorts, who were chosen for political reasons and to whom they had no romantic attachments; see Hans Bielenstein, "The Restoration of the Han Dynasty," Vol. 4 ("The Government") 4:127, *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 51 (1979), 1–300, cited in *Empresses and Consorts: Selections from Chen Shou's Records of the Three States with Pei Songzhi's Commentary*, translated with annotations and introduction by Robert Joe Cutter and William Gordon Crowell (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), 165n92.

[118]*Hou Han shu* 10A.400–401 ascribes the start of the rot not to Deng Sui, but to Zhangdi.

[119]*Hou Han shu* 5.243.

[120]"Mushi" 牧誓 chap. in the *Documents* (10.3). Serruys (private communication) preferred, "It is the house, it must be searched."

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馮石, and his wetnurse Wang Sheng) and by alienating some of his most loyal subjects (e.g., Yang Zhen 楊震).[121] By such actions did the ruling line's legitimacy in "those days steadily weaken to the point of insignificance" (*bi ri er wei* 彼日而微) and "immediately there declined Heaven's path" (i.e., the Han fortunes; *sui jin tianlu* 遂浸天路).[122] De Crespigny presumes that Fan Ye assigns Deng Sui the lion's share of the blame for the decline of the dynastic fortunes in the second century of Eastern Han rule; I disagree, since Sui is not even named as subject in the concluding paragraph of Andi's Annals.

To delve deeply into the gender constructions found in Deng Sui's biography and additional sources relevant to her reign, we must begin with two topics that were foremost in the minds of many in Deng Sui's time, judging from the extant sources: the position of women in general vs. the position of favored palace women in particular. These topics are by no means synonymous, and the modern tendency to extract evidence from one topic to apply to the second is to miss the nuances that are embedded in the literary productions of the early empires, which were written by and for members of the governing elite, male and female.[123] The texts of the early empires speak remarkably little about women in general, as only certain aspects of life were shared among all women, regardless of standing (hereditary or ascribed), for example, their earlier maturity when compared to males of the same age, their tendency to live longer than their male peers, plus the important fact that most women "married out" of their natal households, and consequently were bound by their "three followings [in law]" (*san cong* 三從): when young, their status and livelihood depended upon their fathers, in whose house they resided; upon marriage, their status and livelihood depended upon their husband, in whose house they resided; and at widowhood, their status and livelihood might depend upon their sons and heirs, if they resided in their houses. Despite later gender constructions, *sancong* means that women shared the same *jue* 爵 ("order of honor") as their husbands;[124] it does not describe "the three men to whom obedience is owed" by females. Two statements are true of all men and women: first, that "wife and husband share one body" 婦與夫一體也, and second, that "one *yin* and one *yang* complete each other" 陰陽相成, meaning "one husband

[121]Andi's enfeoffment of his wetnurse offended all the precedents: 變亂舊典 (*Hou Han shu* 63.2074). For the prohibitions against giving stipends and posts to those without merit, see, e.g., the *Odes* classic (Mao ode no. 112, "Fa tan" 伐檀): 無功而受祿. 君子不得進仕爾; see Ruan Yuan, *Odes* (210–11), which is quoted in the *Mencius*.

[122]*Hou Han shu* 5.243.

[123]Bruno Latour regards male/female as one of the modern dichotomies, and he is right to do so. Elite males and females were the only people capable of reading the elevated prose and poetry reproduced in the transmitted sources dating to the Zhanguo, Qin-Han, and Wei-Jin eras.

[124]This is clearly stated both in the early Western Han Zhangjiashan "Ernian lüling" 二年律令 and in *Bohu tong*, chap. 1.4 ("Jue" 爵); cf. chap. 9.38 ("Jiaqu" 嫁娶). Elsewhere, e.g., in chap. 8 ("Tiandi" 天地) and chap. 3 ("Wu xing" 五行), other corroborating statements are made, including 陰陽相對 (8.3) and 陰陽共敘共生; 陰陽交時 (3.29). Zhangjiashan shows that the order of property inheritance was not identical to the order of inheritance for the *jue*. Helpful is Zhu Xueyuan 朱雪源 and Li Huanquan 李恒全, "'Ci min jue, Ci niujiu' yu Handai puhuixing shehui fuli yanjiu" 賜民爵, 賜牛酒與漢代普惠性社會福利研究, *Shehui kexue* 社會科學 2021.1, 153–66. Note that the *Bohu tong* compendium of ca. 100 was compiled during Deng Sui's lifetime. Each form of *qi* is aspectual, rather than an entity. For example, the light-giving sources of sun, moon, and stars are all *yin*, in some respects, although we tend to associate light with *yang qi*.

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and one wife complete a household" (一夫一婦成一室).[125] Here, *yin* precedes *yang*, because winter precedes summer in the calendar year, but above all, *yin* and *yang* need each other for mutual exchanges and completion. They are complimentary and co-dependent.[126] As Nathan Sivin once observed, even to speak of "connections" or "correlations" may be misleading, if applied to the explicit homologies posited between cosmos, body, and the body politic, since "ideas of Nature, state, and body were so interdependent that they are best considered a single complex."[127] To secure a balance between them was ideal.[128]

Whereas later Chinese constructions are apt to place much more emphasis on the father–son or parent–child relation, in Han the ritual texts and other masterworks see the husband and wife team as most generative, and so all the other human relations, including that of parents–children, are derivative and thus secondary to it. That explains why, in late Eastern Han, Xun Shuang 荀爽, then Commissioner of Ceremonial, stated for the record, "In all the many rites, the rite of marriage comes first."[129] Indeed, all ritual is *yin*, by Han standards.[130] Insofar as male and female can be analogized to *yang* and *yin*, respectively, and thus to the combinations spring–summer versus fall–winter, *yang* is said to be "life-giving" (*sheng* 生) but *yin* has multiple admirable aspects: is it low (*bei* 卑); it is the proper position for males to embody when in court service (北面，體陰而行); it participates in life-giving activities (*gong xu gong sheng* 共敘共生); it kills off (*sha* 煞); and it nourishes (*yang* 養). Such complexity stems, quite obviously, from the fact that fall and winter, the two seasons allotted to *yin*, witness both harvest and death, a welcome respite from farming and a turn to valuable sericulture at a time when the skies are higher than the earth.[131]

Turning to women favored at court as imperial bedmates, the rhetorical language becomes much darker, for these court women could easily topple the ruling house, if they interfered with the royal or imperial succession, pushing their own candidates ahead of the lawful heirs. By the *Hou Han shu*, the earlier histories were full of stories about the ruinous effect these favorites exerted on matters of state, including

[125]Both statements are registered in the *Bohu tong* compendium (i.e., compiled during Deng Sui's lifetime). Each form of *qi* is aspectual, rather than an entity. For example, the light-giving sources of sun, moon, and stars are all *yin,* in some respects, although we tend to associate light with *yang qi*.

[126]*Bohu tong*, *juan* 8 ("Ri yue" 日月).

[127]Nathan Sivin, "State, Cosmos, and Body in the Last Three Centuries B.C.," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 55.1 (1995), 5–37.

[128]*Bohu tong*, *juan* 2 ("Sheji" 社稷): 得陰陽中和之氣; *juan* 2 ("Li yue" 禮樂): 律曆以調陰陽; and *juan* 7 ("Xing ming" 姓名), 所以必再拜何？法陰陽也.

[129]*Hou Han shu* 62.2055 (眾禮之中，婚禮為首); cf. *Empresses and Consorts*, trans. Cutter and Crowell. For the status of the Xun family after unification, see Chen Ch'i-yun, *Hsün Yüeh (A.D. 148–209): The Life and Reflections of an Early Medieval Confucian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975). Needless to say, Xun hailed from one of most formidably learned households in the empire, as a lineal descendant of Xunzi.

[130]*Bohu tong*, *juan* 2 ("Li yue" 禮樂): 禮者，陰也.

[131]*Bohu tong*, *juan* 7 ("Wen zhih" 文質); 南方陽極而陰始起. For this reason, the formal marriage ceremonies begin by "*yang* humbling itself before *yin*" 陽下陰, which willingness to cede civilly to others in the community and court becomes the basis of all the ritual exchanges.

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inheritance.[132] It is in that arena, then, that it most counts that women are "outside" in at least three important senses, once they enter the palace precincts:

First, they were *wai* 外, insofar as palace women were not part of the regular official administration (*guan* 官); they were not ranked in the usual way, and their stipends were paid for out of the imperial privy purse (*shaofu* 少府), not out of the funds dedicated for regular administrative purposes.[133] Nonetheless, the palace women were put in "in charge of" the all-important activities of the imperial domestic life, including mourning, sacrifices, and the forging of alliances (*binke* 賓客, literally clients and retainers), as these so often depended upon marriage contracts,[134] suggesting how powerful was the place of high-ranking women in Han times. While the Tianzi worshipped heaven or the sky gods, the empress worships Earth and she was also in charge of the ancestral sacrifices.[135]

Second, they were *wai* 外, as part of the *waiqi* 外戚, maternal relatives of the emperors, a special group who occupied a unique and uniquely problematic place, insofar as few of them had earned "merit" on the battlefield or in regular court offices, the two arenas where merit was typically tested. Instead, some had won places through feminine charms or wiles, or worse, and those of high standing were sometimes thought to be all the more dangerous, as they and their families had ready-made court supporters in abundance.

Three, they were *wai* 外, insofar as convention dictated that they must rule "behind the screen," which put a physical and logistical barrier between them and the regular members of the administration, from the chancellor on down, while bringing them closer to eunuchs and other palace functionaries, on whose picture of events and

[132]*Hou Han shu* 10A.399: 妖倖毀政之符，外姻亂邦之迹，前史載之詳矣. On the considerable confusion and contradictory precedents and pronouncements regarding such rites, see Michael Nylan and Nicholas Constantino, "On the Rites and Rites Controversies in Mid-Eastern Han," 241–84, in *Autour du "Traité des rites": de la canonisation du rituel à la ritualisation de la société* [English title: *All about the "Rites": From Canonised Ritual to Ritualised Society*], ed. Anne Cheng and Stéphane Feuillas (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2022); the text is published online on the Collége de France Website: https://books.openedition.org/cdf/12918.

[133]This is explicitly stated in commentaries to the *Hou Han shu* chapter 10A devoted to the favorite back palace women; see *Hou Han shu* 10A.399n6. The imperial privy purse was administered by the lowest-ranking of the Nine Ministers. Early on in Han, the ordinary administrative budget was supervised by the *da sinong* 大司農 (formerly the *zhisu neishi* 治粟內史) at a high ministerial rank (eighth of nine ministerial posts); later this post was supervised by the *situ* 司徒. Emphasizing the similarities between the male and female palace postholders is Olivia Milburn, "Palace Women in the Former Han Dynasty (202 BCE–CE 23): Gender and Administrational History in the Early Imperial Era," *Nan Nü* 18.2 (2016), 195–223. Yan Shigu's 顏師古 (581–645) commentary notes that the women are assigned ranks in the orders of honor (*jue* 爵), but this is not the regular officialdom; there is no listing of female ranks in either the *Han shu* or *Xu Han shu* treatise on officialdom (*Han shu* 19A–B; *zhi* 24). For the rankings, see *Han shu* chapter 97A.3935, devoted to the imperial consort clans; also, the *Hou Han shu* biography of Ban Gu, again in commentary by Yan Shigu (*Hou Han shu* 40A.1341). Practices and stipends varied a great deal over the course of the two Han dynasties: see *Hou Han shu* 10A.400, for example.

[134]*Hou Han shu* 10A.399.

[135]The *Liji* contradicts itself on the scope of the sacrifices offered by the Tianzi. By *Han shu* 25A.1193, the *sangong* worship the Five Marchmounts; the local lords, the Four Great Rivers. By *Han shu* 99A.4091, a dowager empress has this duty; cf. Hedi's own statement in *Hou Han shu* 10A.421.

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people outside court they often had to rely.[136] (One sees that when Deng Sui relied on the serving maid to contact Deng Kang.)

Cutter and Crowell get it right when they opine that the compilers of the sources for *Hou Han shu* and *Sanguo zhi*,

> felt uncomfortable with the idea of women occupying positions of authority normally held by men. Perhaps of even greater concern ... was the possibility that a woman could be the means by which males from outside the imperial clan might usurp the powers of the emperor. In their eyes, it was acceptable for an imperial consort to act as regent ... as long as she worked in the interests of the imperial clan.[137]

By that standard, Deng Sui cannot be blamed for malfeasance. A separation of powers was the key point; as Zhongchang Tong's 仲長統 (180–220) *Plain Speaking* (*Changyan* 昌言) put it for Cao Cao 曹操: "Do not make marriage alliances with those who make policies; do not entrust governing to those with whom you make marriage alliances."[138] By the official account, Deng Sui's "only source of anxiety was the ruling line and realm" (*wei you guo ye* 唯憂國也). Unlike many others, she was fully cognizant of her obligations, perhaps because she had been raised in the higher echelons of power her entire life.[139]

An interim conclusion might be this: the Western Han court never properly differentiated the male and female spheres of influence at court, and from Wudi's court onwards, far too many women were introduced into the back palace for the emperor's delectation.[140] In Eastern Han, they chose four candidates for the post of Tianzi that were underage from the pool of royal children; six empresses and dowager empresses reigned as virtual rulers. As the *Hou Han shu* charges,[141] these powerful women, "one and all," decided polices "from behind the screen," while some entrusted their own fathers or elder brothers to run the empire; each of them selected child

[136]This is the very complaint made about Deng Sui; see *Hou Han shu* 43.1473, by Zhu Mu 朱穆. Zhu Mu's "In Praise of Liberality" traces problems back specifically to this reliance on eunuchs, rather than on regular members of the bureaucracy, in a highly rhetorical (and historically suspect) complaint about Deng Sui as having made everything worse in this regard. Most other scholars trace problems back to Zhangdi or Hedi, rather than to Deng Sui.

[137]*Empresses and Consorts*, trans. Cutter and Crowell, 40. I have omitted nothing significant in using the ellipses.

[138]*Hou Han shu* 49.1646, 1658 (夫使為政者，不當與之婚姻；婚姻者，不當使之為政也); *Sanguo zhi*, "Wei shu," 21.620.

[139]*Han shu* 97B.4011. Ban Gu wrote there, "Now, as we all know, in cases where a woman rises to power, up from obscurity, coming to embody and be one body with the most noble of men, this is to attain the ultimate in wealth and honor, and yet not to have *earned* it through meritorious deeds, either on the battlefield or in office. This is, in fact, what experts in the Way dread, recognizing it as the source for good and ill fortune." Note that "experts in the Way" is my translation for Daojia 道家, which clearly cannot refer to "Daoists" here.

[140]*Hou Han shu* 10A.399.

[141]*Hou Han shu* 10A.401: 權歸女主 ... 莫不定策帷帘，委事父兄，貪孩童以久其政，抑明賢以專其威.

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emperors "to prolong their reigns" and each "suppressed famous worthies" to arrogate more power and authority to themselves.[142]

If we look more closely at the rhetorical framework into which Deng Sui's court life was inserted, we find that at least one of these charges cannot be laid at the feet of Deng Sui: unlike Dowager Empress Lü, after her first years in office, when she was still mourning, Sui did not delegate any significant powers to her male relatives, and indeed she did her best to remove them physically from court altogether. As lady in the palace, she herself had been the victim of vicious slanders that occasioned bad omens, a fact corroborated in multiple accounts.[143] There is no suggestion that she sought to interfere in succession matters while her husband Hedi was alive, or to keep Hedi from enjoying other sexual partners. To the contrary. Like Taisi 太姒, King Wen's wife celebrated in the first song in the *Odes* classic, she introduced him to multiple sexual partners, with the aim of enabling the conception of future heirs to the throne.[144] She may or may not have manipulated the succession, yet she is not charged with unworthy conduct in one pointed critique, and it is clear that her chosen candidate, the future Andi (who was due to be capped as an adult in two years or so), failed to fulfill his early promise.[145] (Earlier, recall that with Shangdi, she chose the only child of Hedi who was not disqualified from holding the position of Tianzi, but he died in less than a year.[146] That he was but an infant may be less germane here, and there is no indication that Deng Sui was implicated in his untimely death.)[147] In all fairness, it is hard to say that Deng Sui made it a habit of "suppressing" worthies, when she availed herself at many junctures of the wise council of Ban Zhao and other worthy figures, consulting them repeatedly on matters of state.[148] And once, when she was fed up with Du Gen's reprimands, she threatened to kill him, but soon relented, when Ban Zhao admonished her.

[142]Indeed, we are told that she sought out wise advice, from the most highly qualified assistants and consultants, starting with Ban Zhao, Cai Lun, and Liu Zhen 劉珍, among others, all of whom had been well-trained in the Classics. Her brothers, too, sought to protect wise officials. See note 71 for one instance.

[143]*Xu Han zhi* 15.3308 ("Wuxing zhi" 3). Fan Ye and other sources leave us in no doubt that Deng Sui was innocent, when it came to Empress Yin, her predecessor in Hedi's bed: she attended upon Empress Yin, "day and night in fear and trembling." Reportedly, she had good relations with those of the same rank, and often "she suppressed her own impulses to humble herself to them. Even the lowliest servants in the palace had experienced her kindnesses." And she commiserated with Empress Yin's plight after her deposal (*Hou Han shu* 10A.423).

[144]*Hou Han shu* 10A.420. There was some thought, apparently, that empresses who had not borne healthy children did not merit posthumous titles (*Hou Han shu* 9.369n1; 9.370, translated in the next note). Ascribed to a later reign, it is hard to believe that this kind of thinking was new in eras after Deng Sui.

[145]A memorial submitted during Xiandi's reign (*Hou Han shu* 9.370), said, "Four emperors—Hedi, Andi, Shundi, and Huandi—had no merit whatsoever, and so they should not be called *zong* 宗 ('revered imperial ancestors'). Moreover, none of the three empresses—Hedi's mother, née Liang (the Gonghuai 恭懷 Empress); Andi's grandmother, Lady Song (the Jingyin 敬隱 Empress); and Shundi's mother, née Song (the Gongming 恭愍 Empress)—were real empresses, who had been married formally. None of these should be called 'empress,' and all should have their honorific titles withdrawn."

[146]*Xu Han zhi* 9.3197 gives the figure of roughly 300 days before he died.

[147]Given how often the standard histories report slanders, this is significant.

[148]*Hou Han shu* 84.2785: 及鄧太后臨朝，與聞政事. Two incidents are especially prominent: (1) the matter of Deng Zhi's permission to leave the court after his mother's death; and (2) the matter of Du Gen, whose no-holds-barred attack on Deng Sui had angered her. See *Hou Han shu* 84.2785; 10A.430.

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Careful inspection of Deng Sui's actions and the charges leveled against her provide an admirable lens through which to gauge the entanglements of virtue and merit, apportioned roles, and institutional structures at the Eastern Han court among members of the governing elite, with our perceptions only heightened by the sense of tragedy that hovers over her figure and her efforts in at least two respects. First, her brothers were forced to commit suicide soon after her death, despite the rare restraint she had displayed during her lifetime, insofar as she never allowed them to assume high honors or excessive privileges, riding on the coattails of her extraordinary privilege.[149] Second, her adoptive son, Emperor An, chosen partly because his studiousness appealed to Deng Sui, was significantly less virtuous, more barbaric, and more subject to the whims of eunuch and female intrigue than Dowager Deng herself had ever been, as the *Hou Han shu* appraisal of his reign makes clear.[150]

As we have seen, to conduct a thorough analysis of Deng Sui's reign is no mean feat, insofar as it requires careful attention to tropes in the early writings, received and excavated, that speak of Han motivations and institutional structures, and these are offset by a full awareness that what survives today is but a small fraction of the writings that were once in circulation. Fortunately, two excavated edicts (fragments?) found in the Wuyi guangchang cache near Changsha, translated in Appendix II, inspire a measure of confidence, because her edicts look identical to those issued by her male counterparts.

Possibly, in Eastern Han, some gender norms may have been changing in subtle ways. Deng Sui's biography suggests as much, for it was Deng Xun 訓, her father (and not her mother), who recognized her formidable talents and encouraged her to engage in activities that showed her superiority over her brothers.[151] Early on, local soothsayers saw in her something like that of the male founder of the Shang dynastic fortunes.[152] Thus, she appears as the fruit and culmination of the good deeds performed by her grandfather and father, not their antithesis.[153] Several points in Deng's biography suggest that from an early age she was determined to combine the best points of "feminine" and "masculine" behavior among elites, as in this passage:

Her mother often upbraided her, saying, "You do not practice women's work, to supply clothes to wear. If you set your sights on becoming erudite, do you think you might be chosen as court Academician?" As Deng Sui took it seriously that she was acting against her mother's advice, by day she practiced her women's work and by night, she recited her Classics.[154]

[149]That they were themselves the victims of slander the histories state; see *Hou Han shu* 10A.430n6, for example.

[150]*Hou Han shu* 5.203n1: 和、安、順、桓四帝無功德; cf. *Hou Han shu* 9.370.

[151]*Hou Han shu* 10A.418: "Her father Xun thought her extraordinary, and there was no matter, large or small, that he did not talk over with her in detail."

[152]*Hou Han shu* 10A.418–19. Soothsayers had better reputations then than now; on this see Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛, *Handai xueshu shilue* 漢代學術史略 (Taipei: Qiye, 1972), passim. Of course, many early anecdotes and histories feature famous soothsayers; by and large, the logograph *shi* 史 in this period includes such diviners, as shown by Eric Henry, "Who were the Shi 史?," paper presented at Meeting #24 of the SouthEast Early China Roundtable (SEECR) on October 24, 2020.

[153]See the remarks of Deng Gai 陔, Deng Xun, and Deng Yu, as recorded in Deng Sui's *Hou Han shu* biography (10A.419).

[154]*Hou Han shu* 10A.418. Here, her response to a bad omen seems to have been praised as appropriate, especially if one reads *yi* 議 instead of *yi* 儀, as some do: 無非無儀，酒食是議.

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Deng Sui could hardly have been ignorant of the range of sex and gender conventions, and her awareness goes some way to explain her patterns of gift-giving to privileged females and to the worthy eunuch Cai Lun.[155] Furthermore, Deng Sui saw to it that both her father and mother were mourned with equal gravity and pomp. She deliberately looked to male and female models in her rule. But most impressively, Deng Sui took personal responsibility for her actions, a point emphasized over and over again in her biography.[156] So, I leave readers with but two suggestions: let us not be too quick to reduce complexities to dichotomies (including those of male/female, Confucian and non-), and let us not prematurely assume that a love of classical learning in Eastern Han required a firm embrace of the precepts and values (more highly gendered) identified with later Neo-Confucians.[157]

Appendix I

和熹鄧皇后 HHS 10A.418–30

和熹鄧皇后諱綏，太傅禹之孫也。父訓，護羌校尉。母陰氏，光烈皇后從弟女也。后年五歲，太傅夫人愛之，自為翦髮。夫人年高目冥，誤傷后額，忍痛不言。左右見者怪而問之，后曰：「非不痛也，太夫人哀憐為斷髮，難傷老人意，故忍之耳。」

The Hexi[158] Empress Deng (tabooed personal name Sui) was grandchild of the Senior Tutor, Deng Yu.[159] Her father, Xun, was Colonel Protecting Against the Qiang; her mother née Yin, was the niece of Guangwu's empress on her father's side.[160] When the future empress was but five *sui*, Deng Yu's lady so loved her that she wanted to cut Deng Sui's hair by herself. But Deng Yu's wife was old by then, and her eyesight was poor. By mistake, Deng Yu's lady wounded [with the scissors] Deng Sui's forehead, but the child bore the pain and said nothing. Those in the domestic circle who witnessed it wondered at it, and asked the child about it. She explained, "It is not that it did not hurt, but my granny expressed such care and solicitude for me in cutting my hair that I found it hard to cause such an old person distress, and so I simply bore it."[161]

六歲能《史書》。十二通《詩》、《論語》。諸兄每讀經傳，輒下意難問。志在典籍，不問居家之事。母常非之，曰：「汝不習女工以供衣服，乃更務學，寧當舉博士邪？」后重違母言，晝修婦業，暮誦經典，家人號曰「諸生」。父訓異之，事無大小，輒與詳議。

At the age of six *sui* she was able to master the *Shi Chou pian,* a primer for writing seal script; at twelve she could comprehend the *Odes* and *Analects*. Each time her elder brothers were reciting the Classics and commentaries, they would swoop down on her to quiz her on difficult questions. She was set on learning the precedents; she never asked about housekeeping matters. Her mother often upbraided her, saying, "You do not practice women's work, to supply clothes to wear. If you set your sights on becoming erudite, do you think you might be chosen as court Academician?" As Deng Sui took it seriously that she was acting against

[155]Her biography tells us of the lavish gifts she conferred, including green-canopied carriages, quadrigae of four horses; gold, bolts of varicolored silk; and squares of fine cloth, and, for Lady Feng alone, the red sash worn by kings.

[156]E.g., *Hou Han shu* 10A.424.

[157]These binaries have been listed by Bruno Latour as "modern." Here, I make a move that parallels similar moves found in Yang Shao-yun's "Unauthorized Exchanges: Restrictions on Foreign Trade and Intermarriage in the Tang and Song Empires," *T'oung pao* 108 (2022), 588–645, where he argues against the commonplaces predicated on Tang cosmopolitanism versus Song Confucianism and proto-nationalism.

[158]This is said to be an auspicious posthumous title (p. 418n1).

[159]Deng Yu, Senior Tutor (*taifu*), under Mingdi. Beginning in late Western Han, but especially in Eastern Han, Senior Tutors (to whom the emperor had to ritually defer) were drawn from the consort clan families. Deng Yu's base area is Nanyang, 35 miles, more or less, from Dahuting 打虎亭, aka Mixian 密縣, where splendid murals depict elite women for a banquet and receiving guests.

[160]Precisely, niece of the paternal uncle who is younger.

[161]*Hou Han shu* 10A.418.

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her mother's advice, by day she practiced her women's work, and by night, she recited her Classics. The people in her household called her "the student-scholar." Her father Xun thought her extraordinary, and there was no matter, large or small, that he did not talk over with her in detail.[162]

永元四年，當以選入，會訓卒，后晝夜號泣，終三年不食鹽菜，憔悴毀容，親人不識之。后嘗夢捫天，蕩蕩正青，若有鍾乳狀，迺仰嗽飲之。以訊諸占夢，言堯夢攀天而上，湯夢及天而咭之，斯皆聖王之前占，吉不可言。又相者見后驚曰：「此成湯之法也。」家人竊喜而不敢宣。后叔父陔言：「常聞活千人者，子孫有封。兄訓為謁者，使修石臼河，歲活數千人。天道可信，家必蒙福。」初，太傅禹歎曰：「吾將百萬之眾，未嘗妄殺一人，其後世必有興者。」

In Yongyuan 4 [92], she was on the point of being selected for palace service when it happened that her father Xun died. Day and night the future empress wept and wailed; until the three year's mourning was completed, she ate no salty pickles.[163] So haggard did she become that she lost her looks, and even her family members did not recognize her. At that point, Deng Sui once dreamed that she groped the heavens, which were vast, so vast, and sky-blue. There seemed to be something like a bell-shaped breast [a stalactite?], which she then looked up to[164] and suckled. When a dream-diviner was consulted regarding this, he replied that Yao had once dreamed of climbing up to heaven and that he got to heaven, which he licked.[165] "These were all earlier signs presaging sage-kings. This is more auspicious than I can say!" And moreover, a physiognomer was startled by seeing Sui, "This girl is the very model and likeness of Tang 湯 the Victorious."

Her family members secretly rejoiced, but they did not dare to spread the word. Sui's paternal uncle[166] Gai said, "They always say that when a person lets 1,000 people live, his descendants will be enfeoffed.[167] My elder brother Xun, as Imperial Messenger [*Yezhe*], was to repair the Stone Mortar River Canal,[168] and his acts in a single year saved several thousand lives. Heaven's Way can be trusted. Our family will surely be blanketed with good fortune." Sometime earlier Deng Yu had sighed and said, "I have led crowds of millions, and I never let an unfair sentence of murder be inflicted. In later generations, surely the family fortunes will have occasion to rise."

七年，后復與諸家子俱選入宮。后長七尺二寸，姿顏姝麗，絕異於眾，左右皆驚。八年冬，入掖庭為貴人，時年十六。恭肅小心，動有法度。承事陰后，夙夜戰兢。接撫同列，常克己以下之。雖宮人隸役，皆加恩借。帝深嘉〔愛〕焉。及后有疾，特令后母兄弟入親醫藥，不限以日數。后言於帝曰：「宮禁至重，而使外舍久在內省。上令陛下有幸私之譏。下使賤妾獲不知足之謗。上下交損，誠不願也。」帝曰。「人皆以數入為榮，貴人反以為憂。深自抑損，誠難及也。」

In Yongyuan 7 [95], the future empress was duly entered into the palace quarters with other young women of leading families. Exceedingly tall (seven *chi*, two *cun*), with a bearing and countenance that were captivating, she stood out from the crowd, and the emperor's attendants were all startled. A year later, in winter, she entered the "side court" as Honored Lady (*guiren*), at the age of sixteen *sui*. She was attentive to her duties, grave and cautious; each of her acts exemplified the norms and moderation. She attended upon Empress Yin, "early and late in fear and trembling."[169] With those of the same rank she had good relations,

[162]*Hou Han shu* 10A.418.

[163]In other words, she ate only bland food, to deny herself pleasures during the mourning period.

[164]Or, leaned on (?).

[165]Both Yao and Tang are legendary sage-rulers, each of whom was "founder" of a line of rulers in a sense. Here I read the graph as *shi* 舐, because 419n2 tells me to.

[166]A younger brother of her father.

[167]Is this another reason for lenient treatment by local administrators and higher-ups?

[168]"Canal" has been added for sense. A canal and tributary to the Gu Xi 姑溪 River, Danyang 丹陽 area (today's Jiangsu province), associated with Great Yu's efforts in the same area. While the text leads readers to believe that he fully repaired the canal, in fact, repairs designed to facilitate communications with the Yangchang Granary 羊腸倉 had to be stopped eventually, due to the difficulties of completing them. See *Hou Han shu* 3.136n1.

[169]"Early and late" (*suye* 夙夜) describes faithful execution of one's duties to a superior in Mao odes 13 ("Cai fan" 采蘩), 21 ("Xiaoxing" 小星), 110 ("Zhi hu" 陟岵), 260 ("Zheng min" 烝民), 261 ("Han yi" 韓奕), 271 ("Hao Tian you cheng ming" 昊天有成命), 272 ("Wo jiang" 我將), 286 ("Min yu xiaozi" 閔予小子), and 298 ("You bi" 有駜). Mao ode 194 ("Yu wu zheng" 雨無正) laments the lack of faithful servants using the same phrase. *Zhan jing* 戰兢 in the reduplicative form 戰戰兢兢 appears in two odes, Mao no. 195 ("Xiao min" 小旻) and 196 ("Xiao wan" 小宛), where it describes the salutary dread felt by the prudent

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and often she suppressed her own impulses in order to humble herself before them. Even the lowliest servants in the palace had experienced her kindnesses. The emperor [Hedi] deeply loved her. Once, when his future empress was ill, he gave special permission for her mother and brothers to enter the palace precincts to see to her medicine personally, with no restrictions put on the number of days they could enter. The empress said to the emperor, "It is an extremely serious matter to alter the taboos about entry into the palace precincts, yet you have allowed people from outside for a long time into the inner sanctum. Above, you as ruler may be criticized for unduly favoring me. Below, you cause me, your servant, to be slandered as 'one who does not know when to stop.' Relations between you and me will be harmed, which is something I truly do not wish for." To this the emperor replied, "People all regard multiple entries into the palace as a sign of glory, yet you, my Lady, by contrast, take this to be a source of anxiety, berating yourself deeply. Truly it is hard to measure up to you!"

每有讌會，諸姬貴人競自修整，簪珥光采，裙裳鮮明。而后獨著素，裝服無飾。其衣有與陰后同色者，即時解易。若並時進見，則不敢正坐離立，行則僂身自卑。帝每有所問，常逡巡後對，不敢先陰后言。帝知后勞心曲體，歎曰：「修德之勞，迺如是乎！」後陰后漸疏，每當御見，輒辭以疾。時帝數失皇子，后憂繼嗣不廣，〔恆垂涕歎息〕，數選進才人，以博帝意。

Every time there was a banquet, the palace ladies and every rank would vie to dress themselves up, with ivory hairpins and earrings of lustrous jewels, with brightly colored upper garments and skirts. The empress alone wore plain white silk, unadorned without jewelry. If the color of her robes[170] was the same color as that of Empress Yin, she immediately changed them. When they entered the imperial presence at the same time, Sui did not dare to sit squarely on a mat or stand beside Empress Yin. When walking together, she stooped to lower herself. Every time the emperor spoke to her, she shrank back and was late to reply, as she did not dare to speak before Empress Yin. The emperor understood that Sui struggled to bend, and he sighed, "Such effort expended to cultivate one's virtues! How much should this be emulated!"

Later Empress Yin gradually lost favor. Every time she ought to have had the emperor visit her chambers, suddenly she excused herself on the pretext of illness. At the time, the emperor had repeatedly lost several young sons, and the future empress worried that the field of potential heirs was not vast, so continually in tears and heaving many sighs, she repeatedly selected and pushed forward several women of talent, to broaden the emperor's interests [i.e. objects of affection].[171]

陰后見后德稱日盛，不知所為。遂造祝詛，欲以為害。帝嘗寢病危甚，陰后密言。「我得意，不令鄧氏復有遺類！」后聞，迺對左右流涕言曰。「我竭誠盡心以事皇后，竟不為所祐。而當獲罪於天。婦人雖無從死之義，然周公身請武王之命，越姬心誓必死之分。上以報帝之恩，中以解宗族之禍，下不令陰氏有人豕之譏。」即欲飲藥，宮人趙玉者固禁之，因詐言屬有使來，上疾已愈。后信以為然，迺止。明日，帝果瘳。

When Empress Yin saw that the future empress's favor was growing day by day, she did not know what to do, so she had curses uttered, hoping to inflict harm. On one occasion, the emperor was bedridden and his illness grew dangerously worse. Empress Yin then secretly said, "If I have my way, [in future] there will be no Deng clan progeny!" When the future empress heard this, only then did she say to her attendants, with tears flowing,

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person, male or female. See Michael Nylan and Trenton Wilson, "Circle of Fear in Early China," *Religions* 12.1 (2021), https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12010026.

[170]Strictly speaking, her upper garments.

[171]Han commentaries to Mao ode no. 1 ("Guan ju" 關雎) credited the principal wife of King Wen, the pre-dynastic founder of the Zhou dynastic fortunes, with making the same decision. She was herself named as sage along with her husband. See Jeffrey Riegel, "Eros, Introversion, and the Beginnings of Shijing Commentary," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 57.1 (1997), 143–77; that this reading was not confined to the Mawangdui reading is clear from Stephen Owen's *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Council on East Asian Studies, 1992), on the "Great Preface"; and *Shen Pei shi shuo* 申培詩說 1.1, on the first ode in the *Shi jing*, entitled "Guan ju": 關雎: 文王之妃太姒思得淑女以充嬪御之職，而供祭祀賓客之事，故作是詩. *Cai ren* 才人 was not one of the twenty ranked official positions for the back palace ladies, but a more general term for women qualified to become imperial bedmates, due to their hereditary breeding and level of education.

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> I have done everything I could to serve the empress with every ounce of my heart, yet in the end I did not secure blessings from her. I ought to accept the fact that I have, on the contrary, somehow offended Heaven. Even though a wife be without the dutiful wish to follow her spouse in death, still Zhougong begged to substitute his own life for that of King Wu[172] and Yue Ji[173] in her heart swore that she would certainly follow him in death. First, my death would repay the emperor for his gracious favor. Second, I would be relieving the family from harm.[174] Third, I will not allow Empress Yin to suffer criticism for turning me into a "human pig."[175]

As she was on the verge of drinking poison, one palace servant named Zhao Yu steadfastly forbade this, and took this opportunity to deceive her, saying palace envoys had arrived to report that the emperor's affliction was already better. Believing it to be true, Sui finally gave up her plan. The next day the emperor, in fact, was on the mend.

十四年夏，陰后以巫蠱事廢，后請救不能得，帝便屬意焉。后愈稱篤疾，深自閉絕。會有司奏建長秋宮。帝曰。「皇后之尊，與朕同體，承宗廟，母天下，豈易哉！唯鄧貴人德冠後庭，迺可當之。」至冬，立為皇后。辭讓者三，然後即位。手書表謝，深陳德薄，不足以充小君之選。是時，方國貢獻，競求珍麗之物。自后即位，悉令禁絕，歲時但供紙墨而已。帝每欲官爵鄧氏，后輒哀請謙讓，故兄騭終帝世不過虎賁中郎〔將〕。

In Yongyuan 14 [102], summer, Empress Yin was tried and deposed for *wugu* (black magic), and the future empress begged to save her, to no avail. The emperor then let his attentions easily turn to her,[176] and the future empress increasingly proclaimed herself seriously ill, and she shut herself up and broke off relations. As it happened, right then an official memorialized about establishing the imperial burial complex, to which the emperor replied, "The person who has the honored position of empress shares one body with Us. She upholds and maintains the ancestral temple; she is mother to the realm. How could this possibly be changed?[177] Only Honored Lady Deng wears the crown of virtue in the back palaces. Let it be she who is given this place!"

On the winter solstice, she was established as empress.[178] She refused the honor three times, after which she was duly installed. Her handwritten memorial begged off, arguing forcefully that she was not virtuous enough to fulfill the post of "little ruler."[179] At this time, the kingdoms on all sides quarters made offerings, competing in the search for the rarest of objects. From the time of Deng Sui's accession, she always strictly forbade such gifts; at the time of the yearly harvest, she accepted writing material and inks alone.[180]

[172]Probably this refers to the tradition that Zhougong asked to be buried at the three pre-dynastic kings' burial site. Note, however, that Zhougong did not ask to "follow" anyone "in death," but this speech refers to the *Documents*' "Metal Coffer" chapter, which has Zhougong offering to exchange his life for that of King Wu.

[173]Daughter of King Goujian of Yue, wife to King Zhao of Chu, who asked her to "follow him in death." While at first she refused to do this, eventually she ended her own life when her husband became ill, on the grounds that she needed to "prepare" his final resting place for him. For her story, see Liu Xiang's *Lienü zhuan*.

[174]This could mean the Dengs, the imperial family, or both.

[175]As Dowager Empress Lü made Lady Li a "human pig," to her son's ever-lasting shame. Note the role reversal here.

[176]Tentative translation. Certainly, the idea is that Deng Sui did not entice the ruler to elevate her rank.

[177]Anonymous Reader 1 reads this instead as "How could this be easy?" I disagree. I believe the emperor is speaking of what he takes to be unchangeable constants, to which right-thinking people must accede.

[178]The winter solstice was 21 November.

[179]For the possible significance of the terms *wo shao jun* 我小君 vs. *wo jun* in bronze language, see Newell Ann van Auken on the *Annals*, in *The Commentarial Transformation of the Spring and Autumn* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016), and *Spring and Autumn Historiography: Form and Hierarchy in Ancient Chinese Annals* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023).

[180]In theory, paper had not been invented by Cai Lun until 105, three years later. Good writing paper probably did not exist in Deng Sui's time, so this probably is not the "newly invented paper" (contra de Crespigny, *Biographical Dictionary*) but writing materials of some sort from which the word "paper" was taken.

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Every time the emperor wanted to ennoble members of the Deng clan, the empress beseeched him not to. Therefore, Sui's elder brother Zhi to the end under Hedi never reached a position higher than that of General of the Palace "Tigers-running" Guards.

元興元年，帝崩。長子平原王有疾，而諸皇子夭沒，前後十數。後生者輒隱祕養於人間。殤帝生始百日，后迺迎立之。尊后為皇太后，太后臨朝。

In Yuanxing 1 [105], the emperor died. His eldest son the King of Pingyuan had an illness, and all the imperial sons had died early (more than ten of them).[181] Those born late to him were suddenly whisked away in secret to be raised among the people. Shangdi, the Died-Young emperor, had lived by then for 100 days, before the empress finally went to welcome him as the new emperor. She was duly honored with the title of dowager empress, and in that capacity she acted as regent "attending court."

和帝葬後，宮人並歸園。太后賜周、馮貴人策。曰。「朕與貴人託配後庭，共歡等列，十有餘年。不獲福祐。先帝早棄天下。孤心煢煢，靡所瞻仰。夙夜永懷，感愴發中。今當以舊典分歸外園，慘結增歎，燕燕之詩，曷能喻焉？其賜貴人王青蓋車，采飾輅，駿馬各一駟，黃金三十斤，雜帛三千匹，白越四千端。」又賜馮貴人王赤綬，以未有頭上步搖、環佩，加賜各一具。

After Hedi was buried [106], the palace ladies were sent to attend his mortuary park. The dowager empress conferred on Ladies Zhou and Feng the rescript, "For more than ten years, We were entrusted with serving together with you in attendance in the back palace, and together we received imperial favor. We all remained unblessed [as we had no children], and the former emperor departed his realm early. We are bereft, with no one to look up to and emulate. Morning and night we will forever cherish him, and mourn him to the core. Now we ought, by the old precedents, to repair to join him near the gravesite, in our misery, with heaped up sighs. As in the "Swallow" ode in the *Odes* classic, how can one adequately express one's grief? Let there be conferred on the ladies green-canopied carriages like that of the kings, with colored chariot wheels, and quadrigae of four horses; 30 *jin* of gold, 3000 bolts of varicolored silk; and 4000 squares of fine cloth." In addition, she conferred upon Lady Feng the red silk sash worn by kings, and one set each of pearl hair ornaments like that worn by empresses and jade girdle ornaments.

是時新遭大憂，法禁未設。宮中亡大珠一篋。太后念，欲考問，必有不辜。乃親閱宮人，觀察顏色，即時首服。又和帝幸人吉成，御者共枉吉成以巫蠱事，遂下掖庭考訊，辭證明白。太后以先帝左右，待之有恩，平日尚無惡言。今反若此。不合人情，更自呼見實覈，果御者所為。莫不歎服，以為聖明。常以鬼神難徵，淫祀無福，乃詔有司罷諸祠官不合典禮者。

At this time, the throne experienced a new "great sorrow" and the laws and prohibitions were not yet established. In the palace, there was lost a case which held a great pearl. The dowager empress, in thinking about it, wanted to launch a formal investigation but she knew this would certainly involve the innocent. So, she personally visited the palace attendants, observing their facial expressions carefully, and relatively quickly she secured a confession.

When Hedi's favorite, Jicheng, was recklessly accused of engaging in black magic by her attendants, Deng Sui immediately sent investigators to the back palaces to conduct an investigation, and the sworn confession of Jicheng was clear enough. [But] to the dowager empress's way of thinking, Jicheng, as a member of the former emperor's inner circle, had been treated well, and she had never spoken ill of Sui during the emperor's lifetime [when slandering her might have proven advantageous], so why would Jicheng now do the opposite and act like this? It did not make sense in terms of human feelings. So, a second investigation called for by Deng Sui herself discovered that, in fact, this was the attendants' doing. There were none who did not sigh in admiration and submit [to the justice of her findings]; they considered that she was a genius-sage.[182] As she had always felt the spirits are hard to prove, and that illicit sacrifices bring no good fortune, she issued an edict directing the officer in charge to dismiss all shrine officers whose actions were not in accord with ritual precedents.

又詔〔赦〕除建武以來諸犯妖惡，及馬、竇家屬所被禁錮者，皆復之為平人。減大官、導官、尚方、內者服御珍膳靡麗難成之物。自非供陵廟，稻粱米不得導擇，朝夕一肉飯而已。舊太官湯官

[181]Liu Sheng had a chronic illness, but we do not know what illness prevented him taking the throne. A number of officials believed, however, that the disability was not sufficiently serious to disqualify him from the imperial succession. Deng Sui in any case granted the throne to his much younger brother, Liu Long, who was then barely three months old.

[182]*Hou Han shu* uses the term *shenming* 神明 charily (fourteen times, and all but twice used of the imperial family, usually the emperor).

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經用歲且二萬萬，太后敕止，（曰）〔日〕殺省珍費。自是裁數千萬。及郡國所貢，皆減其過半。悉斥賣上林鷹犬。其蜀、漢釦器九帶佩刀，並不復調。止畫工三十九種。又御府、尚方、織室錦繡、冰紈、綺縠、金銀、珠玉、犀象、玳瑁、彫鏤翫弄之物，皆絕不作。離宮別館儲峙米糒薪，悉令省之。

She moreover by edict pardoned all those who since the Eastern Han founding had committed crimes, extending the pardons to the members of the Ma and Dou households who had been proscribed from office-holding. All were to be restored to the condition of ordinary people. She reduced the numbers of great provisioners, the imperial factory workers, and the keepers in the palace in charge the rare items of clothing, jewelry, and the difficult-to-raise creatures. If it was not for the offerings at the imperial gravemounds and temples, millet and rice was not to be specially given in as tribute and selected. Each morning and night there was to be one dish of meat and one of starch, and nothing more. The old provisioners and boilers in the past had used 200,000,000 cash annually, and this the dowager empress ordered to stop. Daily they were to reduce such expenses, and from this time on economies were reduced to the tune of several tens of millions of cash. As for the "tribute" the commanderies and kingdoms were to supply, each unit was to reduce it by over half. They were to quit buying falcons and hunting dogs for Shanglin Park. The buckles and belts and belt ornaments and knives from Shu and Hanzhong were no longer to be inlaid. She also let go thirty-nine kinds of painters. In the royal quarters, the Imperial Factory [Shangfang] and Weaving Room were ordered to absolutely never make again splendid embroideries, "ice silk," fine silk gauze, gold and silver, pearls and jades, items fashioned from rhinoceros's tusks or ivory,[183] tortoise shell, and valuable carvings and baubles. In the traveling palaces and retreats the stores of rice, fuel, and charcoal, all were to be reduced.

又詔諸園貴人。其宮人有宗室同族若羸老不任使者，令園監實籍上名，自御北宮增喜觀閱問之，恣其去留，即日免遣者五六百人。

Another edict concerned the Honored Ladies at the imperial mausolea: those who could live with their relatives or who were old and infirm, and of no use to the palace, were ordered to be examined by the mausolea overseers, who could send up reports that forwarded the true names and cases, after which they would be driven to the Northern Palace to be seen once more by the dowager empress, who questioned them once more, and then allowed them to go or stay, as they pleased, with the result that 500 or 600 people were let go that very day.

及殤帝崩，太后定策立安帝，猶臨朝政。以連遭大憂，百姓苦役，殤帝康陵方中祕藏，及諸工作，事事減約，十分居一。

When Shangdi died, the dowager empress arranged it by rescript that Andi[184] was enthroned [106], but she still attended court to make policy. There were repeated natural disasters,[185] and the ordinary commoners suffered greatly. So she had the secret burial chamber of Shangdi at Kangling greatly reduced, to 1/10 the normal size, by the workmen, to enforce economies.

詔告司隸校尉、河南尹、南陽太守曰。「每覽前代外戚賓客，假借威權。輕薄謥詷，至有濁亂奉公，為人患苦。咎在執法怠懈，不輒行其罰故也。今車騎將軍騭等雖懷敬順之志，而宗門廣大，姻戚不少，賓客姦猾，多干禁憲。其明加檢敕，勿相容護。」自是親屬犯罪，無所假貸。太后愍陰氏之罪廢，赦其徙者歸鄉，敕還資財五百餘萬。永平元年，爵號太夫人為新野君，萬戶供湯沐邑。

By edict she decreed to the Colonel of Internal Security, the Henan Overseer, and Governor of Nanyang,

> Every time I see the clients and retainers of the previous regimes' consort clans taking on airs of authority. Carelessly and callously they mistreat others, acting shamelessly, until the point where they sully and disorder the throne, and cause the people grievous suffering. The blame lies with those who are to uphold the law. They neglect their duties, and so they do not execute the proper punishments.

[183]Although the text says "rhinos and elephants, " this likely refers to the tusks and items fashioned from those, given the list of items before and after the two characters.

[184]b. 94 CE; r. 106–125.

[185]According to de Crespigny, *Biographical Dictionary*, 126, "There are almost annual reports of such misfortunes, coupled with frequent references to earthquakes and great winds. Some of these, particularly those in the Treatises of Astronomy and of the Five Powers, may reflect the exaggeration and even invention of contemporary politicians or later historians." This problem has been discussed by many Han historians; see Mansvelt Beck, *Treatises of Later Han*, 90.170 and note 27, for details.

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> Now the Cavalry General Deng Zhi and others, even though they cherish the intention to engage in reverent and compliant behaviors, nonetheless have their clan households enlarging, their marriage ties proliferating, and their clients and retainers are cunning. In many cases, when they are infringing the laws, let them be openly investigated. I will not have them be protected.

From this time on, the wrongdoers among her closest relatives knew that they had no place to rely upon [to pardon their wrongdoings]. The dowager empress felt very sorry for the removal on criminal charges of the Yin 陰 clan, so she pardoned those who had been exiled and allowed them to return to their home districts. She also ordered the return to them of some half a million cash. In Yongping 1 [106], she had conferred on her mother, Lady Yin,[186] the title of Ruler of Xinye, with 10,000 households to supply her a benefice.

二年夏，京師旱，親幸洛陽寺錄冤獄。有囚實不殺人而被考自誣，羸困輿見，畏吏不敢言。將去，舉頭若欲自訴。太后察視覺之，即呼還問狀。具得枉實。即時收洛陽令下獄抵罪。行未還宮，澍雨大降。

In the second year of Yongping [107], summer, there was a drought in the capital. Deng Sui personally visited the Luoyang Bureau to have copies[187] made of the wrongful imprisonments. In truth, there were those in prison who had not killed people, but under questioning had implicated themselves by lying. [Because of this,] the mounting distress manifested itself, and so frightened the functionaries that they did not dare say anything. Once, when she was on the point of leaving, one of them raised his head as if he wanted to impeach himself. The dowager empress discerned his meaning, and then she questioned him about the dossiers. All had been prepared falsely, so she put the Luoyang Prefect himself in prison, charging him with crimes. Before she had even returned to the palace, abundant rain fell as a result.

三年秋，太后體不安，左右憂惶，禱請祝辭，願得代命。太后聞之，即譴怒。竊敕掖庭令以下，但使謝過祈福，不得妄生不祥之言。舊事，歲終當饗遣衛士，大儺逐疫。太后以陰陽不和，軍旅數興。詔饗會勿設戲作樂。減逐疫侲子之半，悉罷象橐駝之屬。

In the third year [109], in autumn, dowager empress felt discomfort. Her attendants took fright, and they prayed and asked for invocators, urging her to turn her powers over [to the newly capped Andi]. When the dowager empress heard their entreaties, she berated them angrily. Secretly she ordered everyone from the head of the harem down to merely forward apologies for crimes and prayers for good fortune. She would not have crazy talk of long-life or other inauspicious advice. It had long been the old custom at year's end to hold a banquet for the palace guards whose term of service was ending, at which was performed a Great Exorcism to expel epidemic demons.[188] The dowager empress believed that the *yin* and *yang* were not in balance, and the troops had mutinied several times. She summoned people to the banquet, but she did not arrange for the usual entertainments and musical performances. She reduced the young boys involved in the expelling-epidemics rites by half. She got rid of all the elephants, Bactrian camels, and such creatures, along with their keepers.

豐年復故。太后自入宮掖，從曹大家受經書，兼天文、算數。晝省王政，夜則誦讀。而患其謬誤，懼乖典章。迺博選諸儒劉珍等及博士、議郎、四府掾史五十餘人，詣東觀讎校傳記。事畢奏御，賜葛布各有差。又詔中官近臣於東觀受讀經傳，以教授宮人，左右習誦，朝夕濟濟。

In fact, good harvests returned as before. The dowager empress, from the time that she entered the back palaces, received tuition in the Classics, together with texts on astronomy and mathematical calculations, from Teacher Cao [i.e., Ban Zhao].[189] Mornings she saw to policy-making; evenings she recited her texts. She took great trouble lest she make a mistake. She was petrified, lest she contravene the imperial precedents and statutes in writing. Only after this did she widely institute a search to select [qualified men] among the court classicists such as Liu Zhen, the Academicians and advisory courtiers, and more than fifty staff members from the Four Bureaus. These men were to visit the Eastern Tower to collate texts and records there, and when the matter was finished, they were to memorialize the throne, after which they were to be given hempen cloth, each according to his merits. She also by edict ordered the nearest officers in the palace to repair to the Eastern Tower to receive training in reciting the Classics and commentaries, and they, in turn,

[186]A cousin of Guangwu's Empress Yin Lihua 陰麗華 (5–64); her elder sister married Deng Rang 鄧讓 (fl. 23–30) of Nanyang.

[187]Or, "check the records of these"? Below, I translate as "reviewed the records."

[188]For this, see Bodde, *Festivals in Classical China*, 75–139.

[189]Ban married into the Cao family, whence this appellation.

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were to teach the palace ladies, so that all those around her would become well-versed in recitations, and day and night, all would be elegant refinement.

及新野君薨，太后自侍疾病，至乎終盡，憂哀毀損，事加於常。贈以長公主赤綬、東園祕器、玉衣繡衾，又賜布三萬匹，錢三千萬。騭等遂固讓錢布不受。使司空持節護喪事，儀比東海恭王，謚曰敬君。太后諒闇既終。久旱，太后比三日幸洛陽，錄囚徒，理出死罪三十六人，耐罪八十人。其餘減罪死右趾已下至司寇。

Now when her mother, the ruler of Xinye, died, the dowager empress herself attended her in her last crisis, so when she died, she was with her to the very end, and beside herself with grief. And she gave presents to the Elder Princess of a red sash, imperial implements of the Eastern Garden, a jade suit and embroidered quilts, in addition to some thirty thousand rolls of cloth, and some thirty million cash. Deng Zhi and others forthwith steadfastly refused the gifts of cash and cloth. She sent the Minister over Works (*sikong*) to carry the insignia to the funeral rites, and in those ceremonies her mother was treated with all the honors like those of Prince Gong of Donghai and awarded the posthumous title of "Reverent Lord." The dowager empress issued no formal edicts during the entire mourning period, and then there was a protracted drought. The dowager empress for three days visited Luoyang, where she reviewed the records of prisoners, freeing thirty-six who had been judged to have committed capital crimes, and sentencing eighty who deserved the sentence of shaving.[190] The rest had their sentences reduced to penalties ranging from lopping off the right foot to serving as guards for the convict labor details.

七年正月，初入太廟，齋七日，至公卿百僚各有差。庚戌，謁宗廟，率命婦群妾相禮儀，與皇帝交獻親薦，成禮而還。因下詔曰：「凡供薦新味，多非其節，或鬱養強孰，或穿掘萌牙，味無所至而夭折生長，豈所以順時育物乎！傳曰：『非其時不食。』自今當奉祠陵廟及給御者，皆須時迺上。」凡所省二十三種。

In the seventh year, first month, she first entered the imperial ancestral temple, where she fasted for seven days, before making conferrals upon all the officials, high and low, with each according to his or her rank. Then, on the *gengxu* day,[191] she visited the ancestral temple,[192] leading the counsellors' wives to assist her in the ceremonies. Wearing her queenly robes, she handed over the offerings [in nine sets] to the emperor so that he might personally present them. When the ritual had been completed, she returned to the palace. She then took these activities as the subject of an edict:

> In general, the prepared offerings featured new flavors; they were not aligned with the season. In some cases, they were raised in hothouses, forced to prematurely grow to maturity. In other cases, they unearthed young sprouts of plants not yet fully grown. While the flavors produced no salutary effect, the offerings prematurely cut off life. How could this possibly be in accord with the seasons and nurture living things? The tradition says, "If the food is not in season, do not eat it."[193] From now on, those responsible for the offerings at the imperial mausolea, the ancestral temples, and the imperial provisions are to see to it that the foodstuffs they present are in season.[194]

Altogether, some twenty-three kinds of food were omitted.

[190]While Sikou is an ancient name for Minister of Justice, used in the *Zhouli*, "Qiu guan" 秋官, "Da sikou" 大司寇 section, in Han times it usually referred to a lowly post where a convicted criminal believed to be capable of reform was assigned to watch or transport criminals, chiefly on hard labor duty.

[191]This is Day 47 in the sexagenary cycle. The *geng* days, with *geng* the seventh of the ten Heavenly stems, were often chosen to signal a desire for reforms and renewal (*geng* 更).

[192]The first four emperors of Eastern Han were all awarded title of *zong* (revered imperial ancestor). It is likely (but the biography doesn't specify) that she went to the *zong* temple of her husband, Hedi, to pay her respects. For information regarding the *zong* temple, see Nicholas Constantino, "Navigating Precedents: Law and Ritual in Early Imperial China" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2025), chap. 3, 80–110.

[193]*Analects* 10/8.

[194]Cf. the anonymous blog (written by someone at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences) "Handai fanjijie zaipei yu 'bushi bushi' guan nian" 漢代反季節栽培與不時不食觀念 (English title: Han-era Unseasonal Cultivation and "Do Not Eat Foods out of Season" Ideas), 20–34.

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自太后臨朝，水旱十載，四夷外侵，盜賊內起。每聞人飢，或達旦不寐，而躬自減徹，以救災阨，故天下復平，歲還豐穰[195]。

From the time when the dowager empress began overseeing the court as regent, there had been floods and droughts for ten years; also, invasions from the barbarians on all the frontiers, and banditry was on the increase in the interior. Every time she heard people were starving, she would, perhaps, not sleep until daybreak and reduce her expenses, in order to rescue others from deprivations and disasters. Therefore, the empire was eventually restored to peace and the harvests once more became abundant.

元初五年，平望侯劉毅以太后多德政，欲令早有注記。上書安帝曰：「臣聞《易》載羲農而皇德著。《書》述唐虞而帝道崇。故雖聖明，必書功於竹帛，流音於管弦。伏惟皇太后膺大聖之姿，體乾坤之德。齊蹤虞妃，比跡任姒。孝悌慈仁，允恭節約，杜絕奢盈之源，防抑逸欲之兆。正位內朝，流化四海。及元興、延平之際，國無儲副，仰觀乾象，參之人譽，援立陛下為天下主，永安漢室，綏靜四海[196]。」

In Yuanchu 5 [118], Liu Yi,[197] Marquis of Pingwang, knowing the dowager empress's interest in government by acts of grace [rather than by punishments], wanted to have commissioned early on a detailed record of her rule,[198] so he sent a memorial to Andi saying,

> I have heard the *Changes* contains lines on Fuxi and Shennong, which plainly illustrate charismatic rule. And the *Documents* classic tells of Yao and Shun, and their upholding of the Way of emperors. Therefore, even if the throne is occupied by an enlightened sage, one must write down his or her merits on bamboo and silk, and leave the "sound" in pipes and strings. The dowager empress in her attitude supports the Great Sage [Andi]; she embodies the quintessential virtues of *yin* and *yang qi*. She is like Shun's wives. She compares with Ren Si.[199] Filial, affable, compassionate, and humane, she fully does her duty. She regulates her conduct and is frugal. She is the very image of someone blocking off the luxuries and excesses at the source. She is sign and symbol of self-restraint. She carries herself upright in the inner court, yet her influence floods to the four seas. When it came to Yuanxing and Yanping reign periods, when the realm had no surplus food, she looked up to contemplate the signs of flourishing *yang qi*, and she consulted about human reputations, helping to set up your majesty to be a true emperor of the realm, to provide lasting peace to the Han ruling house and to bring comfort and peace to all within the lands.

又遭水潦，東州飢荒。垂恩元元，冠蓋交路，菲薄衣食，躬率群下，損膳解驂，以贍黎苗。惻隱之恩，猶視赤子。克己引愆。顯揚仄陋。崇晏晏之政，敷在寬之教[200]。興滅國。繼絕世。錄功臣。復宗室。追還徙人，蠲除禁錮。政非惠和，不圖於心。制非舊典，不訪於朝。弘德洋溢，充塞宇宙。洪澤豐沛，漫衍八方。華夏樂化，戎狄混并。丕功著於大漢，碩惠加於生人。巍巍之業，可聞而不可及。蕩蕩之勳，可誦而不可名。

Once again there were floods, and in the eastern provinces, there was mass starvation. She bestowed her favor upon all the people, dispatching so many officials [to see to their relief] that they met each other on the roads coming and going.[201] With the simplest fare and in the coarsest clothes, she set a personal example for

[195]On *fengrang* 豐穰, a conventional phrase for a good harvest, see *Hou Han shu* 10A.425; *Xu Han zhi* 8.3177 (the treatise on sacrifices).

[196]*Hou Han shu* 10A.426. Note the pun on her name "Sui" here used as verb, meaning "comfort all the lands within the seas." See note 93 above.

[197]A younger son of Liu Mu 劉睦, King of Beihai, who had died in 74 CE. Liu Yi was granted a county marquisate in 77, but he lost that fief for some fault about 90. In 114, he presented to the throne his "On Han Rule by Virtue" 漢德論 and "On the Fundamental Laws" 憲論, comprising 12 *pian* altogether. At that point, he was awarded a hefty sum of cash (30,000) and an advisory post. In 118, Liu Yi presented this memorial urging that a further installment of the dynastic history be compiled to cover recent events. This was approved, and in 120 Liu Yi, with his cousin Liu Taotu and others, were commissioned to continue a court-sponsored history of Eastern Han, then called *Record of Han* (*Han ji* 漢記) but later known as *Dongguan Hanji* 東觀漢記. See *Hou Han shu* 10A.426.

[198]I.e., the Diaries of Activity and Repose.

[199]She was the wife of Fu Xi 伏羲 and mother of Yandi 炎帝 (Fire Lord).

[200]*Hou Han shu* 10A.426.

[201]Or "clogged up the roads with their carriages."

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the crowds below. She reduced the tasty delicacies and forfeited her fast horses, to support the masses. Such was her care and concern for them that she treated them like newborn babies in swaddling clothes. She conquered her own inclinations; she sought out people to tell her of her faults. From obscurity she raised up good men to prestigious posts. She upheld government policies that facilitated ease for everyone. Everywhere she saw promulgated teachings that focused on tolerance and generosity.[202] She restored extinguished kingdoms. She continued broken lines. She recorded the merits of good officials. She revived the ancestral house. She thought of and recalled the people who had been banished; she abruptly stopped the prohibitions against Partisans. As to her policies: If they would not achieve grace and harmony, she didn't calculate how to achieve them in her heart. If the rules and regulations did not reflect the older norms, she did not bring them to the court for consideration. Her immense liberality was flowing like a flood, filling to the very limits of time and space. Her great blessings, in rich abundance, filled to overflowing the eight directions. The civilized lands of the HuaXia were transformed by the pleasures of civilization.[203] The Rong and Di, however different, came together and unified.[204] Her merits have been written down by Great Han. Her munificent favors have been applied to all living beings. Such towering enterprises—one can hear of them but not attain them. Such surpassing achievements—one can intone them but not capture them in words.

古之帝王，左右置史；漢之舊典，世有注記。夫道有夷崇，治有進退。若善政不述，細異輒書，是為堯湯負洪水大旱之責，而無咸熙[205] 假天之美。高宗成王有雉雊迅風之變，而無中興康寧之功也。上考《詩》《書》，有虞二妃，周室三母。修行佐德，思不踰閾。未有內遭家難，外遇災害，覽總大麓，經營天物， 功德巍巍若茲者也。宜令史官著《長樂宮注》、《聖德頌》，以敷宣景燿，勒勳金石，縣之日月，攄之罔極，以崇陛下烝烝之孝。[206]

The antique lords and kings placed scribes to their left and right, they say [to record their deeds and words]. The Han has its antique precedents, each reign has its records.[207] Now the Way of governing has its good and bad days, and good governance, its advances and retreats. If accounts of good policies are not transmitted, then only details and anomalies will be written down,[208] and then despite the way that Yao and Tang took responsibility for floods and droughts, there would be no shining examples to imitate Heaven's excellence. Nor would we have stories of heartfelt reforms by Gaozong and King Cheng,[209] occasioned by pheasants arriving and windstorms. Nor would there be records of the commendable acts leading to a mid-dynastic revival or the restoration of peace. Above, examining the *Odes* and *Documents*, there were Shun's two wives and Zhou's three mothers, who cultivated their conduct and contributed their characters, and yet their thoughts did not go beyond the female quarters. Never were there inner struggles over succession; never did they meet with ominous disasters outside.[210] They surveyed the great records of governing;[211] they made themselves thoroughly conversant with all the creatures of the cosmos. With such towering merit like this, one ought to order the archivist to record the "Notes on the Changle Palace," a eulogy to honor Sage virtue.

帝從之。[212]

Andi followed the suggestion.

[202]See the Han-era "Yao dian" chapter of the *Documents*.

[203]The histories of terms like HuaXia (e.g., ZhuXia 諸夏) are contested; see my Keyword essay in the forthcoming *Documents* translation from the University of Washington (scheduled for 2026).

[204]A loose translation, trying to capture the sense of *hun* 混並, a phrase indicating that groups with different customs have been brought to unify via alliances with the Han court.

[205]The phrase 庶績咸熙 occurs near the end of the Han-era "Yao dian" (trans. by He Ruyue and Nylan).

[206]*Hou Han shu* 10A.426.

[207]Presumably this phrasing refers to the Diaries of Activity and Repose compiled for each ruler.

[208]This very much sounds like Liu Zhiji's arguments in *Shitong*.

[209]Referring to two chapters of the *Documents* classic: "Gaozong rongri" 高宗肜日 and "Jin teng" 金縢.

[210]This oblique reference may bring to mind the extermination of many in the Deng clan, or the other calamities, such as floods, famines, and incursions. At the same time, we must recall that Deng Sui is here eulogized and compared to these paragons of female virtue; she is not being charged with inferior talents or virtues.

[211]Reading *li* as *lu* 錄, on the basis of *Hou Han shu* 10A.429n19: 麓，錄也。言大錄萬機之政.

[212]*Hou Han shu* 10A.426. Of course, we have no further surviving evidence regarding this commission.

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六年[213]，太后詔徵和帝弟濟北、河間王子男女年五歲以上四十餘人，又鄧氏近親子孫三十餘人，並為開邸第。教學經書，躬自監試。尚幼者，使置師保，朝夕入宮，撫循詔導，恩愛甚渥。

In the sixth year [119], the dowager empress summoned the sons and daughters of Hedi's younger brothers, the Kings of Jibei and Hejian,[214] male and female above five *sui* (more than 40 people altogether), plus the dowager empress's own kinsmen (more than 30 people), so that she might open a place of classical learning for them.[215] She herself would oversee the exams. For those who were still too young [to leave the palace private quarters for the school], she had set up the offices of Tutors and Protectors, who day and night, could enter the palace, so they might comfort and accommodate, lead and guide, her love and affection being very deep.

迺詔從兄河南尹豹、越騎校尉康等曰：「吾所以引納群子，置之學官者，實以方今承百王之敝，時俗淺薄，巧偽滋生。《五經》衰缺，不有化導，將遂陵遲，故欲褒崇聖道，以匡失俗。傳不云乎：『飽食終日，無所用心，難矣哉！』今末世貴戚食祿之家，溫衣美飯，乘堅驅良，而面牆術學，不識臧否，斯故禍敗所從來也。

Only then did she issue an edict to her paternal cousin Deng Bao, Overseer of Henan, and Deng Kang, Cavalry Colonel, among others, saying,

> I have ordered that all your sons be placed in this institution of learning, because recently, they have inherited the bad behavior of many kings, so that they are remiss in their behavior, and their cunning is constantly growing. They are deficient in Five Classics learning; they are not being led and guided by those precepts. They are on the point of collapse, and so I want to extol the Sagely Way and correct erroneous customs and habits. Does the tradition not say it: "They guzzle food the livelong day, never applying themselves to their lessons. This is hard indeed!"[216] At present, in this end of days, the imperial relatives by marriage use their allowances to wear warm clothes, eat fine delicacies, and ride in carriages drawn by excellent steeds, but they have their faces to the wall when it comes to learning. They do not know good deeds from wrong. This in fact is the origin of calamity.

永平中，四姓小侯皆令入學，所以矯俗厲薄，反之忠孝。「先公既以武功書之竹帛，兼以文德教化子孫，故能束修，不觸羅網。誠令兒曹上述祖考休烈，下念詔書本意，則足矣。其勉之哉！」

In the middle years of the Yongchu reign era [107–113], the young lords of the Four Noble Houses all were commanded to enter the court place of learning, so that their old arrogant ways and extravagances would be converted instead into loyalty and filial duty.[217]

> My noble ancestor Deng Yu used to record on bamboo and silk his military merits, intending to use it to teach civilizing virtues and transform the younger generations. One can in this way bind and cultivate oneself and not fall afoul of the net of the law. Truly I order the young ones to be able to narrate their forebears' virtues above and ponder the basic ideas of the edicts and other writings below. This is enough, certainly! Let them get down to work in earnest!

康以太后久臨朝政，心懷畏懼，託病不朝。太后使內人問之。時宮婢出入，多能有所毀譽。其耆宿者皆稱中大人，所使者乃康家先婢，亦自通中大人。康聞，詬之曰「汝我家出，爾敢爾邪！」婢怒，還說康詐疾而言不遜。太后遂免康官，遣歸國，絕屬籍。

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[213]*Hou Han shu* 10A.428.

[214]Liu Shou 壽 (d. 120) was king of Jibei; Liu Kai 開 (or Gong? 恭; d. 131), king of Hejian. See de Crespigny, *Biographical Dictionary*, 524, 545.

[215]This does not seem to have had a direct effect on the Taixue (Imperial Academy), whose purpose was quite different; see Michael Loewe, "Consultants and Advisors, and Tests of Talent in Western and Eastern Han," *Journal of Asian History* 53.1 (2019), 21–54. However, the Taixue was neglected under Andi, we are told.

[216]*Analects* 17/22. Translation tentative; this could also mean, "Let us give them trouble!"

[217]*Hou Han shu* 10A.428 specifies the Yongping 永平中, but the event occurs in sequence in the middle of the Yongchu 永初 reign period, 107–113; hence, the emendation.

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Deng Kang[218] was concerned that the dowager empress had so long attended court and made policy. In his heart he was sore afraid, and on the pretext of illnesses, he did not come to court. When the dowager empress sent palace servants to ask how he was doing, it turned out that many of them had bad reputations for being too free in their comings and goings. Those who had been there a long time were called the Great People of the palace. As it happened, the person Deng Sui dispatched had been a former servant in Kang's household, who had then had affairs with the so-called Great People of the palace. When Kang learned of this, he upbraided her, saying, "You left our house. How dare you come bring your foul self here!" The maidservant was furious, and upon her return she reported that Kang was only pretending to be ill and his words were anything but submissive. The dowager empress forthwith had Kang dismissed from office. He was sent home to his fief, and his name was struck from the registers of eligible candidates for office.

永寧二年二月，寢病漸篤，乃乘輦於前殿，見侍中、尚書，因北至太子新所繕宮。還，大赦天下，賜諸園貴人、王、主、群僚錢布各有差。詔曰：「朕以無德，託母天下，而薄祐不天，早離大憂。延平之際，海內無主。元元戹運，危於累卵。勤勤苦心，不敢以萬乘為樂，上欲不欺天愧先帝。下不違人負宿心。誠在濟度百姓，以安劉氏。自謂感徹天地，當蒙福祚，而喪禍內外，傷痛不絕。頃以廢病沈滯，久不〔得〕侍祠，自力上原陵，加欬逆唾血，遂至不解。存亡大分，無可奈何。公卿百官，其勉盡忠恪，以輔朝廷。」三月崩。在位二十年，年四十一。合葬順陵。

In the second year of the Yongning reign period [121], the second lunar month, the dowager empress took to her bed with an illness that gradually became more severe. Only then did she ride in a sedan chair to the Front Audience Hall, where she met with the Palace Attendants and the Director of the Secretariat. And she took the occasion to travel north to the newly repaired palace of the heir apparent. Upon her return [to her own quarters], she issued a general amnesty for the realm, and she gave gifts of coins and cloth to the Honored Ladies at the imperial mausolea, the kings, and all those in charge of the crowds of official colleagues, each according to his or her station. Her edict said,

> We consider ourselves to lack virtue. Entrusted with the task of acting as mother to the entire realm, We have been stingy with gifts of grace, unlike Heaven, and so it is that your empress is to depart early from this life, which is a source of great sorrow.
>
> During the Yanping period, the realm was without a proper ruler. We had a frightening prospect before us of vile misfortune, it being more precarious than the proverbial pile of eggs. Diligently, most diligently, We worked Ourselves to the bone, never daring to consider my 10,000 carriages a source of true pleasure. Above, We wanted not to cheat Heaven or be disgraced before the previous emperors. Below, We did not want to offend others, or turn Our back on cherished ambitions. Truly We were focused on rescuing and regulating the Hundred Families, in order to settle and give peace to the Liu clan.
>
> Had We been able to say of Ourselves that Our feelings communicated to the entire cosmos of heaven-and-earth, We ought to have been blanketed with good fortune. Instead, We have experienced calamitous deaths, both within Our family and outside,[219] which have left Us with unceasing pain. A while ago, on account of an illness, We felt sluggish. For long We have not been able personally to attend the sacrifices. Having exerted every ounce of Our energy to climb the hill at Yuanling,[220] We coughed up bloody sputum, until in the end it happened again and again. Survival or death, the great allotment, this one can do nothing about! Let Our high-ranking officials and their subordinates exert themselves with the utmost loyalty and reverence, in order to aid the dynasty.

In the third month, she died. On the throne for 20 years, she died at age 41 *sui*. She was buried with her husband at Shunling.[221]

[218]Deng Kang of Nanyang, son of Deng Zhen 珍 and grandson of Deng Yu 禹, was thus a cousin of Deng Sui.

[219]*Hou Han shu*, 10a.430n2, on the Lord of Xinye, and the two emperors, Hedi and Shangdi.

[220]The burial site of Guangwu, the Eastern Han founder.

[221]The burial site of Hedi, her spouse. Ban Chao died at the age of 70, for comparison (see above).

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論曰：鄧后稱制終身，號令自出，術謝前政之良，身闕明辟之義，至使嗣主側目，斂衽於虛器。直生懷懣，懸書於象魏[222]。借之儀者，殆其惑哉！[223]

The Assessment says: Empress Deng took charge of the court rulings for her entire life. Titles and edicts issued from her.[224] Her arts of governance were less skilled than the best of the preceding rulers. She lacked the attention to duty of truly enlightened rulers. And she had a jaundiced eye[225] when it came to selecting who would succeed to the throne; she had the honors bestowed upon an empty vessel.[226] Her straightforward and honest advisors understood her arrogant usurpation of powers, and they hung their petitions [for reform] on the palace doors.[227] She was nearly deluded [in her failure to relinquish power to Andi].

然而建光之後，王柄有歸，遂乃名賢戮辱，便孽黨進，衰歎之來，茲焉有徵。故知持權引謗，所幸者非己。焦心卹患，自強者唯國。是以班母一說，闔門辭事。愛姪微愆，髡剔謝罪。將杜根逢誅，未值其誠乎！但蹊田之牛，奪之已甚。

That said, after Jianguang, the reins of power were returned to Andi, as was proper. Then the famous wise men were killed and insulted, and then did such vile evildoers [as Andi's wetnurse Wang Sheng and her daughter Borong 伯榮] form factions. Swiftly came decline, and it was all too evident [in Andi's court]. Then the wise who upheld the court powers elicited slanders, and those most favored came to fear for the throne. Bitter in their hearts, those who would make themselves stronger only did so on behalf of the ruling family. Because of Ban Zhao's persuasion, Deng Zhi was allowed to close his doors and refuse further court service.[228] Her beloved nephew,[229] because of a minor error, shaved his head and begged pardon for his crime. And Du Gen was confronted with execution [for sending protests about Deng Sui's failure to cede the throne to Andi]. The empress never valued his integrity! "Merely for an ox that trespassed the fields," she [and the ruling house] had too much taken away![230]

Appendix II

The Wuyi guangchang documents were unearthed in 2010 by workers digging in the May First Square in downtown Changsha, in preparation for building a new subway line. Archaeologists quickly determined that the materials deposited in an Eastern Han well numbered some 7,000 pieces (primarily legal in their contents), which dated to ca. 100 CE.

[222]This phrase, drawn from the *Zhouli*, "Qiuguan" 秋官, "Da sikou" section 大司寇, speaks of an auspicious custom in the first lunar month whereby the punishments were to be listed on the door of the local administrative seat.

[223]*Hou Han shu* 10A.430n4 says *jie* 借 means *jia* 假 ("to use as pretext" or "avail oneself of").

[224]Her amnesties are not mentioned here explicitly, as they would have been announced in edicts.

[225]Tentative translation, also referring to skewed judgment.

[226]This presumably refers to Andi.

[227]The practice of hanging protest petitions on the doors to the palace precincts was the subject of my Beijing Forum talk at Peking University (December 10, 2022), entitled, "Rethinking Western Han Chang'an and its Communication Corridors," aspects of which made it into subsequent publications, including "Resources within Chinese Tradition for Democratic Thinkers to Utilize, Remarks on Ci Jiwei's *Democracy in China: The Coming Crisis*," *Comparative Political Theory* 4.1 (2024), 103–22.

[228]*Hou Han shu* 84.2784 (biography of Ban Zhao).

[229]Commentary tells us that this refers to Deng Feng 鳳, son of Deng Zhi. *Hou Han shu* 10A.430n9.

[230]See *Zuozhuan*, Lord Xuan, Year 11; *Zuo tradition/ Zuozhuan: Commentary on the "Spring and Autumn Annals,"* translated and introduced by Stephen Durrant, Wai-yee Li, and David Schaberg (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), 3:637: "Yet there is also this saying: 'He led his ox on a shortcut through the fields of another man, who seized his ox.' Now he who led his ox on a shortcut through the fields of another man was *indeed guilty*, but to seize the ox—that punishment was too heavy." This refers, according to *Hou Han shu* 10A.430n12, to Deng Sui's initial decision to sentence Du Gen, as ringleader of a group protesting the dowager empress's retention of power after 109, when the young Andi had already been capped. Scion of the prominent Dus of Yingchuan, Du Gen was lucky to find a legal officer who let Du escape the worst of the bastinado and eventually Du fled to Nan 南 commandery, until such time as Andi sought to reward his descendants for his loyalty, at which point Du Gen let the court know that he was still alive. Fairly late in life Du Gen became commandery Governor in Jiyin 濟陰 (today's SW Shandong), where he made a name for himself. See *Hou Han shu* 57.1839–41.

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Edict from Yongchu 2永初二 [108 CE]

甲戌詔書：罪非殊死，且勿案驗。立秋如故。去年雨水過多，穀傷民 (414) 飢。當案驗遝召，輕微耗擾，妨奪民時。其復假期，須收秋，毋為煩苛。(402+417)

Jiaxu Edict: With the exception of capital crimes (*shusi*), do not punish or investigate other crimes. Conduct the Autumn [Assizes] as before. In the last year, excessive rainfall harmed the crops and caused the people to starve. Crimes that merit prosecution, investigation, detention, and summoning should be handled lightly and with minimum trouble, so as not to interfere with the seasonal labor of the people. If an extension of the deadline is needed, wait until [after] the autumn harvest, so as not to create trouble or be unduly harsh.

Edict from Yongchu 4 永初四年 [10 CE], on three boards: 412, 413, 399

廷下詔書曰：

比年陰陽鬲（隔），並水旱饑饉，民或流冗。蠻夷猾夏，仍以發興。奸吏 (412) 並侵，人懷怨愁。天垂變，自秋盡冬，訖無涕澤。憂惶悼栗，未知所寧。

方東作，布德行惠，其勑有司，動作順之，罪非殊死且勿案驗，立秋如故。寬令 (413) 數下，廢不奉行。苛虐之吏，犯令幹時，未有所徵。勉崇寬和，敬若浩天。他如詔書 (399)。

The [commandery] court sends down the edict:

Yin and *yang* have been blocked for consecutive years, and floods, drought and starvation have come in rapid succession, causing the people to take flight. Man and Yi barbarians attack the heartland and troops are then mobilized. Wicked officials attack the people, meanwhile, and all harbor resentment and worry in their breasts. Calamities have been sent down from heaven. From autumn through the whole winter there has been no life-giving moisture. There is worry and fear and no understanding of how to achieve peace and ease.

As the planting begins, let gracious deeds be spread alongside benefits. The officials are hereby encouraged to act in conformity [with the seasons]. With the exception of capital crimes (*shusi*), do not punish or investigate other crimes. Conduct the Autumn [Assizes] as before. Merciful ordinances have been sent down repeatedly, but they have been set aside and not upheld. Cruel officials disobey the ordinances and act against the seasons, but they have not been summoned. We implore you to honor liberality and harmony and to act dutifully towards Vast Heaven. For the rest, follow the edicts.

***

In addition, there is a line from the Xuanquan 懸泉 (near Dunhuang) cache, dating to the reign of Chengdi, that some scholars try to tie to an edict by Shangdi (r. late 105–September 106, i.e., under the regency of Deng Sui), since it concerns compassionate exemptions for those in high-ranking households:[231]

丞相臣方進御史大夫臣光昧死口口諸官奴婢年五十六以上及罷癃不任事產口 (VT1611③:311).

The Chancellor Zhai Fangjin and Imperial Counsellor Kong Guang (ca. 15 BCE?), courting death when making this proposal, . . . all those in servile status, male and female, aged 56 *sui* and above, plus the disabled who are unable to engage in productive work . . . .

鄧綏：一个复杂的历史人物

戴梅可

提要

早期關於鄧綏皇后[統治的 (106–121年) 論述應該促使我們重新審視長期以來對成功女性統治者的偏見。這些偏見與漢代的性別規範並不相符。鄧綏皇后 [i.e., 和熹皇后] 既遵守了東漢時期的性別規範，同時也拒絕屈從不便的宮廷習慣。如同時代的班昭 (45–116年)，她有意識地運用古典學問來實現其目標，因此她卓越的治國之道常受到讚譽。

性別史、解讀预兆、宇宙论、法律和政治理论、班昭、赦、德刑、呂太后

[231]Tentative translation. See Feng, "Qin Han teshu shehui fuli yanjiu," 163–64. Feng and others tied this to *Hou Han shu* 4.198.

Cite this article: Michael Nylan (2026). "On Deng Sui 鄧綏, A Complex Figure," *Early China*, 1–46. doi:10.1017/eac.2026.10038

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