



## Female Space in the Forbidden City

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# Female Space in the Forbidden City

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## Introduction

As a way of life existence and activity, space has been closely linked with gender in China's feudal society for thousands of years. The gender hierarchy of men's superiority over women made strict provisions on women's living and activity space, and thus formed a specific way of patriarchy to oppress and control women. For example, girls were wrapped in foot binding when they were a few years old, and their originally healthy feet were tied into "three-inch golden lotus", which greatly restricted their space for movement, so that they "never go out of the gate"<sup>1</sup>. The boudoir of unmarried women was hidden deep in the house and courtyard. In addition, the only outdoor space for them to have recreational activities was the "back garden" which outsiders cannot enter. (Figure 1) No matter how they are called, most of the living and activity spaces related to women have strong separation and closure like a confinement cage. Women were not only prevented from going out of the private space of the family, but also unable to know and participate in any activities in the public space, let alone enter the public space to communicate freely with others. In contrast, men's living and activity space was much bigger.



Fig 1. *Portraits of Ladies*.

The implementation of gender oppression by limiting and restricting women's living space is an important way for patriarchy to implement the feudal hierarchical order of "men are superior to women". In the rule of Chinese feudal dynasties, the space confinement of women by the supreme ruler emperor was particularly prominent. The

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<sup>1</sup> McMahon, Keith. *Celestial Women: Imperial Wives and Concubines in China from Song to Qing*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020, p. 164.

book *Li Ji* stipulated that "the son of heaven has six palaces for three wives, nine concubines, seventy-two wives and eighty-one Royal wives"<sup>2</sup>. However, after the Han Dynasty, the number of concubines in the emperor's "three palaces and six courtyards" has greatly exceeded this requirement, and there was a continuous growth trend. According to *Shi Ji* by Sima Qian, when Emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty ascended the throne, he repatriated 3000 women home for the first time, and then another 3000.<sup>3</sup> This number might be slightly exaggerated, but it still confirms the view put forward by feminism from a historical perspective - space is power<sup>4</sup>. As the supreme ruler, the emperor must have the largest space while having the highest power, and use this space to confine numerous women.

As the largest royal palace in China, which has a history of more than 500 years, spanning two dynasties, the Forbidden City is a typical example. Taking the female space of the Forbidden City as the research object, this paper analyzes the female activities in the inner court space, restores the scenes of women's daily life, and investigates the architectural space and components related to women. I hope to arrive to a sort of categorization of space that can be informative of how architecture was used to maintain social hierarchies.

The existing research related to the inner court of the Forbidden City mainly focuses on two directions. Works by Ito Chuta, Osvald Sirén, Liang Sicheng, Liu Dunzhen, Zhu Luo and other scholars are focused on the architecture characteristics of Chinese traditional courtyards. In this domain, Zhu Luo's *The Construction History of Palaces in the Ming and Qing Dynasties* has made a complete and comprehensive description of the Forbidden City in the Ming and Qing Dynasties and the architecture of palaces at that time. The book summarizes the history of more than 500 years of royal court construction in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Other studies discuss the cultural background or social phenomenon reflected in the Forbidden City buildings, such as *The Last Emperors: A Social History of Qing Imperial Institution* in which Evelyn S. Rawski described the internal social system and culture of the court in the Qing Dynasty from the perspective of Manchu rulers. However, most of these studies have been based on the perspective of rulers, that is, men, while ignoring the women who account for the vast majority of users of the Forbidden City.

As the emperor's palace, there were thousands of palace maids and concubines in the Forbidden City to serve the emperor's daily life. How did these women from different regions of the Empire, with different races, status, ages and personalities live in this imperial palace with strict hierarchy? The research will be carried out from two levels. First, I will take the women in the Forbidden City as a separate social group to study the relationship and difference between the space they use and that of the men. After

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<sup>2</sup> Daisheng, and Zhangjiang Liu. *Book of Rites*. Beijing: Chinese Press, 2016, p. 126.

<sup>3</sup> Qian Sima, Zhen Sima, Shoujie Zhang, and Yin Pei. *Records of the Grand History of China*. Taipei: Taipei Press, 2002, p. 341.

<sup>4</sup> Hengda Bi. *Space is Power*. Taipei: Mind Workshop Press, 2001. p.63.

that, I will classify the female groups in the Forbidden City according to the standard of rank for typological research.

## **1. Traditional etiquette as the basis for the layout of the female space in the Forbidden City.**

### **1.1 "Men outside and women inside"**

American scholar Bai Fulan lamented: "In China, one of the most critical roles played by housing is to use space to mark the differences within the family, including the isolation of women."<sup>5</sup> The history of dividing space by gender in residential space in China can be traced back to the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period. In feudal society, the hierarchy of residence was particularly prominent, and the space division between men and women was strict. The residential layout in ancient China was a composition derived from the "ceremony of differing men and women". The criterion of "six palaces and six bedrooms" in the palace and "front hall and back room" in the house were the first to strictly and clearly distinguish and define the scope of activities and life of men and women. The spatial position sequence of "the north house is respected, the two compartments are followed, and the inverted seat is the guest" in the traditional residence like quadrangles is completely a reflection of the spirit of ritual system in architecture. Whether in royal palaces or noble houses, women lived in their respective boudoirs and couldn't eat at the same table with men, but separated by a screen. These were not only the code of conduct for women, but also the basic principles for dividing and limiting the space between men and women.

However, we should realize that the ritual system inherited from ancient times is just a means formulated by men to establish their own domination over space and even women. Although the dominance of space is closely related to gender identity, it is essentially a matter of rank and status. In fact, in ancient China, the phenomenon that men dominate the outside and women dominate the inside was not always consistent.

In the matriarchal society, female space was once the main living space. The situation of the existing matriarchal family in the Amis of China's Taiwan province is one example. Women own the means of living such as houses and furniture, as well as the means of production such as livestock and farm tools, and men generally have no right to control them. The acquisition of women's dominant position is related to the division of labor at that time. Women bear most of the labor in production and also play an important role in the reproduction. Therefore, the decisive position in both

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<sup>5</sup> Francesca Bray. *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997, p. 102.

material production and human reproduction was the basis and guarantee of women's dominant position at that time. However, with the development of social productive forces, the role of men in organizing production and reproduction was gradually recognized, and the maternal system began to transition to the patriarchal system. In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Engels states that the overthrow of matriarchy is a failure of women with world historical significance. The husband mastered power at home, while the wife was belittled and, in fact, enslaved. She became a slave of her husband and a simple tool for giving birth to children.

From the perspective of architecture, the first consequence of determining the male dictatorship was that there had been subtle changes in human living forms. Human living space was no longer owned by women. Men began to have the right to support whether means of living such as houses and furniture or means of production such as livestock and agricultural tools. At the same time, the dominant position of men in the family and the important role of men's position in society in the family have formed the hierarchy of residence. Women with low social status were basically not allowed to appear in public and can only move within the family. This confinement is also very obvious in the design of traditional residential buildings: Chinese traditional residential buildings like courtyard buildings have the distinction between male space and female space. The front hall and back room are bounded by the middle door. Men and women had their own scope of activities and regions. That is, the so-called "men govern foreign affairs and women govern internal affairs."<sup>6</sup>

## **1.2 Court in Front and Living Quarters Behind**

The Forbidden City which consists of dozens of compound buildings of different sizes is the largest and most complicated compound building complex in China. But in fact, it can also be regarded as a huge courtyard building. Bounded by the Qianqing Gate (main entrance of the inner court), the architectural layout is mainly divided into two parts: the outer court and the inner court.

As the main place to deal with government affairs, the outer court is the symbol of rule, occupying a considerable amount of building area and vast outdoor space. The inner court, as the main place for royal life and entertainment, is the main place for women to live in the Forbidden City. Therefore, the Qianqing Gate plays the role of the middle gate in traditional courtyard houses, dividing the male space and the female space. (Figure 2) The whole palace follows the principle of locating the emperor's court in the front of the palace and the sleeping quarters at the rear, which embodies a belief in the supremacy of heaven over earth and of male over female, as well as the Confucian notion of relationships between husband and wife based on the obedience of the wife.

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<sup>6</sup> Tiancai Yang, and Shanwen Zhang. *Book of Changes*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2018, p. 192.

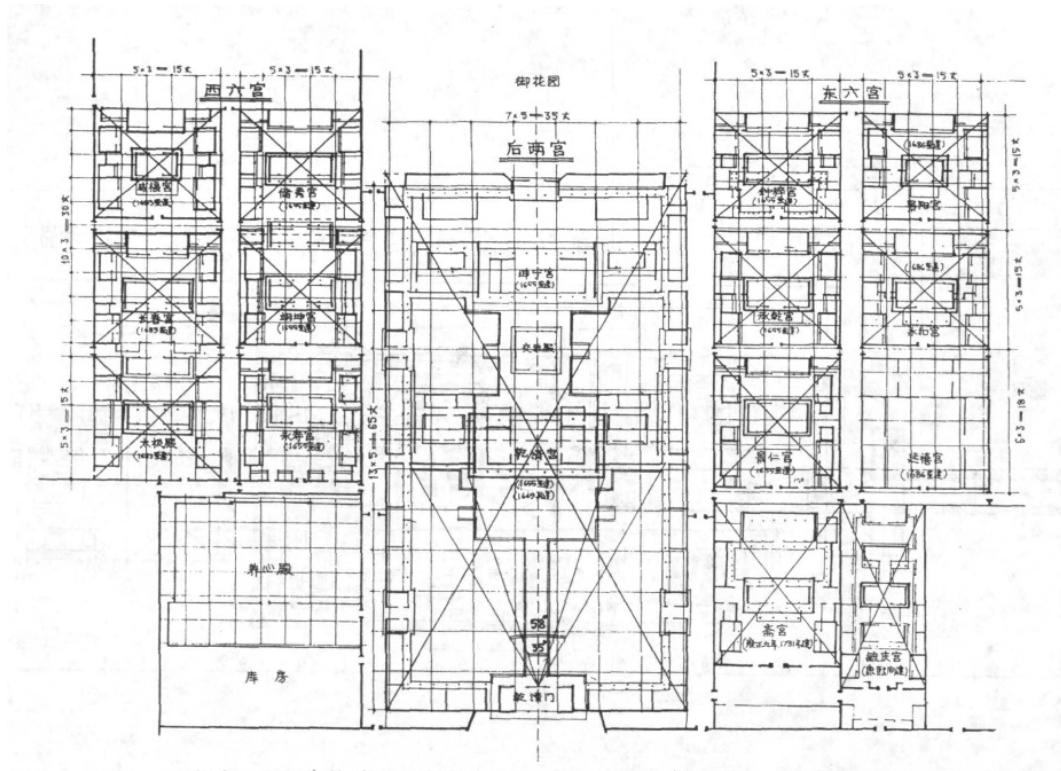


Fig 2. Plan of the inner court

## 2. Female identity and spatial characters

The Emperor Qianlong had court painters create a large number of portraits during his 60 years as emperor. Two of them are *The Portrait of Emperor Qianlong* (Figure 3) and *The Portrait of An Imperial Concubine* (Figure 4), each 95 cm by 100 cm. The same size and mutually echoing composition show that they were designed as a pair. In one of the paintings, Qianlong wears a Han style ceremonial crown and twists his beard, imitating an ancient philosopher who was thinking of writing; In another picture, the beauty in Chinese costume, perhaps his ideal spouse, is dressing in the mirror. From these two portraits, we can tell that in the imagination of Emperor Qianlong, the ideal male space and female space have different characteristics. Although generally symmetrical, there are various subtle differences in the two paintings to highlight the differences between men and women and the dignity of male monarchs: there are some stationery in front of Qianlong but fragrant flowers and jewelry in front of the concubine; Outside the window behind Qianlong is the emerald bamboo and wax plum in the severe winter, and outside the imperial concubine is the summer lotus pond in full bloom. Different forms, patterns, materials and decorations in the female space are given gender metaphors and closely connected with the hierarchy to make it private and inferior.



Fig 3. Portrait of Emperor Qianlong

Fig 4. Portrait of An Imperial Concubine

## 2.1 Architectural appearance

In the Forbidden City, the shape of the roof is classified according to the rank. These roof forms are hip roofs, saddle roofs, suspension roofs, and gabled roofs from the high rank to the low rank<sup>7</sup>. (Figure 5) Different roofs correspond to the different levels of user's identity and the female space usually adopts lower-level roofs. Most of the gable-roof buildings are located in the female living quarters and used as the side halls of the main buildings in palaces, and a small part is scattered on both sides of the main buildings and distributed in clusters. On the contrary, the male space like the Taihe Hall is a building with a double-eave hip roof, which represents the highest rank. The difference of roof forms shows that women are subordinate to men.

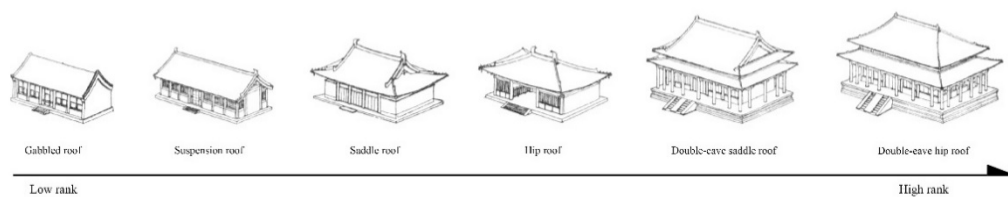


Fig 5. The hierarchy of roofs

<sup>7</sup> Sicheng Liang. *A Pictorial History of Chinese Architecture*. Vancouver, Canada: CA New Press Ltd, 2016, p. 228.



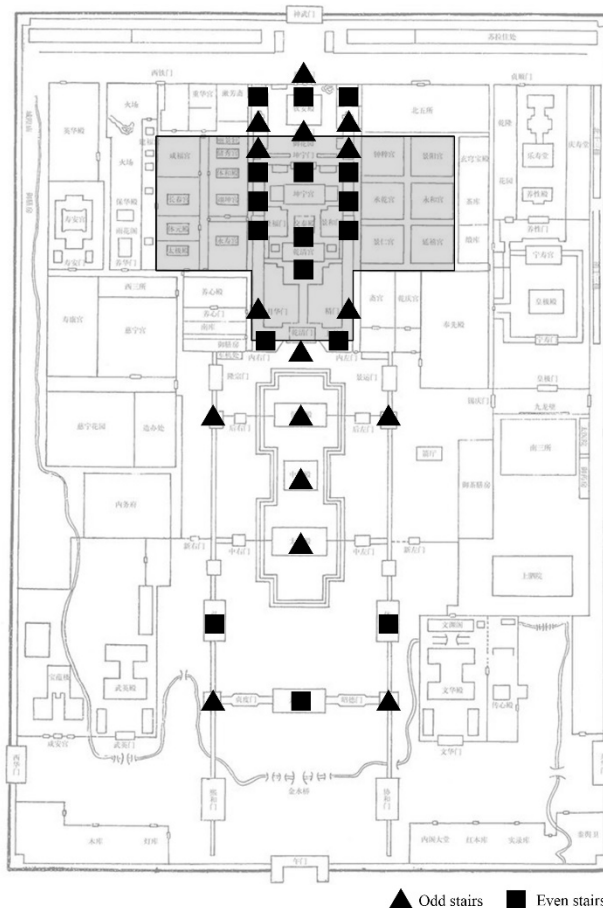


Fig 6. The distribution of odd and even steps

In addition, the number of steps in front of the building is also an important symbol to distinguish between male space and female space. In the Fengshui which is a geomantic omen theory followed by most Chinese traditional buildings, odd numbers represent Yang, which is usually associated with men. Even numbers represent Yin and are usually associated with women<sup>8</sup>. In the Forbidden City, the Taihe Hall and other buildings in the outer court mainly use odd steps to show the dignity of men. The inner court represents Yin, so the concubines' bedrooms are dominated by even steps to show their attachment and obedience to the male space. (Figure 6) The number of architectural steps in the outer court and the inner court both included odd and even numbers, which also reflected the concept of the combination of male and female.

## 2.2 Decorations and furniture

The indoor space of the male space like the Taihe Hall, the Qianqing Palace and other buildings for the emperor to handle government affairs and hold ceremonies was mainly open, and the internal decoration was kept simple and clear. (Figure 7) The

<sup>8</sup> Tiancai Yang, and Shanwen Zhang. *Book of Changes*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2018, p. 39.

main space was controlled by caisson, and closed partition walls were set on both sides. In the space controlled by the caisson, the throne was placed with a back screen set as the background and a plaque installed on it to strengthen the spiritual attribute of space. This kind of less and refined decoration makes people's attention focused but not easily distracted, and meets the needs of use and spirit.

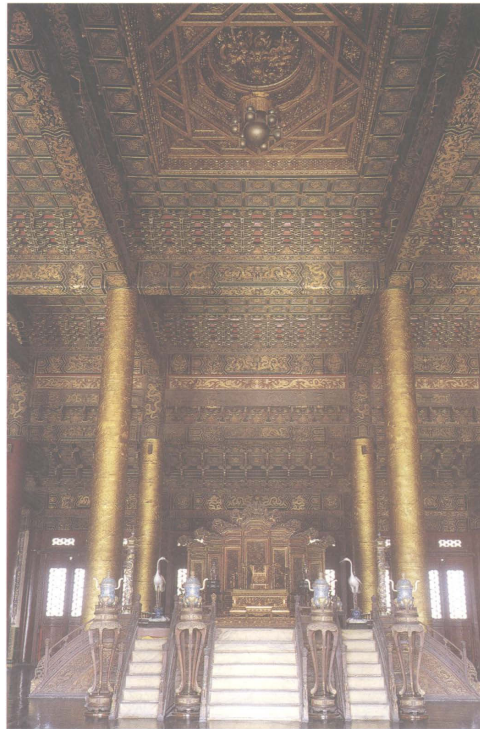


Fig 7. The interior of Taihe Hall.

By contrast, the female space in the six palaces of the East and the West focused more on the needs of living, and the decoration form is also more complex. Different screens were used here to separate the space. (Figure 9) Flexible methods and different forms of decoration were used in the same space in order to achieve harmony. The bedroom decoration was more asymmetrically separated to highlight its flexibility. The mixed use of symmetry and asymmetry makes the spatial separation more ingenious and the changes more abundant.



Fig 8. The interior of Tihedian

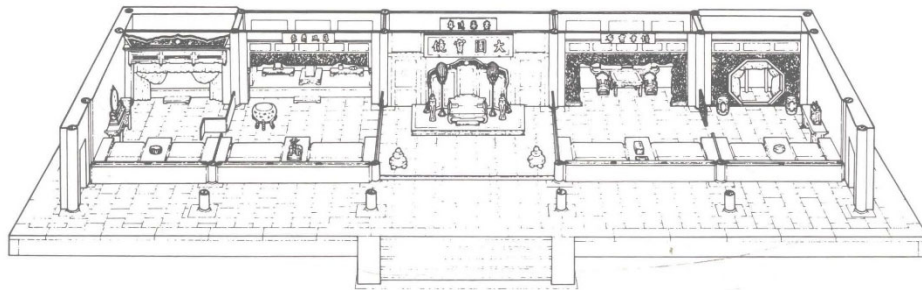


Fig. 9 Interior of the Chuxiugong



Fig 10. Flower-and-bird paintings on the partitions

The furniture in female space had charming shape, gorgeous style and heavy decoration, and the furniture in women's space was smaller than that in men's space. Because the concubines in the Forbidden City were not directly engaged in production activities, women could only reflect their own value by strengthening their own female and reproductive characteristics. This can be confirmed by the unique decoration of women's space in ancient Chinese architecture, such as "Phoenix and peony pattern" and "Qilin sending children pattern". (Figure 10)

### 2.3 Building safety

From the perspective of security, the Forbidden City was not a suitable place for women to live. The general social valuation of boys above girls seems to have prevailed within the palace as well. Even the princesses were not immune to gender discrimination. The survival chances were markedly lower for girls than for boys<sup>9</sup>. The neglect of women's safety is also reflected in the design of building fire protection.

Because a large number of wooden columns were used to support the huge roof, and the doors and windows of the house are all made of wood, it is particularly easy to cause huge losses in case of fire. Therefore, how to prevent fire in the Forbidden City had always been a difficult problem in architectural design, security and fire control.

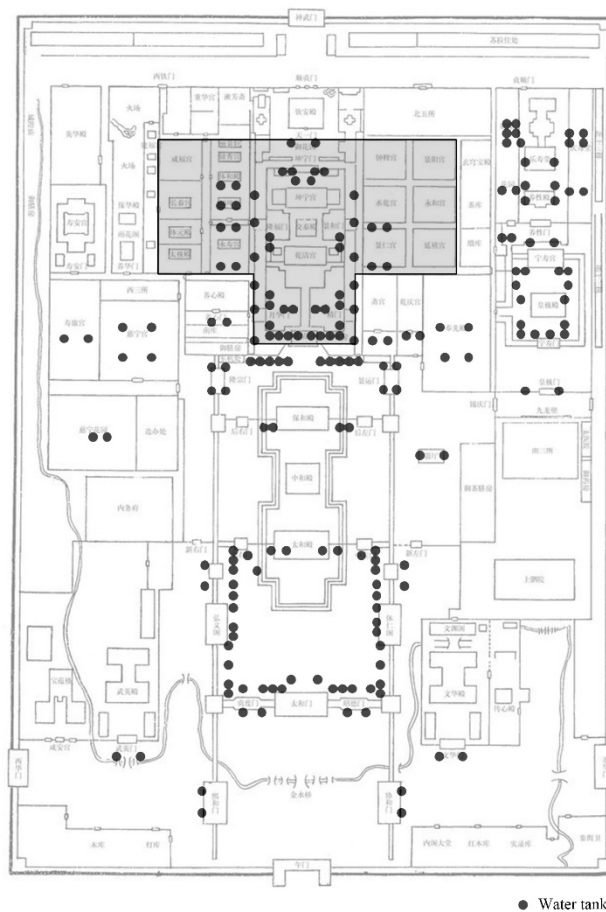


Fig 11. The distribution of water tanks

<sup>9</sup> Evelyn Sakakida Rawski, *The Last Emperors: A Social History of Qing Imperial Institutions*, University of California Press, 1998, p. 145.

In the Forbidden City, there are iron and copper tanks of different sizes next to almost all buildings. These large cylinders are called "Menhai" or "auspicious cylinders". Each large cylinder can store nearly 3000 liters of water, just like small reservoirs. These large tanks were specially managed by more than a dozen eunuchs. They sent factotum to take water from the well and fill the tanks every day. They also needed to ensure that the water quality was clean and free of peculiar smell. Every winter, a cylinder head was routinely set, an iron drawer was set in the cover to place charcoal to prevent the cylinder water from freezing.<sup>10</sup> But interestingly, not every building was equipped with cylinders to prevent fire disasters. These water tanks were unevenly distributed in the Forbidden City. Most of them were concentrated in the foreign dynasties dealing with government affairs and holding ceremonies, as well as the residence of the emperor. Of the twelve palaces where the concubines lived, only five had water tanks. (Figure 11) This means that if there is a fire, the life safety of many women can't be guaranteed.

### 3. Hierarchy determines the right to use the female space

In the Forbidden City, women were divided into, empresses, imperial concubines, concubines and maids from top to bottom. (Figure 12) The rank strictly corresponds to their living conditions, including the location, size and comfort of living space.

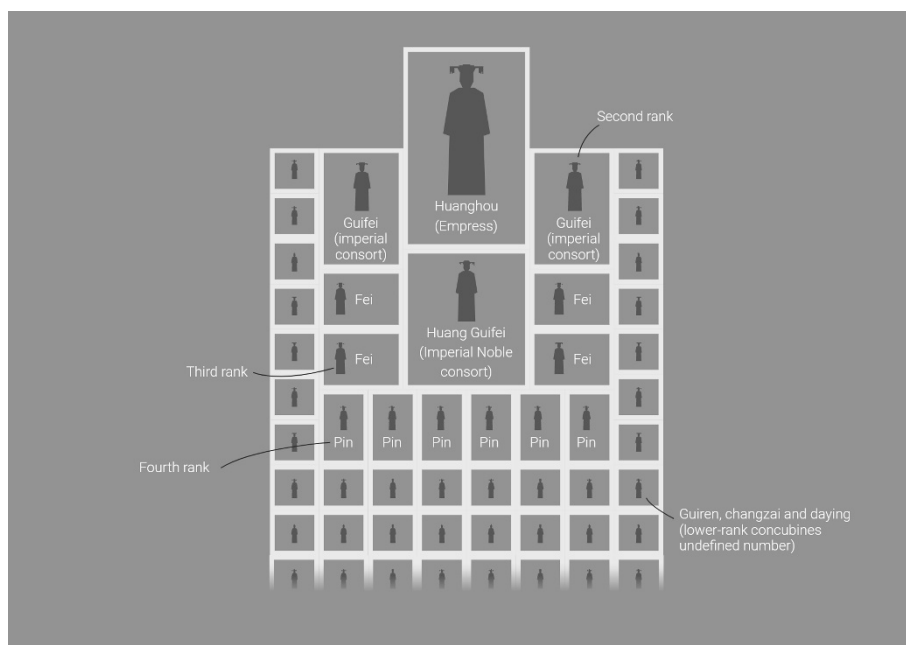


Fig 12. The rank system of concubines

<sup>10</sup> Hai Lin, *Fire history of the Forbidden City*. Beijing: Sanlian Press, 2007, p. 33.

### 3.1 Maid's space rights

In fact, there were only two kinds of women in the Forbidden City: those who serve and those who are served. Concubines may slightly differ in treatment because of their different ranks, but they would not serve anyone except the emperor. On the contrary, the maids belong to the bottom of the female chain of the Forbidden City, hence concubines can command them at will. For a maid, the only chance to be promoted to a concubine is to serve the emperor and get pregnant<sup>11</sup>.

In the Qing Dynasty, the Forbidden City had strict control over maids, especially for the maids' activities in the outer court. Because it was the main place for men to deal with politics. This management was mainly to prevent the palace lady from spreading the information she heard outside the palace. On the fifth day of March in 1677, Emperor Kangxi said:

Whenever ministers enter the palace to report and discuss affairs, I ordered that no maid should be allowed to appear. Now I personally see women sneaking around in the palace. What kind of mess is it! It must be that the eunuchs guarding the doors do not strictly prohibit them. I repeat this order again today. If there are still people who do not correct, they will be severely punished.<sup>12</sup>

On the first day of August of the same year, the emperor said:

All women serving in the Palace should go out immediately after their official business is over. They are not allowed to stay and sit around, spread what is happening outside the palace, or eavesdrop on political affairs to legends outside the palace. Except for the past, if there is such a thing later, it will be punished severely once it is found out.<sup>13</sup>

Actually, for most of maids in the Forbidden City, their range of activities was extremely limited, usually in the compound where the concubines they served lived. The maids had little autonomy over their own activities. They were only allowed to stay in the yard for the most of time. According to the memory of Rong, one of Empress Dowager Cixi's maids, in the *Gong Nv Tan Wang Lu*, she stated that:

I had never left the Chuxiugong alone in my years in the palace. The first day of entering the palace, my aunt announced that I was not allowed to leave the palace gate. 'If you leave the palace gate, it doesn't matter to kill you.' was their mantra. Anyone who wandered in the palace and stepped into other palace gates would be beheaded or sent to the frontier. You were not allowed to go out unless you went

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<sup>11</sup> Evelyn Sakakida Rawski, *The Last Emperors: A Social History of Qing Imperial Institutions*, University of California Press, 1998, p. 134.

<sup>12</sup> Etai Er, Yanyu Zhang, *Guo Chao Gong Shi = History of Imperial Palace*. Beijing: Beijing Press, 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Etai Er, Yanyu Zhang, *Guo Chao Gong Shi = History of Imperial Palace*. Beijing: Beijing Press, 2018.

out with the old empress dowager or sent things at the order of the old empress dowager. Maids were not allowed to go alone in the palace. Sending and taking things were all done by a pair of maids, so no maids could ever leave the Chuxiugong alone. When family members came to visit, I was led in and out by an old eunuch, which was not a single action.<sup>14</sup>

From the above facts, the palace maids had no space of their own in the Forbidden City. This directly reflected their position and, consequently, influenced their identity. As servants of concubines, their accessibility to space completely depends on the master they serve.

### 3.2 Empress and Concubines' space rights

Although the Manchus clearly distinguished the empress from other concubines, this difference was not clear compared with the Ming Dynasty, because any prince could become an emperor. In other words, the prince born to the empress does not enjoy more privileges than the prince born to the concubines. Therefore, the space rights of the empress and concubines is similar, that's why these two can be discussed together.

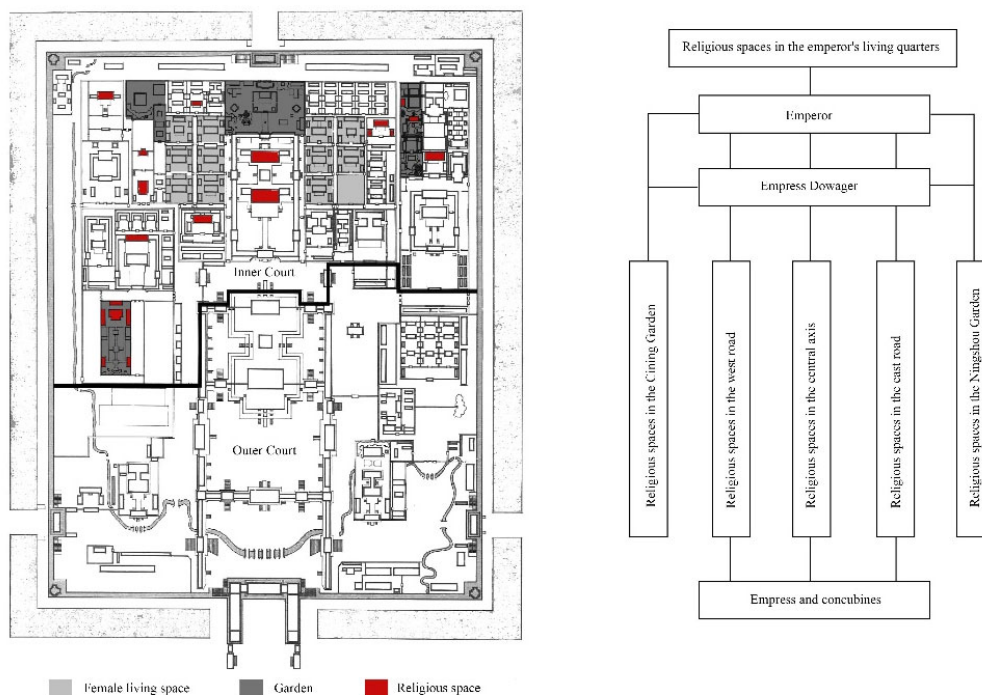


Fig 13. The space rights of concubines

<sup>14</sup> Yi jing, *Memoirs of Palace Maids*. Beijing: The Forbidden City Publishing House, 2014.

Ordinary concubines, regardless of her rank, origin or the degree of favor by the emperor, were essentially accessories of the emperor. It means that they had no control over the space they lived in. First, they could not choose where to live which was usually assigned directly by the emperor. On the first day of February in the 44th year of Qianlong's reign (1779), Emperor Qianlong ordered the eunuch Chang Ning to deliver an edict: "Give the residence of Concubine Shun in the Yangxin Hall to the Concubine Dun, and the residence of the Concubine Dun to Concubine Shun. Let Concubine Ming live next to Concubine Shun's room in Yongshou palace."<sup>15</sup> In this order, the emperor arranged his beloved new concubine in the bedroom next to him, while the original concubine had to move to other palaces. Adjusting where the concubines lived became a way for the emperor to reward or punish them. Because although the twelve palaces were almost the same in size, the quality of decoration varied. Secondly, the concubines also had no right to decide the internal space of the building and even the basic furnishings. In fact, no imperial consorts had property that was theirs alone. The court accessories and court dress were not personal possessions but part of the collective property of the imperial household. As such, they could be returned to the storehouses, to be recycled as needed<sup>16</sup>.

However, it should be noted that in major ceremonies, the empress still had higher space use rights than the concubines. In *Celestial Women: Imperial Wives and Concubines in China from Song to Qing*, Keith McMahon states that "Investitures of the empress and consorts of the first three ranks were accompanied by sacrifices at the imperial ancestral altars (in the Taimiao and the Fengxiandian). Only the empress, however, entered the Forbidden City through the main gate, while the others entered through rear gates."<sup>17</sup> And in *The Emperor Guangxu's Wedding* (Figure 14), we can find that the carriage which carrying the new empress entered the Women through the mid-door in the central axis of the Forbidden City. By contrast, other concubines like the birth mothers of the Yongzheng, Qianlong, and Jiaqing emperors came from lowly bondservant backgrounds and must have entered the palace through the "back door," that is, through the draft for maids<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Etai Er, Yanyu Zhang, *History of Imperial Palace*. Beijing: Beijing Press, 2018, p. 325.

<sup>16</sup> Evelyn Sakakida Rawski, *The Last Emperors: A Social History of Qing Imperial Institutions*, University of California Press, 1998, p. 168.

<sup>17</sup> McMahon, Keith. *Celestial Women: Imperial Wives and Concubines in China from Song to Qing*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Evelyn Sakakida Rawski, *The Last Emperors: A Social History of Qing Imperial Institutions*, University of California Press, 1998, p. 134



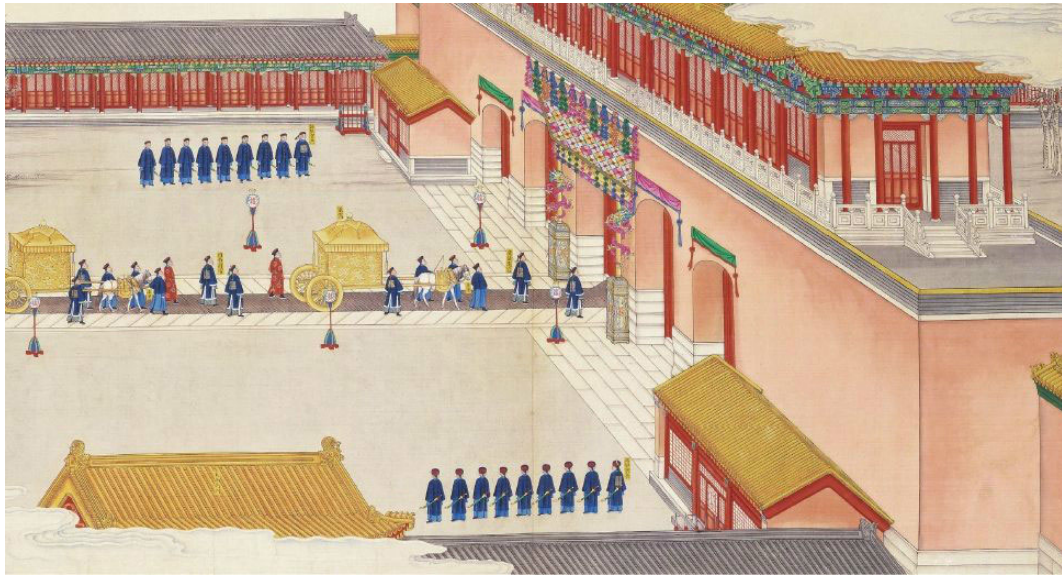


Fig 14. *The Emperor Guangxu's Wedding* (part of the painting)

### 3.3 Empress Dowager Cixi's space rights

The royal palace had always been a male dominated area. Its plan, decoration and furnishings all represent men's aesthetics. From the consistency of the spatial layout and decoration of the East and West palaces, the concubines did not seem to have the right to choose<sup>19</sup>.

But Empress Dowager Cixi, as one of the few women in power in the Qing Dynasty and even in Chinese history, was an exception. As the last important ruler of the Chinese royal family, Empress Dowager Cixi had dominated the Qing court for 47 years since 1861. Unlike other empress dowagers in the history, she not only officially controlled the whole political system, but also exerted power for much longer<sup>20</sup>. And she did not mind using her power to make instructions and amendments in the design of buildings and gardens. During her reign, the Lei family, who was responsible for designing royal buildings and gardens for the emperor, reported directly to her<sup>21</sup>. While the Emperor Tongzhi, as a nominal supervisor and decision-maker of the project, often had to ask for her consent before giving orders<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> Jiajin Zhu. *Interior Furnishings of Ming and Qing Dynasties*. Beijing: The Forbidden City Publishing House, 2004, p. 55.

<sup>20</sup> McMahon, Keith. *Celestial Women: Imperial Wives and Concubines in China from Song to Qing*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020.

<sup>21</sup> The Princess Der Ling, *Two Years in the Forbidden City*. Beijing: 1st World Publishing, 2004, p. 360.

<sup>22</sup> Yingchen Peng. "A Palace of Her Own: Empress Dowager Cixi (1835-1908) and the Reconstruction of the Wanchun Yuan", *NAN NÜ* 14, 1 (2012): 47-74, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/156853212X651988>



Fig. 15 Empress Dowager Cixi

After Cixi became the actual ruler, her desire for performance became stronger. Regardless of her status as an empress dowager, through the renovation project of Chuxiugong, a palace of the inner court, she further expanded the scope of her living space, far beyond the normal specifications and even beyond the living space of the emperor.

The Chuxiugong before the transformation, like the other eleven palaces of the inner court, is a two-entry courtyard composed of a front hall and a back hall. The front hall is the place for ceremonies and the back hall is the bedroom. The Chuxiugong renovation in the ninth year of the reign of Emperor Guangxu (1875) was not a simple modification on the basis of the original Chuxiugong, but connecting the two courtyards of Yikungong and Chuxiugong to form a four-entrance courtyard. (Figure 16) The Yikun Palace assumed the role of the original main hall and became the place for worship. The back hall of Yikungong which was the original bedroom was converted into an outer study and dining hall. The front hall of Chuxiugong was changed into a bedroom, where Cixi could live, rest and sleep<sup>23</sup>. The back hall of Chuxiugong which was renamed as Lijingxuan became a place for Empress Dowager Cixi to watch plays. After this renovation, a living building complex integrating meeting, dining, rest and entertainment had been formed. In fact, what is created is a tiny Forbidden City with court in front and living quarters behind. The purpose of the renovation of Chuxiugong was to arrange her palace in a larger scale and pattern than that of Emperor Guangxu's residence, which was unprecedented among concubines. This self-contained “city” within a city became the stage for the Empress Dowager Cixi to challenge the dominance of the male space and her opportunity to demonstrate her power.

<sup>23</sup> Yi jing, *Memoirs of Palace Maids*. Beijing: The Forbidden City Publishing House, 2014, p. 45.

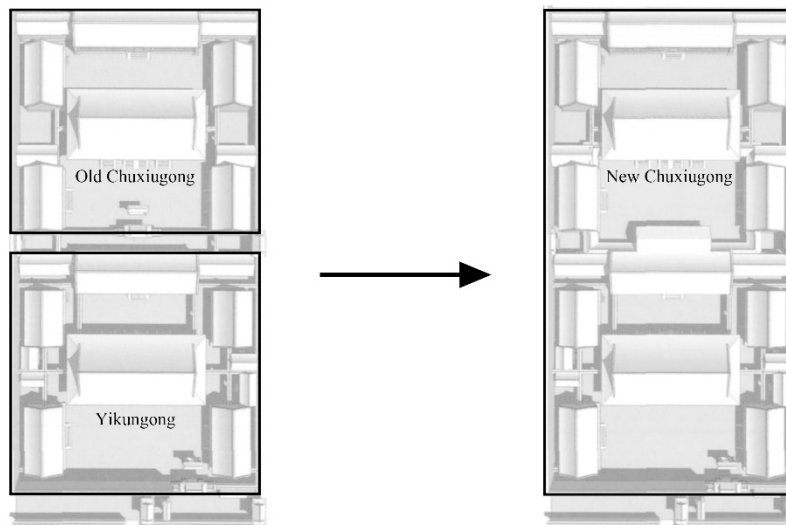


Fig 16. The Renovation of Chuxiugong

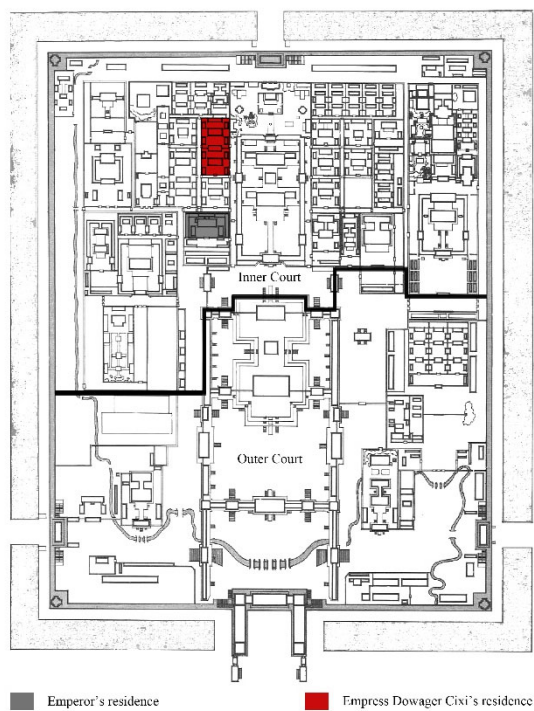


Fig 17. Emperor Guangxu's residence and Empress Dowager Cixi's residence



Fig. 18 Attend to State Affairs behind the Bamboo Curtain

If we observe the spatial relationship between the residence of the Empress Dowager Cixi and the residence of the emperor (Figure 17), we will find that this corresponds almost strictly to their positions of power. Although Chuxiugong was arranged behind Yangxindian (Emperor Guangxu's residence), it was much better in terms of area and functional richness. Just like how the emperor and the Empress Dowager Cixi handled political affairs together, men were outside, women were inside, and women were not even allowed to show up her face (Figure 18). But from another point of view, the emperor sitting in front actually became her puppet and had to obey the queen mother behind. The hierarchy within the Forbidden City served to consolidate the power of the emperor. When the power system collapses, it is difficult for the space to maintain its original appearance.

## Conclusion

The situation of women's living space in the Forbidden City was the result of the feudal ritual system in ancient China. Like most women in the civil society at that time, their living space in the Forbidden City was limited to the "backyard". They were forbidden to participate in most public activities except major ceremonies. Although the Forbidden City which is composed of more than 70 palaces covers an area of 720000 square meters, it is not fundamentally different from the quadrangles, a kind of ordinary folk house in Beijing, from the perspective of gender space. First of all, high walls are both used to enclose the building complex and separate women from social space. Secondly, they both take the middle gate as the boundary, strictly distinguish the main

activity space of men and women, and further block their possibility of participating in social activities. As a result, the roles that women in the Qing Dynasty could play were related to their purest physiological characteristics. They were the projection of male desire, the object of conquest and the tool to continue future generations. They were “women” instead of businessmen, scholars, officials and artists.

The architectural certificate of women's space in the Forbidden City also corresponded to their female identity. They lived in buildings with low-rank roof forms to show their obedience to men. Most of the steps they used were even numbers, just because it represented "Yin" in fengshui theory. In their boudoir, screens were widely used to create enough privacy. The patterns on the furniture also had strong gender metaphors and fertility symbols. Even in the fire protection of buildings, their safety had not received the same attention as men.

In the Forbidden City, discrimination in space not only came from men to women. There were also a complete system of allocating space use rights according to rank. As a servant, the activity space of the maid is basically limited to the palace where her master is located, and she couldn't even walk out of the yard independently; Except that the empress has special space authority in major ceremonies, the scope of her activities was basically the same as that of other concubines, which were limited to the twelve palaces and several gardens; For the empress dowager, there was a palace and supporting temples and gardens only for her to use. Empress Dowager Cixi, as the actual power holder in the late Qing Dynasty, was an exception to this hierarchy. Her spatial power over the Forbidden City not only surpassed all other royal women in the history of the Qing Dynasty, but also greater than the emperors of the same period. It can be seen that the spatial ownership of the Forbidden City is actually a true reflection of the power composition of the whole court society. When the exclusive power structure of the emperor is broken, the original relationship between male space and female space will no longer exist.

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