

# Troubles in Paradise: the Shrinking Royal Family in the Southern Song

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There are many parallels between the Tang and the Song dynasties: each ruled for roughly three centuries, and each experienced mid-dynasty crises that left them visibly weaker relative to the first century of vigorous monarchs and effective governance. Yet, I am struck by one striking difference between the two dynasties, as pertains to fecundity within the line of succession: despite the all-too-familiar signs of dynastic decline, Tang monarchs after 760, continued to produce sufficient numbers of male heirs. And the ability of the royal family to reproduce itself conveyed a positive image of the dynasty in its heyday and beyond. The nostalgia for the Tang in the Five Dynasties and early Song, I believe, owes something to the image of its dynasts as potent symbols of patriarchy. Inasmuch as the political institution of dynasty is the embodiment of the social institution of patriarchy, the strength of one serves to buttress the other. I have employed the *New History of Tang* for the following data on fecundity for the Li royal family:<sup>1</sup>

## Children of Tang Emperors:

Gaozu 高祖 (Li Yuan 李淵 566-635, r. 618-26): 22 sons, 19 daughters

Taizong 太宗 (Li Shimin 李世民 599-649, r. 626-49): 14 sons, 21 daughters

Gaozong 高宗 (Li Zhi 李治 628-83, r. 649-83): 8 sons, 3 daughters

Zhongzong 中宗 (Li Xian 李顯 656-710, r. 684, 705-10): 4 sons, 8 daughters

Ruizong 睿宗 (Li Dan 李旦 662-716, r. 684-90, 710-12): 6 sons, 11 daughters

Xuanzong 玄宗 (Li Lungji 李隆基 685-762, r. 712-56): 30 sons, 29 daughters

Suzong 肅宗 (Li Heng 李亨 711-62, r. 756-62): 14 sons, 7 daughters

Daizong 代宗 (Li Yu 李豫 727-79, r. 762-79): 20 sons, 18 daughters

Dezong 德宗 (Li Gua 李适 742-805, r. 779-805): 11 sons, 11 daughters

Shunzong 順宗 (Li Song 李誦 761-806, r. 805): 27 sons, 11 daughters

Xianzong 憲宗 (Li Chun 李純 778-820, r. 805-20): 20 sons, 18 daughters

Muzong 穆宗 (Li Heng 李恆 795-824, r. 820-24): 5 sons, 8 daughters

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<sup>1</sup> *Xin Tang shu*, ch. 78-83 [Zongshi 宗室, Gongzhu 公主].

Jingzong 敬宗 (Li Zhan 李湛 809-27, r. 824-27): 5 sons, 8 daughters  
Wenzong 文宗 (Li Ang 李昂 809-40, r. 827-40): 2 sons, 4 daughters  
Wuzong 武宗 (Li Yan 李炎 814-46, r. 840-46): 5 sons, 7 daughters  
Xuanzong 宣宗 (Li Chen 李忱 810-59, r. 846-59): 11 sons, 11 daughters  
Yizong 懿宗 (Li Cui 李漼 833-73, r. 859-73): 8 sons, 8 daughters  
Xizong 僖宗 (Li Xuan 李儼 862-88, r. 873-88): 2 sons, 2 daughters  
Zhaozong 昭宗 (Li Hua 李嘩 867-904, r. 888-904): 17 sons, 11 daughters

For the 19 major emperors of the Tang (excluding Aidi, the last ruler, who died without issue at 17 sui), an average of 24.4 children were born, with slightly more sons than daughters: 231 males vs. 215 females. The gender breakdown is noteworthy, as female infants tend to be stronger than males, so during epidemics, deteriorating gene pool, or other anomalies, the balance should favor girls by 5-10%. For the entire Tang, the balance favors males by 8%, consistent with expectations for stable times. Not until the last century of Tang (starting with Jingzong and ending with Zhaozong), does the gender ratio begin to favor girls by the slightest of margins: 51 daughters to 50 sons. Moreover, the most prolific emperor, Xuanzong, father of 59 children (30 sons and 29 daughters) appeared not at the beginning of the dynasty, as in the Ming and Qing, but in the second century of Tang power. There was a perceptible decline in fecundity for the dynasty's third century, but not to the extent of necessitating adoptions, as there were sufficient numbers of siblings in the late Tang to fill any void. Curiously, Zhaozong, the second to last emperor, managed to father 28 children (17 sons and 11 daughters), despite dying in his prime at 38 sui. The dynasty was overturned only three years after his death, but due to the havoc wrought by unruly governors in the provinces and eunuchs at court, not for lack of viable successors. In the West, when royal families decline in political power, it usually coincides with a decline in fecundity, which makes the Tang record all the more remarkable as testament to the strength of the Li imperial seed.

The contrast with the subsequent Song dynasty, as pertains to imperial fecundity, could hardly be greater. The following data was retrieved from the imperial clan's genealogy, *Zhaoshi zupu* 趙氏族譜, which differs only slightly from *Song shi* 宋史:<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Zhao Xinian 趙錫年, *Zhaoshi zupu* 趙室族譜 (Hong Kong, 1937), chap. 1, pp. 41-78.

### Children of Northern Song Emperors:

Taizu 太祖 (Zhao Kuangyin 趙匡胤 927-76, r. 960-76): 4 sons, 6 daughters  
Taizong 太宗 (Zhao Kuangyi 趙匡義 939-97, r. 976-97): 9 sons, 7 daughters  
Zhenzong 真宗 (Zhao Heng 趙恆 968-1022, r. 997-1022): 6 sons, 13 daughters  
Renzong 仁宗 (Zhao Zhen 趙禎 1010-63, r. 1022-63): 3 sons, 13 daughters  
Yingzong 英宗 (Zhao Shu 趙曙 1032-67, r. 1063-67): 4 sons, 4 daughters  
Shenzong 神宗 (Zhao Xu 趙頊 1048-85, r. 1067-85): 14 sons, 10 daughters  
Zhezong 哲宗 (Zhao Xu 趙煦 1077-1100, r. 1085-1100): 1 son, 4 daughters  
Huizong 徽宗 (Zhao Ji 趙佶 1082-1135, r. 1100-26): 31 sons, 34 daughters  
Qinzong 欽宗 (Zhao Huan 趙環 1100-61, r. 1126-27): 2 sons, 1 daughter

### Children of Southern Song Emperors:

Gaozong 高宗 (Zhao Gou 趙構 1107-87, r. 1127-62): 1 son, 0 daughters  
Xiaozong 孝宗 (Zhao Shen 趙慎 1127-94, r. 1162-89): 4 sons, 3 daughters  
Guangzong 光宗 (Zhao Dun 趙盾 1147-1200, r. 1189-94): 2 sons, 3 daughters  
Ningzong 寧宗 (Zhao Kuo 趙擴 1168-1224, r. 1194-1224): 7 sons, 1 daughter  
Lizong 理宗 (Zhao Yun 趙昀 1205-64, r. 1224-64): 4 sons, 1 daughter  
Duzong 度宗 (Zhao Qi 趙禔 1240-74, r. 1264-74): 3 sons, 1 daughter

The fifteen major rulers of the Song (excluding three final boy emperors) produced an average of 13.2 children, a rate of fecundity far short of the 24.4 recorded for the Tang. The gender breakdown for Song rulers of 95 boys and 101 girls, which favors girls by 5% – the inverse of Tang times – is noteworthy as a sign of something amiss. In his work on the Zhao imperial clan, John Chaffee finds that clansmen produced twice as many boys than girls, suggesting a big gap between the extended clan and the royal family.<sup>3</sup> Far and away, the most fecund Song monarch was Huizong: father of 65, he even broke the Tang record of 59. The mortality rate for Huizong's children was also exceptionally low for the times: 6 of 31 sons and 14 of 34 daughters died young, which makes for a survival rate of roughly 70%. At least 18 sons of Huizong lived long enough to receive formal names and investitures as prince. Moreover, the deaths of children were spread out temporally from the beginning until the end of his reign, proving that the emperor continued to sire children well into his 40s. Huizong's effeminate image thus stands in striking contrast with a record of

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<sup>3</sup> John W. Chaffee, *Branches of Heaven: A History of the Imperial Clan in Sung China* (Harvard, 1999), p. 58

unparalleled virility by the standards of any dynasty.

Another interesting contrast between the Tang and Song relates to the fecundity of the founding emperors. Tang founders Li Yuan and Li Shimin had produced 41 and 35 children, respectively. Song founders Zhao Kuangyin and Zhao Kuangyi fathered families of 10 and 16, respectively, which relates partly to the fact that the two men were siblings separated by only twelve years (the Tang founders were 33 years apart), but other factors were at work as well. Family size for the Song founders is consistent with numbers for the extended imperial clan at the time: on average, 15 children.<sup>4</sup> Huizong is the single exception, and if he is factored out of the equation, Song emperors produced an average of 9.5 children, 35% less than the Zhao clan, despite the unlimited resources of monarchy. Even more confounding is the gap between the Northern and Southern Song: the average family size for Northern Song monarchs was 18.4, whereas their Southern Song successors produced on average 6.0 children – a drop of 66%. In sum, the lack of suitable heirs presented a nagging problem for the Southern Song, forcing many monarchs to resort to adoptions to fill the void.

The case of Xiaozong (1127-94) is especially rich in tragedy and symbolism. He was adopted as imperial son in 1135 at 9 sui, when Gaozong (1107-87) lost his only biological son, a boy of 3 sui, in a palace accident. Years earlier, Gaozong had lost his first wife, Xing Mengxin 邢孟信, when Jurchen conquerors invaded Kaifeng and took her captive. According to informed rumors, Gaozong lost all sexual functioning at roughly the same time, distraught by ongoing military pressures.<sup>5</sup> Xiaozong had descended from the line of Taizu, the dynasty's founder, unlike Gaozong and the other Northern Song emperors, who had descended from Taizong, the second emperor. The most viable heirs to the privileged line of Taizong, including the siblings of Gaozong, had been captured by the Jurchen, so the selection of a distant cousin, a selection created by necessity, had the added advantage of enlarging the gene pool. Unfortunately, the switch improved fecundity only at the margins, and at the same time, introduced some unforeseen psychological baggage to the genetic mixture.

Xiaozong's first legal wife, Woman Guo 郭氏, produced 4 sons, when the couple was in their late teens and early twenties. They also had 2 daughters, one of whom died within 5 months of birth; the second daughter died at 32 sui of illnesses that had plagued her since youth. Ms. Guo died in 1156 at 31 sui, when Xiaozong was still prince. After his accession in 1162, at 36 sui, Xiaozong fathered 2 other children, both

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<sup>4</sup> Chaffee, *Branches of Heaven*, p. 58.

<sup>5</sup> *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 5, Part 1: The Sung Dynasty and its Precursors, 907-1279* (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 707-08.

daughters: the eldest lived until 32 sui, but the youngest died months after birth.<sup>6</sup> He remarried Xia Shengfu 夏聖福, one-time attendant to his deceased wife, installing her as empress in 1163. She perished four years later at 39 sui, having given birth to 1 boy and 1 girl (neither appear in *Zhaoshi zupu*); they died young as well. A decade passed before Xiaozong acquired another concubine, nee Xie 謝氏. She had been introduced by Empress Wu 吳端平, Gaozong's second wife, who lamented his "lack of female attention" – to wit, his aloofness to other women after the passing of his second wife.<sup>7</sup> But it was not until 1189 that Woman Xie was elevated to empress, after Xiaozong had abdicated the throne. The long delay seems to confirm the absence of any great commitment to Ms. Xie, who was either barren or sired children who died as infants. We often witness lapses of many years between relationships in the course of his adult life, a sign that Xiaozong was slow to start anew, upon concluding a relationship. What began as a minor matter that endeared him to courtiers – an affinity for his legal wife and coolness to consorts – had evolved into an emotional retreat by Xiaozong's middle years, and very likely, a shunning of sexual activity altogether. He lived a long life, dying at 68 sui, but Xiaozong was largely aloof to female companions for much of that time, which explains the absence of children after 40 sui. His emotional withdrawal also helps to explain the uncharacteristically difficult relations with his son, Zhao Dun, who bore the brunt of his demands.

Xiaozong's fourth son preceded the others in death. His eldest and most precocious son, Zhao Xu 趙愐, died in 1171 at 24 sui, whereupon Xiaozong named Zhao Dun 趙愷 (1147-1200), his third son, as heir-apparent. He thereby passed over second son, Zhao Kai, the next in line, after nearly a decade of soul-searching on his part, but also under mounting pressure from courtiers. Once committed to Zhao Dun, Xiaozong took a keen interest in his education and overall grooming, interest that extended from classical studies to training in archery and the martial arts.<sup>8</sup> He also arranged an appointment for the heir-apparent as co-administrator for Linan 臨安 (modern Hangzhou), allowing the heir-apparent, then in his 20s, to acquire some political experience without leaving the comforts and security of home. Second son, Zhao Kai would die in 1180 at 35 sui, preceding Xiaozong in death, which confirmed to the emperor his own intuition in choosing Zhao Dun, the last survivor.

In his last years, Xiaozong was also beleaguered by the deaths of numerous grandchildren, only one of whom survived childhood illnesses. He chose to abdicate in 1189, at 61 sui, to mourn in fitting fashion the passing of Gaozong, who died in

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<sup>6</sup> *Songshi*, ch. 248, p. 8788.

<sup>7</sup> *Zhaoshi zupu*, p. 64.

<sup>8</sup> Tuo Tuo 脫脫, et al., *Songshi* 宋史 (Zhonghua shuju, 1977), ch. 36, pp. 693-94.

1187 at 81 sui. Historians commonly portray the action as a sign of his passion for Confucian tradition, citing Xiaozong own invocation of the noble precedent of Jin Wudi 晉武帝 and Wei Xiaowen 魏孝文.<sup>9</sup> I suspect that the decision to withdraw from the political world was equally informed by the tragedies in Xiaozong's personal life, including the deaths of two wives in youth, numerous children in middle-age, and finally many grandchildren in old age. Abdication of imperial powers is rarely something to celebrate: it began in the Song dynasty with Huizong, in 1126, on the heels of debilitating setbacks in foreign and domestic affairs, and continued under Gaozong in 1162, triggered by a new war with the north. The negative associations of the recent past were surely not lost upon the historically savvy Xiaozong, but he sought to convey a different message in his case – a message of moral goodness. In reality, for a man who thrived on power and control, the act of abdication was also egotistically gratifying: it employed the tropes of denial, humility, and sacrifice while creating a special niche for Xiaozong not only in Song history, but in annals of Chinese civilization.

For Xiaozong, the heartlessness of nature was aggravated by the malicious deeds of his son, Zhao Dun. Due to the brevity of his five-year reign and its polarizing politics, Guangzong is perhaps the least empathetic of Southern Song emperors. The heir characterized by courtiers as “wise and virtuous,” seemed to change soon after his accession at 42 sui.<sup>10</sup> Since youth, he suffered from emotional problems severe enough to require medication, either severe neurosis or bipolar tendencies. Guangzong was also given to binge drinking in his middle years, unknowingly worsening his mental state. Moreover, this gravely flawed man grew up at a difficult time for his family. He lost his mother at 10 sui and subsequently lived under the constant scrutiny of his famously authoritarian father. Zhao Dun's grandfather, Gaozong, lived to see him reach 40; his grandmother, Dowager Wu, lived until he was 50. These three larger-than-life authority figures, having lived long enough to witness the passing of Zhao Dun's brothers, inevitably focused their attention and aspirations on him. His well-intended grandmother arranged his marriage to Woman Li, son of a military leader, a marriage that produced a son, Zhao Kuo. Their marriage was a sign that the Northern Song practice of intermarrying Zhao men and women with members of the military elite had continued into the Southern Song, even though the political justifications were no longer valid.<sup>11</sup> But the children of soldiers were given to aggressive behavior at home, it is said, and Empress Li personified the stereotype.

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<sup>9</sup> Li Xinchuan 李心傳, *Jiyan yilai chaoye zaji* 建炎以來朝野雜記 (Zhonghua shuju, 2000), 乙集, pp. 495-525, 547-51.

<sup>10</sup> *Zhaoshi zupu*, chap. 1, p. 65; *Chaoye zaji*, 乙集, p. 523.

<sup>11</sup> Chaffee, *Branches of Heaven*, p. 55.

Sources blame Li Fengniang 李鳳娘 (1145-1200), Guangzong's wife, for feeding a rift between her husband and her father-in-law that surfaced within two years of the 1189 accession. Her success, however, attests to strains in the relationship between father and son with deep roots and long histories. She had harbored old resentments against Xiaozong for deferring for nine long years the elevation of her husband as heir-apparent, while later withholding his endorsement of Zhao Kuo, her own son, as successor to her husband. Empress Li also allegedly refused medication for her husband's emotional swings out of fear that her father-in-law wished to poison him.<sup>12</sup> Her insecurities also explain the violent outbursts that she unleashed against potential rivals in the harem. Her motivation appears principally strategic: in the absence of intimacy with consorts, the emperor had no alternative to her own son as successor. By 1193-94, Guangzong had begun to decline official audiences by employing vague illusions to "illnesses," thereby spurning his most important political duty. Eventually, he severed relations with his father and declined the ceremonial yet symbolic visits to his palace, rejecting family duties as well. Even worse, he refused to conduct mourning rites upon Xiaozong's death. Outraged courtiers now had little choice but to enlist Grand Dowager Wu, the widow of Gaozong, in arranging another transfer of power. Zhao Kuo, the sole surviving son of the royal couple, succeeded as Emperor Ningzong in 1194. Guangzong and Empress Li also produced 3 daughters who died as children, along with Zhao Kuo's sole brother.<sup>13</sup> The couple died six years later while in their mid-fifties, concluding the darkest chapter in Southern Song political history.<sup>14</sup>

Zhao Kuo (1168-1224) did not inherit the dark side of his father, but as his official portrait reveals, a nearly emaciated body suggests physical ailments of some gravity.<sup>15</sup> He lived until 57 sui, a few years older than his parents, and reigned for exactly three decades – a time remembered more for its troubles than its achievements. Unlike his father, he apparently enjoyed amicable relations with two wives, initially Han Zhenyi 韓珍已 (1165-1200), a descendant of the Northern Song statesman Han Qi 韓琦, and later Empress Yang Yan 楊儼, also known as Yang Meizi 妹子 (1162-1232), his partner for the last thirty years, who was an accomplished calligrapher and patron of the arts. Despite two romantic marriages and a plentitude of concubines, Ningzong produced one of the weakest of progenies. Ningzong eventually died without biological successor, a record that differs from the other heirless Southern Song emperors in one important regard: a plethora of infant deaths.

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<sup>12</sup> Ding Chuanjing 丁傳靖, *Songren yishi huibian* 宋人軼事彙編, ch. 3, p. 91, based on citation from *Xihu zhiyu* 西湖志餘; *Songshi*, ch. 243, pp. 8653-55.

<sup>13</sup> *Chaoye zaji*, 甲集, p. 53.

<sup>14</sup> *Cambridge History, Volume 5*, pp. 756-73

<sup>15</sup> Hui-shu Lee, *Empresses, Art, and Agency in Song Dynasty China* (Washington, 2010), p. 168.

The Basic Annals of the dynastic history provides some detail on infant births and deaths for Ningzong's thirty-year reign, from 1194 to 1224.<sup>16</sup> Inasmuch as the data does not include births before Ningzong's accession at 27 sui, it represents a serious underassessment. Still, the record suggests, in the case of males, a preponderance of very young deaths:

- Infant son 1: born 6/1196, dies 2 months later (maternity uncertain)
- Infant son 2: born 1/1200, dies 8 months later (maternity uncertain)
- Infant son 3: born 11/1200, dies 1 month later (born to Empress Han)
- Infant son 4: born 12/1202, dies 1 month later (born to Empress Yang)
- Infant son 5: born 1/1207, dies 2 months later (born to Consort Zhong)
- Infant son 6: born 2/1207, dies 2 months later (maternity uncertain)
- Infant son 7: born 3/1208, dies 2 months later (maternity uncertain)
- Infant son 8: born 1/1223, dies 1 month later (maternity uncertain)

In addition to the eight aforementioned cases, Ningzong had a single daughter, who died within six months of birth, plus 3 sons who survived infancy and received formal names and 1 son who died at birth and received no name. This makes for a total of 13 children, far more than the 8 reported in the clan's genealogy, *Zhaoshi zupu*. (Inasmuch as the death of infants is considered unpropitious, clan-based sources generally tend to underreport such deaths.) Seven of the 8 infants identified in *Song Shi* died within two months of birth, suggesting physiological problems of some gravity. One source, *Jianyan yilai chaoye zaji*, alluding to a boy who died in 1206, "he had a frail body and many ailments." 體羸多疾<sup>17</sup> On average, for every child to survive one or two years, there were 3 who died within weeks of birth. Among the ill-fated babies, 6 out of 8 were born in the winter, when germs are generally dormant.

Interestingly, most of the imperial conceptions occurred prior to 1208, before Ningzong turned 40, similar to his father and grandfather. The final birth in 1223, when Ningzong was 56, is highly suspect, as it follows a lapse of fifteen years since the last recorded birth and preceded Ningzong's death by just a year. Curiously, sources never question paternity, even though an illegitimate child is far more likely than the prospects a sickly fifty-five year-old suddenly regaining his virility. Memorabilia of the period refer to the councilor of twenty-five years, Shi Miyuan 史彌遠, as "creating a clamor by entering the palace at free will." 彌遠出入宮禁, 外議譁然<sup>18</sup> I am neither insinuating an affair between Shi Miyuan and Empress Yang nor attributing the last infant to them – the two were in their fifties at the time. I wish

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<sup>16</sup> *Songshi*, ch. 37-40, pp. 713-82.

<sup>17</sup> *Chaoye zaji*, 甲集, p. 530.

<sup>18</sup> Songren yishi huibian, ch. 18, p. 986, citing *Qiantang yishi* 錢唐遺事.

merely to note the implications of the statement in terms of security at Ningzong's palace, whereby any number of non-castrated men enjoyed access to the Forbidden City. Did the sons of Miyuan, who often accompanied him to court, also accompany him to the palace?<sup>19</sup> Did Empress Yang's closest collaborators in the art world, Ma Yuan 馬遠 and his son, Ma Lin 馬麟, enjoy similar access?

Sources provide incomplete information as pertains to maternity for the 8 infants of Ningzong who died within months. Empress Han died in the year 1200, within days of the birth of Infant #3, presumably in childbirth. Empress Yang reportedly gave birth to 2 of the remaining 5 infants, leaving maternity for the others to Consort Cao 曹氏, Consort Zhong 鐘氏, or some lesser known woman.<sup>20</sup> We know that at least 3 of the boys to die as small infants were born to different mothers, suggesting the absence of hereditary problems on the part of the mothers. The Middle Palace of Ningzong never witnessed the sort of Empress/Consort intrigue characteristic of his predecessor, so palace mischief was the least likely cause of the infant deaths. Moreover, the magnitude of this sort of tragedy was unprecedented in Song times: Renzong, for example, had lost 13 children (3 boys and 10 girls) to early deaths, but he had the good fortune of fathering 3 girls who reached adulthood, whereas Ningzong's solitary daughter died young as well, within months of birth in 1208.<sup>21</sup>

In the absence of an heir, Ningzong adopted at the outset of his reign the 6 year-old Zhao Xun 趙詢, who died unexpectedly in 1220 at 29 sui, due to dysentery. He chose not to follow the wise precedent of Gaozong, who adopted two boys from the outset and thereby had an alternate, in the event of either mishap or poor performance.<sup>22</sup> Clearly, the principal actors in the selection – the emperor, the empress, and Shi Miyuan – had grown too fond of Zhao Xun to contemplate his possible demise. They decided upon Zhao Hong 趙竑, a nephew of the monarch. But the teenager was never formally installed as heir-apparent, and on the eve of Ningzong's death in 1224, was replaced by Zhao Yun (1205-64) through the intervention of Shi Miyuan and Empress Yang. They had both concluded, for different reasons, that Zhao Hong lacked the needed judgment, temperament, and sense of responsibility.<sup>23</sup> These two powerful court figures, as first-hand witnesses to Guangzong's insanity, were sensitive to the potential peril of an unstable man on the throne. In the intervening years, Zhao Yun had proven superior in intellect and temperament. The deposed Zhao Hong perished in exile months later, implicated in a

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<sup>19</sup> Davis, *Court and Family*, pp. 131-37.

<sup>20</sup> *Chaoye zaji*, 乙集, pp. 527-28

<sup>21</sup> *Songshi*, ch. 248, pp. 8776-78, 8789.

<sup>22</sup> Chaffee, *Branches of Heaven*, p. 179.

<sup>23</sup> *Cambridge History*, Volume 5, pp. 833-38.

rebellion against the court. Emperor Lizong thus began his reign under a cloud of controversy – the deposing and death of his stepbrother – which he might have salvaged by adopting an agenda of disciplined governance, in the fashion of another adopted heir, Xiaozong. Instead, Lizong’s reign was marred by excessive dependence on civil officials and deficiencies in personal conduct that rose to the level of scandal.

Lizong was plagued with the familiar problem of heirlessness. Although 20 sui at the time of accession in 1224, he dallied for five years before consenting to marry Xie Qiao 謝喬 (1210-83), granddaughter of the statesman Xie Shenfu 謝深甫. The marriage had been arranged by Dowager Yang, Ningzong’s widow, but Lizong never took to his plain-looking partner and their marriage produced no children. So, he decided to dote instead on consorts such as the fabulously gorgeous sister of Jia Sidao 賈似道. She was the subject of numerous poems composed at his own hand and their union produced a daughter. Consort Jia 賈氏 died in 1247 and the daughter, whom Lizong loved so much that he consented to marriage only under the condition that she continue to live nearby, would similarly die in her prime at 22 sui.<sup>24</sup> The loss was devastating on many levels: it signaled more than the death of Lizong’s last child, it stripped him of the sole surviving connection to the love of his life. Lizong’s 4 sons died very young, so he, like Ningzong, had the sad fate of living long enough to see his entire progeny perish. Sadly, nature was not his only enemy.

Born and raised in Shaoxing 紹興, Lizong’s reproductive handicap cannot be attributed to environmental conditions within the palace. And the birth of a daughter in 1240, at 35 sui, demonstrates that he was capable of producing children well into middle-age, but the pressures of office took their toll. For a man thrust to power at 20 and never groomed to govern, perhaps he was overwhelmed by the contradiction between the trappings of power and his own limitations. First, there was the controversy surrounding his enthronement that continued to smolder long after the deaths of Empress Yang in 1232 and Shi Miyuan in 1233, the powerful persons behind the last-minute switch in succession. After all, their associates were still in office, including Zheng Qingzhi 鄭清之, Shi Miyuan’s protégé. Second, he inherited a country at war with two formidable contenders: the Jurchen and later the Mongols. For the preceding century of Southern Song rule, wars had been sporadic, whereas Lizong’s forty-year reign was dogged by a succession of nearly interminable conflagrations. It is common knowledge that professional pressures can undermine fertility and sexual performance. “Lizong would drink heavily on a daily basis,” sources say, inferring an addiction to alcohol, which in turn, affected sexual

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<sup>24</sup> *Songshi*, ch. 248, pp. 8789-90.

performance in negative ways.<sup>25</sup> Rumors were rife about Lizong bringing local prostitutes to the palace, ostensibly due to an insatiable appetite for sex. But such activities might just as well emanate from anxieties about sexual performance.

In 1253, in the absence of a biological heir, Lizong adopted the fourteen year-old Zhao Qi (1240-74) as imperial son. Rather than cast his net widely, Lizong chose his closest biological kin, the son of his own brother, raised in Shaoxing. Elevated to heir-apparent in 1260, Zhao Qi acceded as Emperor Duzong in 1264, at 25 sui. The early adoption afforded courtiers a full decade to prepare the youth for royal duties, in contrast with Lizong, who in a matter of days had catapulted from imperial son to heir-apparent to emperor. Lizong also chose to participate personally in the youth's training, following in the footsteps of Xiaozong.<sup>26</sup> Duzong's early years in Shaoxing and exposure to life beyond the palace might have been an asset in governance, but he followed the pattern set by Lizong in delegating decisions to others and retaining lackluster holdovers from the previous reign.

Duzong married his own cousin, Quan Jiu 全玖 (1241-1309), the granddaughter of Lizong's mother. It was only after several failed attempts at childbirth that Empress Quan gave birth, in 1271, to a son destined for long-life, Zhao Xian (1271-1323).<sup>27</sup> In the interim, Duzong took a consort, Yang Juliang 楊巨良 (1244-79), who delivered a son, Zhao Shi 趙是 (1268-78), in 1269. A third son, Zhao Bing 趙昺 (1272-79), followed in 1272. Duzong fathered 2 other boys in 1268; they died of the usual infant diseases, leaving only his youngest sons as survivors. His only daughter also died young. Still, a survival rate of 3 out of 6 children (50%) was fairly strong, by the standards of the recent past. The fact that the surviving son of Duzong and Empress Quan, Zhao Xian, proved physically healthy and emotionally stable suggests that the issue of intermarriage between cousins (the genetic proximity of mother and father) did not necessarily yield defective children, as we might expect.

Duzong died suddenly at 35 sui, due to the malfeasance of a palace doctor, the severity of the doctor's punishment (exile) suggesting gross negligence.<sup>28</sup> Yet he was reportedly born with "weak arms and legs" as a consequence of his mother's attempt to abort her pregnancy.<sup>29</sup> Duzong was never a healthy man, in any case, which makes Lizong's decision to elevate him utterly inexcusable: he placed sentiment before reason, family before country. Duzong was succeeded in 1274 by the sole son of

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<sup>25</sup> *Songren yishi huibian*, ch. 3, pp. 99-100.

<sup>26</sup> *Songshi*, ch. 46, pp. 891-92.

<sup>27</sup> *Songren yishi huibian*, ch. 3, pp. 104-05.

<sup>28</sup> *Songren yishi huibian*, ch. 3, p. 103, citing Xu yijian zhi.

<sup>29</sup> *Songren yishi huibian*, ch. 3, p. 102, citing Guixin zashi.

Empress Quan, Zhao Xian, then 4 sui. The boy reigned less than two years when the Mongols invaded Hangzhou and incarcerated the royal family in Manchuria. By conventional wisdom as articulated by Bayan 佖顏, in 1276, the man commanding Mongol armies, it was the accession of a boy as emperor that had doomed the Song dynasty and set the stage for a repeat of events in 960, when Zhao Kuangyin overturned the child-monarch of Later Zhou to establish Song rule.<sup>30</sup> The circumstances by which Duzong perished, namely sudden death, prevented him from planning his own replacement, leaving the decision to regents led by his wife, who chose to favor her own blood. When the heir-apparent to Ningzong died unexpectedly, the 53 year-old emperor wisely adopted an adult male as imperial son, Zhao Hong. Had the regents of Duzong, in the wake of his death, followed the Ningzong precedent and adopted an adult successor, they may have changed the course of Song history. It proved a momentous misstep.

In sum, we cannot identify a single cause for the dual problems of high mortality and infertility within the royal family of the Southern Song, which makes the confluence of many factors as the most likely culprit. In the case of Ningzong, a man born and raised in the imperial compound, conditions in the residence may have contributed to the exceptionally high number of infant deaths in his thirties. The only other monarch raised largely in the palace, Xiaozong, adopted at 9 sui, had no children after 40, but apparently out of choice, not necessity. The emperor to sire the fewest children, Gaozong, had spent his first 20 years in the imperial compound at Kaifeng and his last 50 years in Hangzhou, but environmental conditions never figured in his infertility, in any case. It is noteworthy that the royal family, after relocating to Hangzhou, needed to confiscate a mixture of religious and private lands in the city's southern precincts to build government offices and palaces.<sup>31</sup> Construction activity continued on the site for some years, polluting the air and water in the short-term, while limited resources and an accelerated schedule involved compromises in the usual safety standards whose long-term impact on the health of imperial residents is unknown, but likely considerable.

Rather than environmental conditions, it appears that political pressures were more critical in explaining the paucity of potential successors for Gaozong, who reigned for 35 years, and for Lizong, who reigned for 40 years – the longest reigns of the Southern Song. By no coincidence, Gaozong reigned at the beginning of the dynasty and Lizong at the end, periods characterized by military contests either uniquely intense or open-ended. The times demanded decisions about war or peace that proved controversial for years to come. At the same time, Gaozong and Lizong

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<sup>30</sup> *Cambridge History, Volume 5*, p. 961.

<sup>31</sup> *Cambridge History, Volume 5*, pp. 959-60.

were beleaguered by nagging challenges to their legitimacy as sovereigns elevated by historical accident rather than dynastic design. Their dependence on court handlers like Qin Gui 秦檜 and Shi Miyuan, I believe, emanated from such political insecurities, which in turn, added to the pressures of governing. The fact that Gaozong chose to abdicate 25 years before death, while still of sound mind and body, serves as a reminder of the weight of that burden and the freedom that abdication afforded him. Abdication was never an option for Lizong, due to the youth of his successor.

Hereditary factors surely played some role in the mental condition of several Song emperors, including Xiaozong, who suffered sporadic bouts of depression.<sup>32</sup> Xiaozong's biological son, Guangzong, had a more severe form of the malady, although heredity contributed only partly to the problem. Through the untimely loss of his mother and his father's emotional detachment, Guangzong grew up in a thoroughly dysfunctional household, only to marry a paranoid and vindictive woman given to inciting matters. A century earlier, in the Northern Song, Emperor Yingzong died in his prime, at 36 sui, after suffering a combination of physical and psychological infirmities, suggesting that depression was a part of the genetic makeup of Zhao royals.<sup>33</sup> Alcoholism was common for many Southern Song monarchs, which may have had genetic roots as well, a predisposition worsened by imperial rituals such as banquets. Whether abuses of alcohol were a function of heredity or social practice, the consequences in terms of sexual dysfunction were the same for middle-age men.

Premature death sometimes occurs by mishap and sometimes by lifestyle choices. The mistreatment by a palace doctor was responsible for the sudden death of Duzong. For men and women of the royal family who perished in their prime, medical malfeasance must have been a fairly common cause. Adult males in the Imperial Compound died from the same sorts of illnesses that killed other Song men in their prime, but ironically, privilege sometimes worked to their detriment. Men of means often experimented with potions that promised sexual potency or long-life, but the sorts of exotic potions that reached the imperial palace were often the most novel and the least tested. As for imperial consorts and daughters to die in their prime, childbirth ranks high among possible causes: Ningzong's first wife and Lizong's only daughter offer the best documented cases. Patricia Ebrey, in discussing motherhood in the Song period, provides plenty of anecdotal evidence as pertains to the frequency by which women died during delivery.<sup>34</sup> Ebrey was speaking of upper-class women in general, but imperial women likely faced similarly dismal prospects for surviving pregnancies,

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<sup>32</sup> Dieter Kuhn, *The Age of Confucian Rule: The Song Transformation of China* (Harvard, 2009), p. 84.

<sup>33</sup> Chaffee, *Branches of Heaven*, pp. 65-66.

<sup>34</sup> Patricia Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period* (California, 1993), pp. 175-76.

despite the higher standards of hygiene and midwifery in the palace. I have long argued that upper-class wives in traditional China often welcomed consorts into the household in order to share the risk of pregnancy. The same should apply to imperial women, for whom the pressures to reproduce were even greater.

The high rate of infant mortality within the Song royal family may merely mirror the harsh reality of the times. John Chaffee estimates that roughly 70% of children in the extended imperial clan died before 6 sui.<sup>35</sup> It seems that the mortality rate for the smaller group that constituted the Zhao royal family was even higher, but by a fairly modest margin. Moreover, infant mortality clearly worsened after dynasts moved from Kaifeng to Hangzhou, a change that parallels the shift of Chinese capitals from the west to the east that occasioned the transition from Tang to Song. Did Tang royals produce not only larger, but healthier families due to the special conditions of Changan 長安 and Luoyang 洛陽, its seat of power in the northwest? Were the eastern capitals of the Song more vulnerable to disease?

Clearly, the Song dynasty surpassed the Tang in hygienic practices and medical knowledge; its record on containing contagious diseases was also vastly superior. Although the Song met with the usual pestilences of a localized nature, there is no record of epidemics that swept vast regions, which relates directly to losing sovereignty over the Silk Road, which the Tanguts controlled. In Tang times, the Inner Asian steppe was the source of several plagues that swept vast expanses of the empire, according to Denis Twitchett.<sup>36</sup> Exposure to exotic diseases was partly due to the privilege extended to foreign traders to traverse long stretches of Chinese land, trade within Chinese borders, and take up residence in the capital. For the entire Song period, however, trade with the steppe was indirect. Admittedly, the Southern Song presided over a new Silk Road along the South China Sea 海上絲路, but again trade occurred through distant intermediaries: coastal cities like Quanzhou and Guangzhou, and only secondarily Ningbo. Unlike Tang-dynasty Changan, foreign traders were never allowed to visit, let alone live, in the capital of Hangzhou; even diplomatic convoys were carefully managed in terms of movements within China's borders.

A factor often ignored in contrasting the early Tang and the late Song is the difference in living spaces in Changan, the dry northwest, and Hangzhou, the most humid corner of the southeast. The still waters of West Lake, the man-made wonder for which Hangzhou is famed, doubled as a breeding-ground for an assortment of

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<sup>35</sup> Chaffee, *Branches of Heaven*, p. 54.

<sup>36</sup> Twitchett presented this data in his Inaugural Lecture at Princeton University in 1982, which to my knowledge, has never been published. Also see Denis Sinor, ed., *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia* (Cambridge, 1990).

bugs capable of infecting humans, most notably, mosquitoes. Other germs surely festered in the expansive canal network that provided fresh water and cheap transportation for the city. Meanwhile, the imperial Zhao clan, as émigrés from Kaifeng and natives of Luoyang, must have faced physiological adjustments of some consequence in their new home. The evidence lies in the simple fact that emperors were dying younger: founder Gaozong and transitional-ruler Xiaozong enjoyed long lives, the former dying at 81 and the latter at 68; yet southern-bred Guangzong, Ningzong, and Lizong all died before 60. When the body is beleaguered by unfamiliar natural conditions, Chinese doctors may conclude that, “The elements are against you,” 水土不服. The sense of discomfiture or maladjustment in the southeast may help to explain the lingering nostalgia for the north, the extent to which leaders at different times in the dynasty – Xiaozong, Ningzong, and Lizong – undertook high-risk adventures in the hope of regaining the homeland. Most were not content with the paradise known as Hangzhou.

Apart from vastly different levels of heat and humidity, the capitals of Changan and Hangzhou also differed radically in size and population density, which in turn, affected the safety of human settlements. Estimates place population peaks for both cities at roughly 400,000 households, or 2 million people, but the parallels are misleading. A sprawling Changan was complemented by suburbs larger than the city itself and its residents were sufficiently spread out to live in comfort. The city of Hangzhou had less than half the space of Changan and a population density at least four-fold, due to natural limits on suburban sprawl. The congestion left the city highly vulnerable to fire, but just as fire spreads easily in such congested spaces, so does disease. It is a little studied aspect of the hazards of life in the opulent capital. Nestled by the Zhe River to the east, the Fenghuang Mountains directly south, and a sprawling system of canals across the middle, Hangzhou’s demographics likely contributed as much as anything else to the high levels of infant and other deaths in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Clearly, God never intended for emperors to live in paradise.