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**Dynastic Centres in Europe and Asia: A Layout**  
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by

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# Dynastic Centres in Europe and Asia: A Layout for Comparison<sup>1</sup>

Jeroen Duindam<sup>2</sup>

*Keywords: Europe, Asia, Comparative Analysis, Dynasty, Rulers*

## ABSTRACT:

*In this paper, I seek to prepare the way for a comparative analysis of dynastic centres in Europe and Asia. This is a timely challenge, following trends in European historiography stressing the persistence of household structures and ritual at the heart of the early modern state, as well as recent detailed studies of Asian courts. Clearly patterns varied greatly, but the divergences should not be fitted unthinkingly into a grand narrative based on the 'rise of the west'. Among the issues equally relevant for courts in Europe and Asia, I privilege two. In the first place, all rulers needed loyal agents, yet could not easily guarantee their loyalty over time. Agents in the long run tend to become vested interest groups, standing in the way of the ruler's personal power. The court was a main theatre where this tension could be solved or exacerbated. In the second place the dynastic centre with its redistributive function and its calendar of rituals could offer a point of orientation for regional elites not otherwise connected, hence bringing cohesion to loosely governed multi-ethnic empires or composite monarchies. After considering comparative strategies and problems related to scope, as well as obstacles created by languages and sources, I elaborate in some detail four foci for research:*

- 1) the ruler himself (or more rarely herself);*
- 2) the dynasty, succession, reproduction (evidently including women as well as siblings);*
- 3) the status, composition, and tasks of the groups serving the ruler; and finally*
- 4) the connections of this grouping with its wider social environment.*

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<sup>1</sup> The author thanks Subrata K. Mitra, the anonymous reader of this journal and the staff at Heidelberg University's South Asia Institute (Department of Political Science) for criticism and suggestions. This paper reflects plans for a cooperative project, and explicitly invites readers' comments. In spring 2008 a first version of this research plan was submitted to the European Research Council's advanced investigator grant programme; it passed the 'quality threshold', but was not funded. I aim to resubmit an improved version of the project described in this paper in spring 2010. Please note that references to literature and sources have been kept to a minimum, privileging recent work directly related to my themes over standard texts.

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*It is my contention that in each of these four subsequent concentric circles we can define a series of questions relevant for all dynastic centres, notwithstanding huge cultural differences separating civilizations, regions, and periods. Using diachronic and synchronic approaches to study a focused theme, I hope to reach a level of comparative precision that goes beyond open generalized statements while retaining analytical precision and proximity to sources. This can only be structured as a joint effort, the outlines of which are suggested here.*

## INTRODUCTION

Most comparative research on early modern Europe and Asia has been organized implicitly or explicitly around the notion of a 'rise of the West'. Students of the comparative history of state-building have contrasted ineffective and despotic empires in Asia with smaller-scale effective states in Europe, stressing the competitive multipolar environment and the role of *corps intermédiaires* in European politics. While the interesting yet Manichean views of Wittfogel and other classics have now been surpassed by more nuanced interpretations, the perspective of a 'rise of the West' itself entails an unnecessary narrowing of our horizon of research questions. Its endpoint inevitably is the economic and military dominance of Europe, established over even the most powerful Asian empires in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Where did Asian empires skid off course? When, where, and how did Europe achieve its edge of superiority? Interpretations stressing military innovation, political competition leading to increasingly effective extraction of resources, private initiative and economic competitiveness, and scientific breakthrough vie for precedence.

While such questions are undoubtedly important, they tend to privilege modernity and breakthrough in early modern European history while seeking out signs of decadence or structural limitation in Asia as well as in pre-modern Europe. The modernization perspective has long since led scholars to stress the modernity of the early modern European state: they focused on bureaucracies, ministers, and representative assemblies, seriously underestimating the persistent dominance of the household in the heart of the dynastic state. A 'new court history' emerging over the last two decades has provided numerous studies underlining the role of the household in the political make up of dynastic states, at the same time stressing the political relevance of rituals. Several early modern Asian polities, moreover, had developed machineries of bureaucratic checks and balances far exceeding contemporary practice in European dynastic states. Clearly, it no longer suffices to qualify European early modern monarchies as efficient machineries of decision making and resource extraction, while sidelining contemporary dynastic states in Asia as inadequate 'palace polities'. More importantly, as soon as we leave aside the axioms of the traditional modernization perspective, a convergence in themes and interpretations emerges around household and dynastic government that positively invites comparative work.<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I accept this challenge by

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<sup>3</sup> See several recent comparative efforts: A.J.S. SPAWFORTH, *The Court and Court Society in Ancient Monarchies* (Cambridge 2007); Anne WALTHALL, ed., *Servants of the Dynasty. Palace Women in World History* (Berkeley, Los Angeles 2008); Tülay ARTAN, Jeroen DUINDAM, Metin KUNT, ed., *Royal Courts in Dynastic States and Empires* (forthcoming Brill).

identifying structures and patterns recurring in the context of pre-modern dynastic household-based rule, rephrasing them in a reasoned layout for thematic comparison. In a preliminary section, I will address some of the problems and choices related to my comparison of dynastic centres.

Patterns of kinship and settlement have varied widely in human history. Alongside other variants of communal living, the household based on a nuclear or extended family has been a widespread form of organizing daily life and reproduction. In hierarchical societies, the household of a leader tends to serve as a conspicuous centre of the wider social unit, a household writ large underpinning the supremacy of the leader's clan as well as symbolizing the cohesion of the group as a whole. Arguably, the enhanced household around the ruler represents the form of power predominant in global history. We can produce archeological and written materials as well as artistic representations *ad libitum* to support this statement. Style, form and scale, however, will differ immensely, from modest and accessible dwellings barely distinguishable from their environment to imposing and secluded palatial complexes.

Household servants cater for the daily needs of rulers, administer their domains, and typically also perform services we would qualify as pertaining to the government of the realm. Services for person, household, domain, and government overlap. Terms such as *oikos*, *domus*, *Haus* or *maison* are used not only for the house and its dwellers, but can also refer to the lineage, to its domains, and even to the economy of the 'state'. Early modern Europeans typically used the word state when referring to the listing of people present at court (*Hofstaat*) or to budgets, rather than to the abstract concept of the state. An increasing separation between household and government, conceptually as well as in terms of personnel, developed gradually. Throughout history, the two usually seem to have been closely intertwined – although the differentiated structures of court and administration in Chinese history and the atypical development of the Roman imperial household alongside Republican political institutions show that this is not a general rule. In using the term court, I refer to the amalgam of household and government services grouped around the person of a dynastic ruler. The question whether or not these services were separated can only be answered by examining both elements and their connections. I use the term dynastic centre because it widens the horizon, explicitly situating the court in its political, social and cultural environment; moreover, it puts at a distance specifically European literary and artistic overtones of the terms court and courtier.

As soon as rulers and leading lineages emerge certain questions will arise regarding 1) the ruler himself (or more rarely herself); 2) the dynasty and its continuation (evidently including women as well as siblings); 3) the status, composition, and tasks of the groups serving the ruler; and finally 4) the connections of this grouping with its wider social environment. It is my contention that in each of these four subsequent concentric circles of ruler-dynasty-palace staffs-connections, we can define a series of questions relevant for all dynastic centres, notwithstanding huge cultural differences separating civilizations, regions, and periods.

These four dimensions, elaborated in the second part of this paper, are further streamlined by two perspectives of general importance for the history of power structures and state-building. The first concerns the necessity of delegating power, a process in which over time almost inevitably loyal agents are turned into vested interest groups. This dilemma resounds in dynastic as well as modern political history. Particularly strong rulers can thwart elites undermining dynastic power; yet all rulers need to create a trusted group of agents or institutions supporting them and implementing their measures. It seems inevitable that such groups in the longer run resurface as power elites: the story starts all over again. A set of precepts and practices developed to prevent or resolve this situation, which is reflected in the organizational make-up as well as in the written legacies of dynastic centres.<sup>4</sup> My second general perspective relates to the potential of the dynastic centre to integrate elites from diverse backgrounds by creating a conspicuous ritual centre, which organized redistribution of resources and served as a model for high culture. Dynastic power in the pre-modern world remained limited in practice, even if it was usually elevated to great heights in ritual and representation. While dynastic power often arose in conquest, violence or the threat of violence were never sufficient to hold together a realm in the long run. The household could admirably organize two other essential prerequisites of socio-political harmony. It appealed to material interests through its redistributive functions; it strengthened cohesion by involving variable audiences in its public rituals, conspicuous hierarchies, and high culture. Elites and the populace at large could be ‘persuaded to acquiesce’ by these activities of the dynastic centre.<sup>5</sup> The ambivalent moral reputation of the dynastic centre – a model of sophistication easily turned into its negative counter-image associated with lust, luxury, ambition and vanity – indicates that identification could easily be reverted, when either physical circumstances or the attitudes of the ruler and his following alienated the populace. ‘Regime changes’ replacing declining dynasties with vigorous young dynasties are a standard element in traditional models of dynastic power from the Chinese dynastic cycle to Ibn Khaldun’s *Muqaddimah*.<sup>6</sup>

## STRATEGIES OF COMPARATIVE RESEARCH

Comparative and intercultural research can follow many models. Dynastic centres organized around a household serving the ruler can be found in many periods and

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<sup>4</sup> The impressive study of ‘state breakdown’ by Jack GOLDSTONE, *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World* (Berkeley 1991) stresses demography as single or dominant factor; the recurring pattern of ruler-elite dynamics sketched here is certainly an additional (as Goldstone would probably concede), and in my perspective also an independent factor. s

<sup>5</sup> David CANNADINE, ‘Introduction’ in: *Rituals of Royalty. Power and Ceremonial in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge 1987) pp. 1-19, p. 19: “Yet for any society, in any age, the study of politics ultimately comes down to one elemental question: how are people persuaded to acquiesce in a polity where the distribution of power is manifestly unequal and unjust, as it invariably is.”

<sup>6</sup> Ibn KHALDUN, *The Muqaddimah. An Introduction to History*, Franz ROSENTHAL, ed. (Princeton 1967), notably many passages on tribal ‘group feeling’ (*Asabiyya*) undermined by sedentary life and luxury.

regions, diachronic as well as synchronic research strategies can be followed. Diachronic comparison in one region makes possible the analysis of continuity and change over time, whereas synchronic comparison in several regions allows the study of interaction among dynastic centres in a single epoch. The Heidelberg cluster of excellence focuses on shifting asymmetries in cultural flows between Asia and Europe, and hence would seem to privilege a synchronic perspective. My previous study of dynastic centres left me with the impression that combined diachronic and synchronic perspectives can be the most effective strategy to tackle several thorny questions.<sup>7</sup>

One such question certainly is the classical opposition between ‘diffusionism’ and the notion of independent development in physically separated areas. Traditions of rulership can be traced in terms of artefacts and palace decoration as well as in household structures. Thus, for instance, until the end of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806, emperors-elect were ceremonially crowned and dressed with attributes thought to have originated in Carolingian times. Napoleon still vainly tried to appropriate this crown with its age-old imperial connotations. The relics connected to the prophet and the caliphs likewise were captured by a series of dynasties before they reached Topkapi palace. At a different level, we can establish some continuity in court offices and structures, connecting the Carolingian and Ottonian courts to later European courts.<sup>8</sup> A tentative line of development and imitation has been construed from the Abbasids to Mamluk, Ottoman and Safavid practices combining palace-based slave-soldiers, eunuchs and slave-concubines.<sup>9</sup> Staffs of the court (chamber, table, stables, hunt, guards, etc) as well as specific offices (e.g. cupbearer, chamberlain, falconer) seem similar in many ages and places. Hardly everything can be explained by contact, imitation, and tradition, however. Staffs follow the logic of everyday household life, also reflected in some of the recurring offices. Differentiated rules for access show striking similarity from one court to another, yet they too are an inevitable component of household practices in any hierarchical environment, and shouldn’t necessarily be interpreted as an importation from a specific origin. Forms of extreme deference, notably by touching the ground with the forehead as practiced in proskynesis or kow-tow, finally, can be found in many cultures; again, the pattern seems general to the point of sociobiological cliché, and only far more specific characteristics can indicate actual imitation.

Undoubtedly long-standing traditions exist in court life, offering a repository of practices and images for later generations, yet we need to differentiate between

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<sup>7</sup> Jeroen DUINDAM, *Myths of Power. Norbert Elias and the early modern European Court* (Amsterdam 1995); DUINDAM, *Vienna and Versailles. The Courts of Europe’s Dynastic Rivals, 1550-1780* (Cambridge 2003).

<sup>8</sup> On the *Kleinodien* see Hermann FILLITZ, *Die Insignien und Kleinodien des heiligen Römischen Reiches* (Vienna, Munich 1954); on Carolingian court offices and their impact on later medieval courts see Werner RÖSENER, ‘Hofämter an mittelalterlichen Fürstehöfen’, *Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters*, 45 (1989) pp. 485-550.

<sup>9</sup> Patricia CRONE, *Slaves on Horses: the Evolution of the Islamic Polity* (Cambridge 1980); David AYALON, *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans: A Study in Power Relationships* (Jerusalem 1999); recently also S. BABAIE, K. BABAYAN, e.a. *Slaves of the Shah. New elites of Safavid Iran* (London, New York 2004).

the various ways in which these traditions could operate. What was the relevance of, say, the Persian tradition of kingship, from the Achaemenids to Nadir Shah? This multifaceted and malleable influence blended with Arabic, Islamicate, and Turkic forms, each adding its own repertory of ideas and practices.<sup>10</sup> In learning, poetry and architecture, as well as in the pragmatic science of ruling and administration, the Persian tradition had a lasting influence, but rulers permanently reinvented and reformed it, even when they sought to re-establish the tradition. The reputation of ‘Burgundian-Spanish ceremonial’ in Europe shows how a tradition could be taken extremely seriously, whereas at the same time its substance remained wholly unclear. Generations after the end of the actual Burgundian court, Charles V reinstated what he thought were its practices in Spain. Soon, the Habsburgs in Spain as well as in Austria prided themselves on their ‘Burgundian’ legacy. In Vienna, courtiers referred to the Burgundian tradition when they needed a powerful rhetoric argument in favour of challenged age-old rights; ‘Burgundian’ represented the acme of tradition and distinction, conferring sanctity and immunity against change. Their court, however, apart from the order of the Golden Fleece and some other isolated habits, hardly resembled the Burgundian example. Habsburg courtiers revered a tradition distant from their actual practice, and exceedingly spongy in its definition. In France, conversely, Burgundy was not usually referred to – it was after all a French secundogeniture, an appanage granted to a younger son whose successors defiantly turned it into a magnificent court temporarily outshining France. The Burgundian court, however, had originated in French court practices, and hence the courts showed great resemblance.<sup>11</sup>

The discussion of traditions brings to mind the etic-emic distinction. Deriving from linguistics, the terms ‘phonetic’ and ‘phonemic’ have been used widely to discriminate between the perspectives respectively of detached observers versus participants, or outsiders versus insiders.<sup>12</sup> The Burgundian example shows that traditions treasured by groups in the past do not necessarily coincide with influences and connections we can verify from our contemporary academic perspective. Conversely academics can establish connections that were irrelevant to historical actors. The Central Asian heritage shared by, for instance, the Qing and Ottoman dynasties with their traditions of horsemanship and archery could not be perceived or valued by these distant dynasties themselves. The strong affective and legitimizing potential of traditions does not necessarily match their concrete impact; nor does the absence of a consciously cultivated tradition exclude shared roots or earlier influences. This fits in and complicates the problem of diffusion and separate development.

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<sup>10</sup> Marshall G. S. HODGSON. *The Venture of Islam. I. The Classical Age of Islam* (Chicago 1975); Robert L. Canfield, ed., *Turko-Persia in historical perspective* (Cambridge 1991); Muzaffar ALAM, ‘The Pursuit of Persian: Language in Mughal Politics’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 32, 2 (1998) 317-349; Lisa BALABANLILAR, ‘Lords of the Auspicious Conjunction: Turco-Mongol Imperial Identity on the Subcontinent’ *Journal of World History*, 18, 1 (2007) 1-39.

<sup>11</sup> Jeroen DUINDAM, ‘The Burgundian-Spanish legacy in European court life: a brief reassessment and the example of the Austrian Habsburgs’, *Publication du Centre Europeen d’études Bourguignonnes (XIVe-XVIe s.). Rencontre d’Innsbruck*, 46 (2006) pp. 203-220

<sup>12</sup> See discussion and applications in Thomas N. HEADLAND, Kenneth L. PIKE, Marvin HARRIS, ed., *Emics and Etics: the insider/ outsider debate.* (Newbury Park, CA 1990).



The opening paragraphs of this paper implicitly stated an argument that makes a combination of synchronic and diachronic comparison mandatory for my project. Studying any phenomenon in Europe and Asia only in the early modern age immediately raises the question of a structurally increasing power asymmetry in favour of Europe. Questions related to differentiated trajectories of modernization, long predominant in economic and political studies, do not ideally fit the comparative study of an institution semi-universal in pre-modern history. This relatively recent change in global balances rapidly obscures other questions. A diachronic, longitudinal perspective is necessary to put into perspective tendencies that seem either typically early modern, or typically European rather than Asian from a longer-term viewpoint. Only a diachronic perspective allows us to identify clichés of court history, recurring aspects that should not be mistaken for modern developments. How can we accept unreservedly, for instance, Norbert Elias' specific interpretation of court ceremony, *Affektbeherrschung* and the changes in modern European civilization when close parallels in courts throughout world history strike the eye?<sup>13</sup>

Other comparative strategies have been used to go beyond 'East-West dichotomies'.<sup>14</sup> The pattern of Braudel's study of the Mediterranean has been extended to the Indian and Atlantic Oceans.<sup>15</sup> These studies have placed emphasis on the multiple connections and influences rather than concentrating on clashes between religions and polities. The Mediterranean itself remains a rich basis for studying connections between Byzantine, 'Frankish', Mamluk, North-West African and Ottoman dynastic heritages from later medieval to early modern times. World-historical perspectives help to highlight global movement of silver, germs, gems, weapons, peoples, and many other items. Among these perspectives, an Inner Asian view, looking at the impact of peoples migrating from the steppe heart of the Asian landmass towards cultures in all directions is relevant for the comparison of East and West Asia.<sup>16</sup> This project acknowledges these perspectives; it primarily looks at recurring elements in household structures, seeks to include connections

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<sup>13</sup> Norbert ELIAS, *Die höfische Gesellschaft. Untersuchungen zur Soziologie des Königtums und der höfischen Aristokratie. Mit einer Einleitung: Soziologie und Geschichtswissenschaft* (Darmstadt, Neuwied 1969); ELIAS, Norbert, *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation. Soziogenetische und Psychogenetische Untersuchungen* (Bern 1969); see discussion in DUINDAM, *Myths of Power*.

<sup>14</sup> This terminology comes from Victor LIEBERMAN, 'Transcending East-West Dichotomies: State and Culture Formation in Six Ostensibly Disparate Areas', *Modern Asian Studies*, 31, 3 (1997) pp. 463-546.

<sup>15</sup> See classics Fernand BRAUDEL, *La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (Paris 1949); K. N. CHAUDHURI, *Asia before Europe: economy and civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge 1990); see a perceptive perspective in Sanjay SUBRAHMANYAM, 'Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia', *Modern Asian Studies*, 31, 3 (1997), pp. 735-762; recent assessments: Bhaswati BHATTACHARYA, Gita DHARAMPAL-FRICK, Jos GOMMANS, 'Spatial and temporal continuities of merchant networks in South Asia and the Indian Ocean (1500-2000)', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 50, 2-3 (2007) pp. 91-105; *Atlantic History: A Critical Appraisal*, Jack D. GREENE, Philip D. MORGAN, ed. (Oxford 2008).

<sup>16</sup> See recently e.g. Christopher E. BECKWITH, *Empires of the Silk Road: A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present* (Princeton 2009).

and influences when relevant, and only in the very last instance may deal with changing asymmetries between Europe and Asia.

Comparative research dealing with ‘big questions’ usually relies on secondary literature.<sup>17</sup> Recently several important works have been published on the history of the court that together provide wide-ranging coverage in terms of regions and periods.<sup>18</sup> Yet even this specialized academic literature doesn’t offer an entirely sufficient basis for comparison. Studying simultaneously the archival legacies of the dynastic courts in Vienna and Versailles, I noted that in many respects, only at this detailed level did comparison start to make sense. Numbers and expenses, for instance, could be turned into comparable aggregates only by first ascertaining the categories used in archival listings, indicating court servants in various staffs and auxiliary services, wages, and expenditure. Numbers suggested in the literature were often faulty, but even correct statements offered no basis for comparison, as the logic of the computations behind the totals differed. The presence or absence of archival materials at these two courts, as well as the nature of these materials, helped me to rephrase and refine research questions. In the end, several results emerged that were wholly unexpected, correcting some of my initial hypotheses as well as contradicting the general reputations of Bourbon and Habsburg courts in history. Comparative history, I concluded, should consistently try to include published as well as unpublished materials in its research. This is easier said than done: comparative research based on primary sources and ideally also on unpublished materials presents a major challenge within Europe, swelling to truly daunting proportions as soon as we cross more fundamental borders of culture and language.

It is possible to make this work only by organizing a cooperative effort, bridging the gaps of language and culture by bringing together a set of specialists. In recent years I have cooperated with ottomanists and sinologists who in many instances corrected my intellectual reflexes formed by a European background deepened by a preoccupation with mostly European history. With such a group coaching young researchers from relevant territories in Asia as well as in Europe, jointly elaborating a framework for comparative research in their own sources, important results can be achieved. Cooperation along these lines, close in spirit to the Heidelberg projects currently underway, can uncover unexpected contrasts and similarities. Language competence and familiarity with the cultural backgrounds are necessary to connect the wider comparative perspective with detailed knowledge of relevant sources. It is equally indispensable for the cultural translation of terms and concepts – what are the equivalents for court, courtier, court ladies, eunuchs, nobles, ruler, household, government or state – and specific offices in these domains? What are the connotations and judgments inherent in

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<sup>17</sup> See a classic statement and methodical explanation of this approach in Charles Tilly, *Big structures, large processes, huge comparisons* (New York 1983).

<sup>18</sup> Evelyn RAWSKI, *The Last Emperors. A Social History of Qing Imperial Institutions* (Berkeley, Los Angeles 1998); David M. Robinson, *Culture, Courtiers, and Competition: The Ming Court (1368-1644)* (Harvard 2008) Harvard East Asian Monographs; S. BABAIE, K. BABAYAN, *Slaves of the Shah*; Rhoads MURPHEY, *Exploring Ottoman Sovereignty. Tradition, Image and Practice in the Ottoman Imperial Household 1400-1800* (London, New York 2008); also the volumes edited by Walthall, and Spawforth.

these terms? Intense cooperation before and during the phase of research can lead to a multicultural glossary of terms including explications where no clear parallels are available. Ongoing comparison makes it possible to continually develop the catalogue of questions and foci, for which this paper provides a starting point.

The scope of this comparative effort has no limitation in principle, only in practice, at the level of finance and organization. A minimum coverage needs to guarantee:

- 1) the correction of a specifically early modern perspective as well as
- 2) a sufficient spread of examples in Europe and Asia.

In a first attempt to obtain a European Research Council advanced investigator grant, I included a longitudinal-diachronic perspective concentrating on West Asia and its European connections, from Assyrian to Ottoman times, as well as an early modern lateral-synchronic perspective including at least Ming-Qing China, Tokugawa Japan, the Ottomans and Europe. Clearly, Safavid, Mughal, South-Indian, South-East Asian examples could be added, as well as, in the margins of the fragmented European perspective, Russia with its steppe connections. Also, the longitudinal perspective could be extended to include early imperial China, or earlier phases of Indian history. Africa and Pre-Columbian America can offer valuable additions – the Pre-Columbian heritage has special relevance as the only example developing in seclusion, without connections to the Eurasian and African cultures.

Ming and Qing China, the Ottoman empire and most of the other dynastic complexes cited here were organized around a single dynasty and one leading dynastic centre. In Tokugawa Japan, with its peculiar form of dual rulership based in Edo and Kyoto, the shogun in Edo served as main political-military point of orientation for the entire realm. Medieval and early modern Europe could look upon itself as a *Res Publica Christiana*; pope and emperor could with some legitimacy pose as the twofold rulers of at least a section of their world. At no moment in its history, however, did Europe function as a coherent empire, oriented towards a single ruler and centre (or even two rulers and two centres). How can we compare the multiplicity of households, in various styles and traditions, with the apparent unity of the single major dynastic household in empires? The contrast is relevant but needs to be put into perspective. Rulership existed at many levels, both in the diverse European commonwealth and in empires. All longer-lasting empires went through phases of devolution characterized by the emergence of multiple competing dynasties – in the Indian subcontinent as in Europe, this seems to have been the rule rather than the exception.<sup>19</sup> In every empire, princely households existed at various levels. The level of autonomy and power of kings, dukes, and

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<sup>19</sup> Note the comparison of India and the Holy Roman Empire in Edmund BURKE, *Select Works of Edmund Burke* (Indianapolis 1999) 4. Chapter: *Speech on Fox's East India Bill*. Accessed from [http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/659/20402\\_on\\_2009-03-19](http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/659/20402_on_2009-03-19). Discussion of European perception early modern India: Gita DHARAMPAL-FRICK, *Indien im Spiegel deutscher Quellen der Frühen Neuzeit (1500–1750) Studien zu einer interkulturellen Konstellation* (Tübingen 1994), particularly chapter 4.

counts, beys, viceroys, and governors varied widely. The dynastic household itself is my basic unit of comparison, not necessarily the dynastic household of a large-scale empire, let alone a ‘civilization’. The difference in scale between, for instance, France under Louis XIV with its ca 20 million population, and Qing China under Kangxi with ca 150 million need not undermine comparison.

Two fundamental qualifications circumscribe the nature of the dynastic centres to be compared. First of all, I consider only dynasties with the ambition and potential to extend their rule over many generations. Dignitaries acting as temporary representatives of a central dynasty, who can transfer their power to another generation only by subterfuge and without openly claiming dynastic legitimacy, do not enter into my comparison even if they reside in palaces and are served by hundreds. This does not exclude courts where succession was arranged through election or acclamation, such as the the Papal, Mamluk and Holy Roman Imperial courts. A second reservation concerns the conglomerate of territories and peoples under the rule of a dynasty. I concentrate my effort on dynasties ruling over several regions or peoples, not because of any strict measurement in scale, but because I want to assess the household’s potential to integrate mixed populations comprising various ethnic or religious groups.<sup>20</sup> This qualification leaves room for comparing European dynastic states and Asian empires. Empires almost by definition include a multiplicity of peoples. Yet in fact most European dynastic states were composite monarchies. The early modern Austrian Habsburgs combined the royal crowns of Bohemia and Hungary, the archducal hats of various Austrian duchies, and the imperial crown of the Holy Roman Empire. Other rulers always listed an array of titles underlining the variety of territories in their portfolio, and more often than not had to deal with regionalized identities and privileges.

It might seem unsatisfactory to end this introductory section without establishing a genealogy of scholarly works serving as basis for this effort, or highlighting the innovative concepts and ideas used. I hesitate to do so here, because the first would lead to obvious names from Max Weber to Michael Mann, from Jack Goody to Clifford Geertz, as well as to a long list of anthropological studies and historical monographs.<sup>21</sup> The second would turn out to be rather modest: the innovative impulse here cannot be situated in a list of authors and their concepts, or in a virtuoso exercise in intellectual concept-juggling but in the combination of preceding observations with the fields outlined below, to be implemented in cooperative research.

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<sup>20</sup> John BEATTIE, *Understanding an African kingdom: Bunyoro* (New York 1960) p. 32 stresses the representation of clans and crafts at court; their contact with the dynastic centre served to integrate the people of Bunyoro. The mechanism singled out for research here also relevant for smaller territories.

<sup>21</sup> Notably Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriss der verstehenden Soziologie* (Tübingen 1922); Michael Mann, *Sources of Social Power. A history of power from the beginning to AD 1760* (Cambridge 1986); Jack Goody, e.g. *Succession to high office* (Cambridge 1966) or his *Comparative Studies in Kinship* (Stanford 1969); Clifford GEERTZ, *Negara. The theatre-state in nineteenth-century Bali* (Princeton 1980), p. 130; see also GEERTZ, *Local knowledge. Further essays in interpretive anthropology* (New York 1983).

## FOUR CONCENTRIC CIRCLES: RULER, DYNASTY, PALACE STAFFS, CONNECTIONS

### *THE RULER: LIFE CYCLE, PERSON AND POSITION, CATALOGUE OF VIRTUES*

A ruler may be presented as the son of heaven; the shadow of god on earth; the agent of divine power on earth: he remains an ordinary human being following the unbending trajectory of birth, growth, death. While coups or elections usually install persons at the height of their physical and intellectual powers, hereditary succession can bring to power persons at any stage of the human life cycle: young children still being raised by their dynastic elders; inexperienced adolescents; adults at the peak of their capabilities; elderly persons. The two most marked rulers of the later seventeenth century, Louis XIV and Kangxi, went through all these stages. The life cycle exerts a powerful influence: youngsters approaching adulthood seek to break free from the tutelage of their mentors; senior rulers easily slip into the vulnerabilities of old age, pressured by eager successors and a court awaiting their deaths. A miniature dynastic cycle of weakness-strength-weakness hides within many reigns. Favourites rise to power more easily in the proximity either of very young or very old rulers. This holds true even for strong figures. Qing emperor Qianlong in the latter part of his reign allowed the accumulation of power in the hands of his Manchu guardsman Heshen. Only after the death of his mentor Mazarin did Louis XIV proclaim his independence; later in his life he again increasingly relied on his morganatic wife Mme de Maintenon – a fact usually passed over in silence.<sup>22</sup> For women at court -- spouses, concubines, regents and rulers -- reproduction and pregnancies formed a major factor in the life cycle. Post-sexual status, motherhood, and widowhood consolidated their position; conversely, an active role as ruling queen or regent could be seen as irreconcilable with reproduction and sexuality.<sup>23</sup>

Astute rulers can father weaklings. All rulers, strong or weak, bright or dim-witted, had to cope with expectations, obligations, and temptations. These proved to be too heavy for many among them. The more elevated the ritual position ascribed to the ruler, the more burdensome it could turn out in practice for the incumbent. The show of omnipotence around the ruler severely limited his personal freedom of movement; this is one of the conclusions emerging from Clifford Geertz's interpretation of the Balinese 'theatre-state'. The king, then, was like the king of chess: central yet vulnerable and static.<sup>24</sup> In all ritualized forms of rulership,

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<sup>22</sup> See e.g. Mark Bryant, 'Partner, Matriarch and Minister: The Unofficial Consort, Mme de Maintenon of France, 1669-1715' in C. Campbell-Orr ed., *European Queenship: The Role of The Consort 1660-1815* (Cambridge 2004).

<sup>23</sup> See e.g. Judith M. RICHARDS, "'To promote a Woman to Beare Rule": Talking of Queens in Mid-Tudor England', *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 28, 1 (1997) 101-121; Leslie PEIRCE, *The Imperial Harem. Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (Oxford 1993) stressing the link between 'postsexual status' and political power.

<sup>24</sup> GEERTZ, *Negara*, p. 130; see also GEERTZ, 'Centers, kings, and charisma: reflections on the symbolics of power' in: *Local knowledge*, pp. 121-146; see comments on Geertz e.g.

we need to differentiate sharply between the inflated status of the position, and the actual role of the person: these kings and emperors reigned, but often could not truly rule. At the same time, the servants prostrating themselves in the presence of the ruler could turn out to be more powerful in practice than the person they inflated to unnatural proportions. Supreme status and celestial legitimation came with heavy responsibilities. An unexpected eclipse, natural disasters, droughts, floods, indicating heaven's displeasure, could force the Chinese emperor to purge corrupt bureaucrats and introduce reforms, but in the end he himself had to restore harmony through sacrifices and rituals.<sup>25</sup> Elements of this great responsibility are reflected in the attitudes of European rulers, centred on justice and accessibility. Religious legitimation created demands that were taken quite seriously by most rulers, even if they quite often failed to live up to them.

In addition to such burdens, rulers would have to deal with decision making and paperwork. The three 'high' Qing emperors clearly worked very hard, and were keen to present this image. Louis XIV, possibly lackadaisical by their standards, insisted on the necessity of continuous hard work in the memoirs he wrote for his son. Habsburg Emperor Leopold I complained in letters to a confidant about the unending hours of reading and commenting on state papers. A fifth-century Roman emperor allegedly invented a refueling oil lamp, allowing continuous work into the night; other inventions to prevent sleep figure in the literature idealizing hard-working rulers.<sup>26</sup> Most rulers were confronted with continuous pressure from servants who approached them with their own intentions. The Sun King cautioned his son, stating that servants who: 'were the first to see his weaknesses, were also the first who sought to use them to their own advantage'.<sup>27</sup> Silence and seclusion made some rulers, particularly in Asia, less vulnerable to outside pressures; yet this defensive measure heightened the power of the inner court servants. Hunting, probably the single most important diversion of rulers throughout history, combining physical exertion with relatively easy companionship, brought relaxation from hard work as well as social pressures.<sup>28</sup>

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in S.J. TAMBIAH, *Culture, thought and social action. An anthropological perspective*. (Cambridge, Mass. 1983).

<sup>25</sup> RAWSKI, *The Last Emperors*, pp. 197-294, see e.g. rituals following droughts on pp. 225-227; for a wider discussion of ritual kingship and the Frazerian notion of sacrificing the ritual king, see Declan QUIGLEY, 'Scapegoats: The Killing of Kings and Ordinary People' *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 6, 2 (2000) pp. 237-254.

<sup>26</sup> The refueling lamp was mentioned in a paper by Jill HARRIES (St Andrews) during a November 2009 conference on Empires and Law: principles, practices Law: 'Going outside the order: Roman law from city state to world empire'. See many examples of the rhetoric and also the practice of hard work in Louis XIV, *Mémoires de Louis XIV pour l'instruction du Dauphin*, Charles DREYSS, ed., (Paris 1860) two vols, e.g. II, pp. 99, 119-120; Jonathan SPENCE, *Emperor of China. Self-Portrait of Kang-Hsi* (New York 1974), 46, 110-111; for Habsburg emperor Leopold I see e.g. Alfred F. PRIBRAM, ed., *Privatbriefe Kaiser Leopold I. an den Grafen F. E. Pötting*, (Vienna 1903) two vols, I pp. 118, 375.

<sup>27</sup> DREYSS, *Mémoires de Louis XIV*, I, pp. 196-197; II, pp. 64-65.

<sup>28</sup> See RAWSKI, *Last Emperors*, pp. 20-22; MURPHEY, *Ottoman Sovereignty*, pp. 152-153; generally Thomas T. ALLSEN, *The Royal Hunt in Eurasian History*. (Philadelphia 2006). Staffs for several forms of hunting existed at all courts known to me; hunting was usually connected to a seasonal calendar and to change of location.

Do ‘princely mirrors’ in different cultural settings reflect a comparable catalogue of virtues, combining religious attitudes and the ideal of a harmonious relationship with the population with dynastic qualities such as valour and liberality? Stereotypes of good and bad rulers invite comparative scrutiny, as does the tension between the ritualized position and the vulnerability of incumbent rulers, or the fundamental impact of the life cycle.

***DYNASTIES: REPRODUCTION, SUCCESSION, SIBLINGS***

Dynastic power is based on inheritance of high status, a situation contingent on procreation. Eunuchs as well as clergymen restricted by celibacy frequently managed to transmit their wealth or status to members of their extended families or took recourse in the adoption of favourites.<sup>29</sup> Rulers could sometimes also choose to create successors through adoption rather than through reproduction; yet on the whole they hoped to see their children installed in their place. The organization of reproduction left open many choices: monogamous marriage versus polygyny; endogamous marriages with near-equals versus slave concubinage — and combinations of these. Interestingly, we see a development from dynastic marriage to harem-based slave concubinage both in the Abbasid and the Ottoman empires. The dynasty was henceforth defined exclusively in patrilineal terms; concubines were slaves as well as outsiders. Patterns of marriage and concubinage have been traced for several Chinese dynasties. Preceding phases of control by dowager-empresses and their lineages in Chinese history, decried by gentlemen-literati who hated to see power in the hands of their inner-court rivals, apparently convinced the new Qing rulers to adopt concubinage in addition to marriage as basis for procreation. Concubines were selected from all social levels of the conquest elite, organized in the Manchu, Mongol, and Hanjun (Chinese) military formations or banners; successors were not necessarily sons of high-ranking spouses.<sup>30</sup>

In Europe, the practice of marriage among equals hardened into dynastic marriage among sovereign dynasties. Concomitantly, primogeniture slowly became the dominant practice, although election, acclamation, and direct choice by the incumbent ruler were all practiced. Likewise, the carving up of territories among successors upon the death of a ruler, or mitigated variants of such practices granting younger sons appanages in crownlands, remained habitual. Elsewhere, the varieties of marriage and concubinage led to multiple systems of succession. Succession is the key to and Achilles’ heel of dynastic power: offspring are a necessary precondition for continuity, but they can present a daunting challenge at the same time. Monogamous dynastic marriage turned infertility and premature

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<sup>29</sup> Jennifer W. JAY, ‘Another side of Chinese eunuch history: Castration, marriage, adoption, and burial’, *Canadian Journal of History*, 28, 3 (1993) 459-478; see Jin YI, *Mémoires d’une dame de cour dans la cité interdite* (Arles 1993) and Dan SHI, *Mémoires d’un eunuque dans la cité interdite* (Arles 1991) for many details of eunuchs towards the end of the Qing dynasty.

<sup>30</sup> Rubie S. WATSON and Patricia BUCKLEY EBREY, ed., *Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society* (Berkeley 1991), notably the chapters by Jennifer HOLMGREN and Evelyn RAWSKI; Shuo WANG, ‘The Selection of Women for the Qing Imperial Harem’, *Chinese Historical Review*, 11, 2 (2004) pp. 212-222

deaths into grave concerns, leading to serious crises, for instance, in France after 1712, or in Austria under Charles VI. Most European wars between 1648 and 1789 were triggered by succession disputes, themselves caused by the extinction of senior branches of dynasties. An abundance of potential successors, however, brought out other tensions and anxieties, in Europe and elsewhere. Succession quarrels dominate dynastic history: particularly in the steppe-based dynasties of Central Asia, the notion of collective sovereignty dictated a sharing of power among siblings. Among Mughal rulers, proudly pointing to Genghis as well as to Timur as forebears, violent succession struggles were endemic.<sup>31</sup> The Ottomans practiced a form of succession-by-competition among sons of the deceased ruler. Splitting up the realm after the death of a ruler remained an option until Mehmed II formalized the practice of fratricide.<sup>32</sup> All sons were potential successors, serving as governors in border provinces; they rushed to the capital or the army to secure support, and confront competitors. Rivals were killed in battle, or afterwards by the victor – fratricide emerged as a necessary practice. Around 1600, the practice dissolved in several stages. Sons were no longer sent out to rule in the provinces, but were kept in Topkapi palace. All males in the House of Osman were expected to stay there, until the sultan died and the eldest successor took his place. Seniority and hence the succession of brothers rather than sons replaced the earlier system. The Qing discarded Ming primogeniture; within the general practice that sons succeeded their fathers, the emperor's preference now ruled. This was not as painless as it may sound. Once a preference became clear, it was challenged from many sides. Even as powerful a character as Kangxi was repeatedly forced to change course, a situation causing him great worries. These experiences were equally undermining for his eventual successor Yongzheng, and distrust of siblings dominated the opening of his reign. In the end, Yongzheng and Qianlong – Kangxi's favourite grandson – turned succession into a secret, to be made public only upon the death of the emperor.<sup>33</sup>

At the level of the first generation, children of a ruler offered opportunities for cementing alliances through marriages. Sultans' daughters habitually married among the highest state agents of the empire, viziers and pashas.<sup>34</sup> Princes and princesses were exchanged to consolidate peace treaties in Europe, where an increasingly dense network of marriage connections turned all rulers into one family. Princes from the Manchu imperial lineage or Aisin Gioro concluded endogamous alliances with Manchu as their preferred partners in addition to numerous Mongol and few Chinese women. Qing princesses married among the

<sup>31</sup> See e.g. Munis D. FARUQUI, 'The Forgotten Prince: Mirza Hakim and the Formation of the Mughal Empire in India', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 48, 4 (2005) pp. 487-523; Jorge FLORES, Sanjay SUBRAHMANYAM, 'The Shadow Sultan: Succession and Imposture in the Mughal Empire, 1628-1640', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 47,1 (2004) pp. 80-121; Jorge FLORES, "'I will do as my father did": on Portuguese and other European views of Mughal succession crises', *e-Journal of Portuguese History*, 3, 2 (2005).

<sup>32</sup> MURPHEY, *Ottoman Sovereignty*, p. 42.

<sup>33</sup> RAWSKI, *Last Emperors*, 101-103; Spence, *Emperor of China*, pp. 115-140.

<sup>34</sup> PEIRCE, *The Imperial Harem*, discusses at length the marriages of Ottoman princesses to the highest state servants, Sultan's sons-in-law or Damads; see also on Saljuq and Abbasid women Eric J. HANNE, 'Women, power, and the eleventh and twelfth century Abbasid court', *Hawwa* 3, 1 (2005) pp. 80-110.



same groups, but the proportions were different, with the Mongol princes now ranking at the top. These alliances reflected the importance of the Mongol connection for the conquest of Ming China, extended into the protracted phase of fighting Western Mongolian tribes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>35</sup>

Descendants of royal siblings, close to dynastic legitimacy yet without likely chances to rule, could pose serious problems for rulers. They were ideal personal representatives and viceroys; but for the very same reasons, also the most dangerous rivals for the throne. The Ottoman practice of competitive succession and fratricide, followed by the new pattern of seclusion and succession through seniority eliminated or at least mitigated the problem. Qing emperors sought to gain a strong grip on the imperial relatives. Princes could hold high office, but were also restricted in movement: princes lived in and around Beijing, catered for as well as controlled. Their noble titles, moreover, descended in rank one grade from generation to generation, although an exception was made for the most important families. In Europe, cadet branches that had figured prominently in rebellions, gradually turned to muted opposition or uncomfortable acquiescence. The Orléans in France -- from Gaston's open role in the *Fronde*, via the Orléans regency and Philippe Égalité's vote in favour of the execution of Louis XVI, to the brief dynastic triumph of Louis Philippe in 1830 -- offer a typical example. As soon as regular succession was in some way undermined -- by minorities, regencies, or popular discontent -- princes were to be found in the vanguard of powerseekers.

At a lesser level, similar tensions were endemic in the relations between rulers and high nobles in Europe. In the Ottoman and Qing empires, below the level of the dynastic clan (or that of preceding dynasties), hereditary status and noble descent were rarely stated as openly and assertively as in Europe. Machiavelli, Montesquieu and many others contrasted all-powerful Asian rulers served by slaves or their equivalents, to European kings who could rule only by establishing consensus with their noble elites -- or by overpowering them. The Habsburg diplomat Busbecq and the Jesuit father Du Halde were positively impressed by what they perceived as the predominance of merit rather than birth in respectively the Ottoman and Chinese empires.<sup>36</sup> Notwithstanding major differences in legitimation and representation of status, it seems clear that in all examples discussed here, agents of central government as well as regional elites were forces to be reckoned with. Their connections with the dynastic centre, as focus of administrative activity and as ritual centre, were an important element in the working of the pre-modern state. A thorough analysis of groups serving around the ruler, the focus of the third concentric circle, is necessary to understand these connections.

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<sup>35</sup> Evelyn RAWSKI, 'Ching Imperial Marriage and Problems of Rulership', in: *Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society*, p p.170-203, at pp. 175-182.

<sup>36</sup> BUSBECQ, *The Turkish letters of Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, imperial ambassador at Constantinople, 1554-1562*, E. Seymour Forster, ed. (Baton Rouge 2005), pp. 59-60; Jean-Baptiste DU HALDE, *Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique et physique de l'empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie chinoise...* (The Hague 1736) 4 vols, II, p. 69-75.

The organization of reproduction and succession, and the challenges posed by pretenders as well as more generally relatives sharing in dynastic prestige invite thematic comparative research. Changes in accepted practice such as those occurring in around 1600 in the Ottoman empire or during the first generations of Qing rule, form a good starting point.

**GROUPS AROUND THE RULER: TOPOGRAPHY AND GENDER, FUNCTION, STATUS, PROVENANCE**

At the heart of this sketch stands the amalgam of groups serving the ruler in different capacities: domestics, advisers, guards, religious agents, and a variety of others. While the pattern of problems connected to rulers as persons and to dynastic continuity coalesced around several general points, a discussion of groupings at the dynastic centre threatens to fragment into a multitude of examples, among which the differences may be more obvious than the parallels. I will seek to establish criteria for comparison here, and discuss some patterns that seem to recur notwithstanding major differences in organization.

Topography and architecture suggest a first approach to the dynastic centre. Groundplans and palace structures show a more or less demarcated difference between 'inner' and 'outer' sections of the court. Frequently, 'inner' and 'outer' take form as courtyards, with subsequent gates limiting access. Structures in these courtyards can include additional thresholds of access, tying the approach of visitors to specific trajectories, typically with gates, stairs, and a sequence of rooms leading to the place where the ruler awaits guests. The inner part of the court, including by definition the residential area of the ruler himself, usually connected directly to that of his spouse(s) or concubines, was also the centre of decision making: the domestic heart served as the political heart as well. The *cabinet du roi*, the room where the king could work together with his advisers, was in the royal apartment. This shows the limitations of the modern concepts of 'private' and 'public', if these are read as labels for 'personal' and 'political' spheres. There was no such opposition in the household, even if specialized political-administrative services gradually came to operate at increasing distance from the dynastic heart of the political setup.

Women at court likewise tended to occupy the least accessible parts of the palace compound. This holds true for the European *Frauenzimmer*, a term referring both to the women and to their location,<sup>37</sup> as well as for the harem in Topkapi or the women in the forbidden city. The centrality of the 'inner court' entailed the proximity of women and power counteracting the common gender bias against women in power. The bias operated mostly for younger, sexually active, women,

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<sup>37</sup> See Jan HIRSCHBIEGEL, Werner PARAVICINI, ed., *Das Frauenzimmer. Die Frau bei Hofe in Spätmittelalter und früher Neuzeit 6. Symposium der Residenzen-Kommission der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen* (Stuttgart 2000); Katrin KELLER, *Hofdamen. Amtsträgerinnen im Wiener Hofstaat des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Vienna, Cologne, Weimar 2005).

leaving more leeway to mothers and widows.<sup>38</sup> Interestingly, both the Ottoman sultan and the Qing emperor withdrew further into the inner court in the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries respectively, strengthening the connection between occupants of the inner court – notably women – and power. At many courts eunuchs functioned as the *trait d'union* between the environment of women and men, between inner and outer courts, and hence between the sacralized ruler and less elevated persons.<sup>39</sup> More generally, chamber servants controlling access to the ruler's inner quarters could develop great power, whatever their background. Physical access to the ruler, particularly lasting access which could develop into convivial proximity, was a vital asset for any person. Palace groundplans combined with ceremonial or institutional records can help to establish the contours of inner and outer courts in terms of localities, trajectories, and staffs. This provides a necessary background to all discussions of power, administrative positions, and decision making.<sup>40</sup>

Functions of groups around the ruler can be compared at a general level, by studying the organization of household staffs and government services. Gatekeepers and guards, cupbearers and chamberlains, can be found at most courts, as well as ritual or religious specialists, scribes, secretaries, and financial controllers. Establishing lists of functions and titles of groups serving the ruler in domestic, religious, administrative or military capacities, we can translate them into a comparative matrix of functions at court.

In addition to staffs and functions, status groups and hierarchies are an essential element of any dynastic court. Can we distinguish groups with sharply differentiated status around the ruler: such as slaves, freedmen, bondservants, commoners, nobles, princes? In Europe the noble-commoner divide seems most relevant, complicated by artists and other specialists reaching high status through special achievements or proximity. At the Ottoman court all posed as the sultan's slaves, yet under this blanket status category pages in the palace schools, black and white eunuchs, women in the harem, various categories of servants of the outer court or *birun* held very different positions. At the Qing court, eunuchs, Banner bondservants, empress and concubines, Banner nobles and the imperial princes in the interior can be juxtaposed to the literati in the ministries. Hierarchies in and among these status groups – surely a vital consideration in all dynastic environments, and a cornerstone of ceremonial occasions – invite further study. Hierarchies of function (i.e. a chain of command in certain staffs) can clash with hierarchies of status (i.e. noble-commoner); this occurred regularly at European courts. What were the occasions and forms of conflict? Did conflict at court follow the fissures between status groups, between inner court and outer court, between household and government? Or did it follow a volatile pattern changing according to the occasion, and crossing the major divides? Conflict was endemic at European

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<sup>38</sup> The role of mothers and widows is stressed in PEIRCE, *Imperial Harem* and WALTHALL, *Servants of the Dynasty*.

<sup>39</sup> Keith HOPKINS, *Conquerors and Slaves* (Cambridge 1981) chapter IV on the 'political power of eunuchs'.

<sup>40</sup> Beatrice S. BARTLETT, *Monarchs and Ministers: The Grand Council in Mid-Ch'ing China, 1723-1820* (Berkeley; Los Angeles 1994).

courts, though it varied in intensity from court to court -- were Asian courts more orderly and disciplined? Fomenting conflict at court has been interpreted by Norbert Elias and many others as a conscious strategy of princes, who systematically used strife among rivaling elites to strengthen their own power. Looking at the court through the criteria given here, we can ascertain various sources of rivalry and seek to verify whether rulers indeed tried to use these systematically. In that case they contributed to a situation deplored in moral manuals of rulership.

Recruitment, provenance and training of personnel can provide vital insights. Did the dynastic centre include or exclude specific groups, regions, religions? Did it stand apart from society through its composition? The mostly Banner-recruited staff of the inner court in China contrasted with the predominance of Han Chinese in the bureaucracy, recruited through the civil service examinations. The predominance of slaves recruited among the Christian population of the empire through the *devshirme* system in the Ottoman household services as well as household troops set the court apart from its environment, although the system would soon allow recruitment in other forms as well.<sup>41</sup> The sultan's concubines, likewise, tended to come from peripheral areas. In both cases the centre was staffed to some extent by outsiders, groups ideally loyal to the ruling dynasty more than to anything else. The practice of employing eunuchs, another type of outsiders, as harem attendants, go-betweens, and advisers existed among others in Assyria, China and India.<sup>42</sup> Chinese eunuchs shielded the emperor from prying literati; their inner-court power acted as a brake on outer-court bureaucratic power. Using persons not allowed or unable to procreate in the service of rulers, was more generally adopted to prevent the emergence of hereditary power networks among elites; clerics play a major role as agents of power in European history. Exiles and travelers rose to power at many courts. After his defeat Hannibal of Carthage entered the inner circle of Antiochus the Great; deposed European rulers stayed at the courts of friendly rulers. Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta were invited to take up positions at the courts they visited. Distance from local connections and loyalties made outsiders useful as a counterpoise against vested groups. Conversely, the overt rise to power of outsiders frequently gave rise to complaints and unruliness at European courts, when dynastic marriages introduced new rulers with their circles of friends from other territories.

While recruitment could be based on preliminary training, most courts offered some sort of schooling and training to specific groups. Young pages in the stables can be found at European courts: they stayed at court several years for training, before moving to army command or court office. Slightly older noble girls were

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<sup>41</sup> I. Metin KUNT, *The Sultan's Servants: The Transformation of Ottoman Provincial Government, 1550-1650*, (New York 1983).

<sup>42</sup> On eunuchs see e.g. Jane HATHAWAY, *Beshir Agha. Chief Eunuch of the Ottoman Imperial Harem* (Oxford 2006); Shaun TOUGHER, ed., *Eunuchs in Antiquity and Beyond* (London 2002); on Assyria see Gojko BARJAMOVIC, 'Pride, pomp and circumstance. Palace, court and household in Assyria, 879-612 BCE' in: *Royal Courts in Dynastic States and Empires*; on Indian court eunuchs Kira HALL, 'Go suck your husband's sugarcane. Hijras and the use of sexual insult' in: *Queerly phrased : language, gender, and sexuality*, Anna LIVIA, Kira HALL, ed. (Oxford 1997) pp. 430-460, at pp. 432-436.

trained in the establishments of queens and princesses, usually ending their court career in marriage. Training of pages and young women in the harem can be found at all courts discussed here. Indeed, the court often functioned as a centre for training, initiating youngsters into court culture, arts, or administrative and military expertise.

The youngsters trained at court did not necessarily spend the rest of their lives there. This phenomenon leads to another question: do we focus on groups permanently present at court, visible on the ruler's payroll, or do we aim to chart a wider elite grouping sharing in only some of the activities of the court?<sup>43</sup> Were such 'court societies' a general phenomenon of dynastic centres, or did they emerge only in specific situations? In European historiography, the household institution has frequently been mixed up with the images evoked by Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*. Castiglione's book does not describe court life -- not primarily because it presents a lofty ideal rather than regular practice, but more importantly because it captures a unique moment, a chance meeting of the *fine fleur* of Italian elites. This was neither a household, nor a group institutionally bound together and sharing a daily calendar. Clearly, however, visitors and incidental occasions were very relevant for the court. Around the modest institutional core of permanently present servants multitudes could be expected to attend court incidentally. This process was regularized to some extent through various forms of honorary membership, job rotation, and a set calendar of festive and ceremonial occasions. The household institution served as the modest starting point only for a series of activities that brought in temporarily numerous others, who were not usually on the ruler's payroll. These typically included 'courtiers', *cavalieri*, gentlemen: an upper layer frequenting the court, formed by its habits yet themselves contributing to a courtly style. Can this dynamic interaction, common in Europe, also be found at Asian courts, with their more secluded inner courts, and more withdrawn rulers? Rhoads Murphey's recent study of the Ottoman court suggests a parallel phenomenon in the *müteferrikas* or distinguished persons, though they seem to represent a very select upper echelon less subject to inflation than European honorary connections.<sup>44</sup> This question becomes relevant again in the last section of this fourfold layout, connections.

Palace topography, gender, function, status, hierarchies, provenance, and presence at court can be used to establish an anatomy of the court. Applying the results in these various fields as overlapping transparencies, it should be possible to reach a better understanding of many processes at court. More focused research options can follow where sources are likely to be rich. One example may be given here. A change of rulers often generated reforms, hence sources tend to be plentiful. Even if succession was straightforward, the changeover of a princely retinue to the new sovereign court posed all sorts of questions. Which persons and groups would go from the prince's retinue to the new court? What to do with the supernumeraries -- would they stay or go? Was there any support for them? Were they pensioned or relegated to another household? In Vienna, the dowager-empress' household took over supernumeraries, allowing the new ruler a fresh start

<sup>43</sup> SPAWFORTH, *The Court and Court Society*, p. 8.

<sup>44</sup> MURPHEY, *Ottoman Sovereignty*, 154-158.

with his own servants. In France, court office gradually became semi-hereditary. Did similar rules pertain to the administrative apparatus, or had this become more detached from the ruler as a person? These questions seem relevant for all courts under consideration.

### ***COURT CONNECTIONS AND EXTENSIONS***

Most dynastic centres had one prime locus, a major palace in the capital city, such as Topkapi, the Forbidden City, or Versailles not far from Paris. These central palaces, however, were rarely the single location of the court. In and around the capital, more palaces would be available, sometimes occupied by other members of the leading dynasty with their own households. More distant venues promised a seasonal change of décor and climate, with the opportunity for different recreations, notably hunting. The dynasty and a group of servants that could change according to the occasion travelled around the country. At the same time, a steady movement of periphery to centre took place, drawing in many different groups to present their compliments to the ruler or his agents. Finally, at the level of the capital, we can expect ongoing economic, social, political and ritual interaction with the palace.

How can we characterize the relations between court and capital? Topography clarifies loci of contact and trajectories of movement between palace and city – connecting major squares, religious edifices, hunting grounds and military zones to the palace. Could people move freely in the more open sections of the palace compound? Did they use these venues for other purposes, socializing, vending? In the capital, around the major palace, connections with the urban environment could take form through purveyance and an artisanal workforce – though indeed the court itself could deal with such matters, acting as a centre of production in its own right.<sup>45</sup> Churchgoing, Friday prayer, the cycle of great sacrifices formed connections between palace and city, ruler and populace. More incidental occasions such as circumcision festivals, dynastic marriages, or the visit of important foreign missions provided flamboyant and protracted entertainment.<sup>46</sup> Which groups took part in the ceremonial movements between city and court, and in which capacity – as participants, close spectators, or as outsiders forcefully held at a distance? Who would later read about the shows, see their representation in images and writing or print? The segregation of Banner and Han Chinese populations in different sections of Beijing adds a dimension absent in Istanbul or European capitals.

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<sup>45</sup> Preston M. TORBERT, *The Ch'ing Imperial Household Department. A Study of its Organization and Principal Functions* (Cambridge Mass.; London 1977).

<sup>46</sup> On city, court and ceremony see Susan NAQUIN, *Peking. Temples and City Life* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London; 2000) 324-31; Thomas A. Wilson, 'Sacrifice and the Imperial Cult of Confucius', *History of Religions*, 41, 3 (2002), pp. 251-287; MURPHEY, *Ottoman Sovereignty*, deals at length with the *sur* or circumcision ceremonies; on the Habsburgs in Vienna see DUINDAM, 'Palace, city, dominions: the spatial dimension of Habsburg Rule' in: *The Politics of Space: Courts in Europe and the Mediterranean, c. 1500-1750*, Malcolm Smuts, George Gorse, ed. (forthcoming Bulzoni 2009).

Dynastic centres ruled over a plurality of dominions. These could be attracted into the orbit of the court on their own terms, with specific forms intended chiefly or exclusively for them. Qing emperors cultivated their Manchu heritage and maintained the separate status of the Banners. They fostered connections with the Mongols not only through marriage policies; hunting expeditions in the North-East and a lasting Tibetan Buddhist connection most emphatically visualized in the summer resort of Chengde were also directed towards the Mongols. A ‘court of colonial affairs’ was added to the administrative structure to deal specifically with Inner Asian peoples.<sup>47</sup> Other recently acquired territories, notably the western province of Xinjiang, were treated differently from long-established zones.<sup>48</sup> At the same time, however, Qing emperors posed as paragons of Han Chinese classical traditions. The heartlands of Chinese culture and wealth were visited on inspection tours strengthening dynastic rapport with these territories, as well as exerting control.<sup>49</sup> The regular machinery of government operated in addition to these special impulses.

In the Habsburg monarchy, until the 1740 characterized by ‘light’ government, the dynastic centre attracted increasingly numerous honorary officers, who spent time at court only incidentally, but needed their court rank to commence their *cursus honorum* in dynastic service. The stamp of a shared court background became an effective way to bring together various elites into a ‘gesamthabsurgische Adel’. Their court-derived rank, furthermore, commingled and gradually overruled regional rankings. Coercion may have stood at the beginning of this process, but it soon developed a dynamic motivated by interests, chance, and ideals rather than by threats. The right to attend court as a participant, conferred by honorary office, had become indispensable. The court’s specific cultural stamp, visible in architecture and apparel, as well as habits, spread more easily thanks to these numerous middlemen and -women. Connections through honorary membership exist for all European courts, perhaps most notably in the orders of chivalry, epitomizing high noble status. A court-based ‘economy of honour’ could certainly help to attract elites to the dynastic centre -- their confluence around the ruler strengthened prestige for all.<sup>50</sup>

Not all connections can be subsumed under honour and ritual. The administrative apparatus itself was centred on the court: directing and controlling agents of princely power was a prime responsibility of the ruler and his intimates. In the classic Ottoman system graduation (*chikma*) promoted household-trained pages into the outer court (one among several possibilities), and from there to high

<sup>47</sup> See RAWSKI, *Last Emperors*, pp. 66-71 on Mongol nobles and the Lifanyuan.

<sup>48</sup> L. J. NEWBY, ‘The Beggars of Xinjiang: Between Two Worlds’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, 61, 2.(1998), pp. 278-297. Ottoman rulers accepted different conditions for heartland and recently conquered territories, pragmatically accepting local situations under the umbrella of Ottoman power.

<sup>49</sup> Recently Michael G. CHANG, *A Court on Horseback. Imperial Touring & the Construction of Qing Rule, 1680-1785* (Cambridge Mass; London 2007) Harvard East Asian Monographs 287.

<sup>50</sup> The expression is taken from Andreas Pecar, *Die Ökonomie der Ehre. Der höfische Adel am Kaiserhof Karls VI. (1711-1740)* (Darmstadt 2003) Symbolische Kommunikation in der Vormoderne 5.

service in the regions. Having performed their tasks there, they returned to the centre to await a new assignment. Once in the centre, they could hope for promotion to a role of pasha – or at the very end of the ladder, vizier or grand vizier. While they would no longer as a rule be allowed to enter the inner court, their career ideally started and ended at the palace. There is no need here to repeat in detail the intricate details of control inherent in the Chinese administrative system, with short tenure in different regions and functions, evaluation, censorate, formalized correspondence -- innovations introduced in France and elsewhere in Europe from the later sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries resemble these practices, though formal training and exams were introduced only towards the end of the early modern age.<sup>51</sup> The Qing added to these long-standing mechanisms yet another channel of control, first based on Kangxi's direct and secret communication with intimate Manchu connections on mission, circumventing the Han Chinese bureaucracy, then formalized as the 'palace memorial system' under Yongzheng.<sup>52</sup> Apparently, delegating power to agents in outlying regions remained a difficult process, one that needed to be adapted continually to prevent accumulation of power in the hands of nominal representatives of princely rule. Intimates from the inner circle at court – whether nobles, bondservants, eunuchs or slaves – frequently surfaced as trusted agents used to monitor or keep administrators in check. As soon as these agents rose to higher rank and formal power in this process, however, patrimonial strategies could become advantageous for them too.

In my previous discussion of the ruler, I mentioned his duties towards justice and social harmony. Following this moral injunction, rulers could reach out to common people, promising equity and protection, by inviting them to put forward complaints about their superiors. Reading petitions, listening to complaints and administering justice, therefore, served as a double-edged sword, appeasing the populace while putting pressure on the bureaucrats. Organizing a level of personal access to petitioners and an administrative procedure to deal with written complaints were a major burden on rulers. 'Enlightened despots' in Europe, who in their attempt to restore state finances frequently alienated their *corps intermédiaires*, encouraged easy access to strengthen their popular appeal and at the same time control their obstinate agents.<sup>53</sup> They followed a strategy of 'protecting' the commoner akin to that of 'benevolent despotism' in Asia.<sup>54</sup> Justice, however, was not the only motivation that led people of various standing to the

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<sup>51</sup> See a careful assessment of the examinations in Benjamin ELMAN, 'Political, Social, and Cultural Reproduction via Civil Service Examinations in Late Imperial China', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 50, 1. (1991), pp. 7-28, stressing social reproduction and knowledge of the classics.

<sup>52</sup> See e.g. Silas Hsiu-liang WU, 'The Memorial Systems of The Ch'ing Dynasty (1644-1911)', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 27 (1967), pp. 7-75; BARTLETT, *Monarchs and Ministers*.

<sup>53</sup> See e.g. the direct connections with the population cultivated by Habsburg emperor Joseph II: Derek BEALES, 'Joseph II, petitions and the public sphere' in: Hamish Scott, Brendan Simms, ed. *Cultures of Power in Europe during the Long Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge 2007) pp. 249-268.

<sup>54</sup> On 'benevolent despotism' see MURPHEY, *Ottoman Sovereignty*, pp. 35-39; Pierre-Étienne WILL, R. Bin WONG, ed. *Nourish the people: the state civilian granary system in China, 1650-1850*, (Ann Arbor 1991) Michigan monographs in Chinese studies; 60.



court. European dynastic rulers universally listed high among their priorities the careful distribution of honours in their hands. The highest titles, offices, and benefices ideally would be distributed by the ruler himself. At fixed moments in the court calendar, lists with offices and their allocation were made known to the public, an occasion preceded by a whirlwind of appeals and interventions, during which court servants could market their services. Intercession of persons at court could work wonders for lesser offices, and might even reach to higher levels. Repeatedly European court ordinances forbade servants, particularly chamber servants, to accept and forward requests to the ruler – surely a practice that must have been lucrative as well as frequent. Did their compeers at Asian courts seek similar opportunities?

Through all these mechanisms the dynastic centre could function as the hub in a wheel involving many regions and groups. This centrality could never be taken for granted in the long run. The court could be perceived as being unduly biased in its system of rewards and punishments, or as too withdrawn to fulfill its ritual functions. Its ideal image could easily be turned into its opposite – a situation neatly fitting the expectation of cyclical renewal of the dynasty. The dynastic cycle, or Ibn Khaldun's parallel view of inevitable erosion of tribal purity and force, can be interpreted in a less moral way. Innovative institutions and loyal groups devised by a new dynasty could through their very success become obstacles for successors. The devshirme-recruited slave infantry crack troops of the Sultan, the janissaries, epitomize this metamorphosis. Starting out as the Sultan's most trusted servants, they gradually consolidated their one-generation position through marriage, succession, and close connections with Istanbul's trades and crafts. They became the archetypical kingmakers and praetorians, protecting the dynasty while incidentally threatening or deposing the incumbent. In 1826 Sultan Mahmud II violently disbanded the corps, which acted as a strong interest group and a brake on reforms.

The figure in the centre, surrounded by inner court servants with their own agendas, could be manipulated in many ways. Withholding and modifying information are a side effect of autocratic rulership itself: who brings the emperor the bad news?<sup>55</sup> Spanish monarchy was the marvel of sixteenth-century Europe, but through financial problems and privatization it lost this role in two generations. France repeated the same pattern a century later, when the entrenched elites created by monarchy declined to sacrifice their privileged role and obstructed government. These diminutive dynastic cycles, obscured by rapid development from the later eighteenth century onwards, conform roughly to patterns we can observe in other pre-modern states and empires.

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<sup>55</sup> See the communication between official and emperor as sketched in Pierre-Henri DURAND, 'Langage bureaucratique et histoire. Variations autour du Grand Conseil et de l'ambassade Macartney', *Études Chinoises*, 13, 1 (1993) pp. 41-145.

## CONCLUSION

The preceding outline of themes recurring in the history of the dynastic centre, provides a framework for several thematically delineated research projects. These, in turn, will give more force and coherence to the attempt to examine, refute or substantiate the preliminary statements made here in a comprehensive synthesis. This joint venture can also help to clarify and translate the terminology of the dynastic centre, producing a glossary of concepts, activities, ranks, and offices. Through the analysis of the domestic heart of the pre-modern state it aims to reassess the classic divisions between models of power in East and West. Undoubtedly, major differences exist, but they deserve to be considered afresh, without the biases created by European modernization.

It will be necessary to differentiate carefully between ideologies and practices. In early modern Europe elites tended to present themselves in terms of lineage and nobility, even when this was far from plausible; in the Asian context, the slave status of the Sultan's elite servants complicated the discourse of lineage, but did not preclude the formation of hereditary power elites. In China, likewise, the civil service examinations stressed merit rather than descent, and could not guarantee individual succession to high office. Yet the system did not prevent gentry lineages to maintain comfortable wealth, access to schooling, and hence a group monopoly of power positions over the generations. For the rulers themselves, the opposition between idealized status and their actually quite vulnerable situation needs to be taken into account. How did these rulers, and their political advisers, cope with challenges and changes? To what extent did they consciously remodel and use the structures of their environment to further their interests? Did their choices mostly reflect *ad hoc* adaptation, or can we understand them as premeditated interventions? If the latter appears to be true, did the consequences of these actions match the intentions, in the short run and in the longer term?

Finally, the study of pre-modern polities based on household structures touches many aspects that seem strikingly familiar in the modern political context. Notwithstanding sweeping changes in political legitimacy and political processes, coercion, ideology and interests still form the main components forming attitudes of acquiescence or resistance. States still have a ritual heart where show and ceremony are often as important as the actual content of discussion. Distribution of honours occupies pride of place in modern as well as pre-modern systems, although the practice may be veiled more systematically now. Outcries against corruption are not new, nor are political scandals. These examples are not intended to indicate that change is irrelevant; they do convey the notion that the gap between modern and pre-modern polities is as much a rhetorical construction as it is a reality. Studying the heart of the pre-modern political system can only help to better understand current polities.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> The anonymous reader of this journal pointed out to me that this position reflects Susanne RUDOLPH, Lloyd RUDOLPH, *The Modernity of Tradition: Political Development in India* (Chicago 1967).

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