

Early Childhood and Dynastic Reproduction at Princely Courts, 1600–1800: European and Global Perspectives

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Outline

Dynastic rule was the most widespread form of political organization in the world well into the nineteenth century. However, dynasties had one major weak point: their continuity depended on (usually male) offspring. Recent comparative studies have shown that this problem was especially acute for European dynasties because of the importance they placed on the Christian principle of monogamy. Together with the high infant mortality rates in all strata of early modern societies, this made children a highly precious asset. This project analyzes practices and representations connected with the problem of early childhood and dynastic reproduction – i.e., the practices that aimed at providing for numerous and healthy legitimate offspring in order to reiterate the dynastic line – during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe and on a global scale.

The project is divided into three sub-projects (P1–P3). P1 is an in-depth, archive-based study of early childhood and dynastic reproduction at German courts. It analyzes patterns of care and status interaction in princely nurseries, representations and performances of kinship, early education and health, and the impact of relationships with princely children on courtiers' later careers at the courts of Vienna, Munich, and Stuttgart. P2 studies the representations of dynastic reproduction found in European reports on Eurasian princely courts. It investigates how local knowledge and European semantics merged in descriptions of dynastic reproduction at the courts of late Ming and Qing China, the Ottoman empire, and late Rurik and Romanov Russia. P3 is a comparative analysis of patterns of dynastic reproduction in Eurasia that relies on the results of P1 and P2 and on the expertise of other scholars.

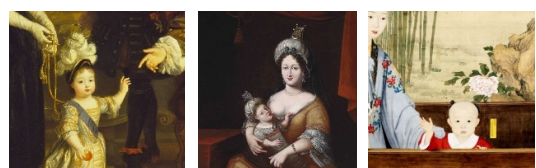
By combining different methodological approaches – archival research, analysis of early modern travel reports, and a comparative analysis – this project illuminates dynastic reproduction as a key element of early modern dynasticism. Furthermore, as it sheds new light on early childhood at princely courts, it also contributes to the history of children in the pre-modern world.

Project team

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P1

Early childhood and dynastic reproduction at German courts

Investigator: Nadine Amsler

Duration: 2021–2023



The care for small children at princely courts was an important part of what we might call the work of dynastic reproduction, i.e., the practices that aimed at providing for numerous and healthy legitimate offspring in order to reiterate the dynastic line. The space in which this work was carried out was the princely nursery, a social setting that, up to now, has received little systematic attention by historians. While many studies have looked at the ‘education’ of princes (usually with a special focus on curricula starting at the age of seven), a systematic study of practices of care for the most vulnerable – the youngest members of the dynasty – has not yet been undertaken. Following suit of recent innovations in dynastic and court history, which have highlighted women’s roles in dynastic politics and shed new light on social interaction at princely courts, P1 aims at shedding light on the ways how infants and young children were cared for at European princely courts.

P1 studies princely nurseries as social spaces where people of different social status, among them the princely parents, the governesses, physicians, wet nurses and domestic servants, interacted to serve the superior goal of ensuring the survival of dynastic offspring. Drawing on archival material from the nurseries of three South German princely courts of different sizes – the Imperial court of Vienna, the electoral court of Munich, and the ducal court of Stuttgart – it investigates the organization of care work during the princes’ and princesses’ first years of life. It is the hypothesis of this sub-project that ruling families and court personnel, far from perceiving the survival of young dynastic offspring as a matter that was in the hands of God, saw the particularly vulnerable and therefore crucial years of early childhood as a phase of life that required active and creative intervention in order to promote the children’s physical and mental development and minimize health risks.

Picture: In contrast to German ruling houses, who had their dynastic offspring only rarely painted, the French Bourbons were fond of paintings that presented their youngest family members. This is a detail of a painting showing the governess Madame de Ventadour with Louis XIV and his heirs, painted ca. 1715 – 1720 by a painter of the French School. It shows the Duc d’Anjou, the future king Louis XV. – Wallace Collection, London.

P2

Making sense of dynasty in a globalizing world: Dynastic reproduction in European reports on Eurasian countries

Investigator: N. N.

Duration: 2022–2025



Dynastic reproduction was not only a key concern of every ruling family; it was also an object of public observation and was thus under the scrutiny of society at large. In the early modern era, moreover, the erudite public became increasingly aware of the variability of patterns of dynastic reproduction on a global scale thanks to the growing body of published travel literature, including reports on foreign countries in Eurasia, in which descriptions of political systems figured prominently.

Reports on Eurasian countries are the focus of P2. It will analyze European authors' descriptions of practices linked to the problem of dynastic reproduction at the courts of China, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire. It thus combines studies of a distant empire that was applauded in Europe for its outstanding civility (China) with a neighboring empire that was suspiciously observed due to religious differences and a long history of military conflict (Ottoman empire), and an empire whose ambivalent status as simultaneously Asian and European polities caused puzzlement among European observers (Russia). The timeframe of this project is from ca. 1580 to 1800. This allows for an investigation of the representations of two dynastic transitions (Ruriks to Romanovs in the late sixteenth century and Ming to Qing in the mid-seventeenth century). It also allows for a reconstruction of the shifts in semantics over two centuries that were not only characterized by accentuated social and scientific change, but also by shifting power relations between Europe and Asia.

P2 will analyze how reports describe dynastic patterns and practices, patterns of care in the princely nurseries, representations and performances of kinship, early education and health, and the impact of childhood relationships on later careers. In contrast to P1, which is particularly interested in practices in princely nurseries reconstructed from archival records, P2 is focused on representations of distant countries' princely nurseries. It will shed light on how local knowledge and European semantics merged in the descriptions under consideration. Furthermore, comparisons between the reports on the three Eurasian empires will be made.

Picture: This detail of a larger painting probably depicts the influential Ottoman court woman Kösem Sultana (1590–1651) with her one of her sons and future sultans (Murad or Ibrahim). It was painted by an unknown seventeenth-century painter from the Austrian School. – Private possession.

P3

Patterns of dynastic reproduction in Eurasia: Comparative perspectives

Investigator: Nadine Amsler

Duration: 2024–2026



While P1 and P2 will be in-depth, source-based studies of practices and representations of early childhood and dynastic reproduction at princely courts, the goal of P3 is a comparative meta-analysis. Building on the growing amount of comparative historical work on dynasties and courts and on monarchical rule, this project will compare practices linked to the problem of dynastic reproduction in Eurasia.

In order to establish an open framework of comparison, P3 will heavily rely on the results of P1 and P2 and on scientific exchange with specialists of area studies. A core element will therefore be the organization of an international conference on “Dynastic reproduction in the early modern world” (planned to be held in Fribourg in 2024) that will bring together experts on different area studies and will thus help to establish a scientific network and test the possibilities of comparative views on Eurasian patterns of dynastic reproduction. On the basis of this conference, an edited volume will be developed.

Furthermore, a focused comparative case study on wet nurses at Chinese, Ottoman, and European courts is planned. This will allow a comparison of cases with distinct systems of dynastic marriage, reproduction, and succession. First investigations into the Chinese case show that, due to the lack of Chinese dynasties’ intermarriage with other dynasties and the resulting low social origins of *all* women at court (including wives and concubines), wet nurses (*rumu*) could sometimes wield enormous political power. At the Ottoman court, the Sultan’s wet nurse (*daye hatun*) was also an important figure. Its investigation is of special interest thanks to the formalized concept of milk kinship in Ottoman law. The comparative research will rely on Chinese primary sources for the study of the Ming and Qing courts and on the rich secondary literature in European languages on the Ottoman court.

Picture: This detail shows a consort of the Chinese Qianlong emperor leading his son, the future Jiaqing emperor, at her hand. The painting is attributed to Giuseppe Castiglione, an Italian Jesuit who worked as a painter at the Qing court. It was painted in ca. 1765. – Palace Museum, Beijing.