

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

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In my work on Southern Song politics, in preparation for the *Cambridge History of China*, I was baffled by a phenomenon that seemed unique for the times – the fact that 3 out of the 6 emperors to reach maturity – Gaozong, Ningzong, and Lizong – died without male survivors and needed to adopt heirs. Moreover, the emperors who managed to produce successors – namely, Xiaozong, Guangzong, and Duzong – produced sons of inferior stock, by the standards of Northern Song predecessors. Xiaozong’s mentally unstable son, Guangzong, for example, was forced to abdicate at the age of 48 sui, after five scandal-ridden years of governing. There is evidence that Xiaozong also suffered from bouts of depression, which helps to explain his famously autocratic political style and the decision to abdicate years before death. Guangzong’s son, Ningzong, although emotionally more stable than his father, proved apathetic and aloof, causing him to delegate sweeping powers to ministers and consort factions. Adopted sons raised outside the palace and drawn from a different gene pool should have performed better as monarchs, but Lizong’s severe flaws set the dynasty on a course of collapse within a decade of his death. His son, Duzong, a man of average abilities, proved unable to salvage things in the course of his decade-long reign.

In addition to issues of ruling style, another sign of deficiency is the high rate of infant mortality for the Song royal family. Ningzong had fathered over 10 boys, none of whom survived infancy. His grandson by adoption, Duzong, died in his prime at 35 sui; he was succeeded by a son of 4 sui, his older biological sons having preceded him in death. Lizong had four boys who died as infants; his sole daughter died at 22 sui. In contrast, research on the imperial clan proves that Zhao clansmen away from the capital did not suffer problems of a similar magnitude as pertains to fecundity, mortality, and mental health. Thus, the sad state of affairs for the royal family that resided in the imperial compound seems exceptional.

This essay explores the factors behind the decline of the Southern Song royal family. Clearly, infant mortality and emotional problems are partly informed by genetic factors, but political, cultural, and environmental factors were also at work. Aesthetic choices may have played a role as well. It is now common knowledge that prolonged exposure to lead 鉛 can gravely compromise the nervous and reproductive systems, creating a reduction in sperm count for men while causing low birth weights

and miscarriages in women. Could it be that the high concentrations of lead contained in porcelain, paint, and even toys within the Song palace may have played a role killing off children or sterilizing parents? It is also known that exposure to asbestos can have a similar impact on palace residents, and as proven by Marco Polo, the material was commonly used as a fire retardant in the best of urban homes. It is an intriguing problem for which I offer no answer, only some suggestions about potential culprits.

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