

# The Death of the Xiaoxian Empress: Bureaucratic Betrayals and the Crises of Eighteenth- Century Chinese Rule

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**I**N APRIL OF 1748 the Xiaoxian empress, first wife of Qianlong, died of a malarial fever. In the months that followed, a scandal erupted that shook the bureaucracy and left several officials dead. Their crime was shaving themselves before the expiration of the hundred days of declared state mourning. The case was an important moment in Qing rule, showing a very saddened and still-learning emperor grappling with different methods and models of governing, questioning his role as a specifically Manchu leader, and struggling with the place that law would occupy in his reign. He emerges from mourning his wife, and from the scandals that ensued, with a changed sense of how to govern that would have long-term consequences for the Qing government. Before turning to our story, it is best to begin with a context for the issues.

The events described here took place during the reign of the Qianlong emperor, which is justifiably considered the most important of China's Qing dynasty. During the sixty years that Qianlong sat on the throne, from 1736 to 1796, China experienced a period of unparalleled growth and prosperity. Peace was brought throughout the empire, the borders of which encompassed the greatest territory they had in almost all of Chinese history. And yet many Qing scholars have, in recent years, come to see the Qianlong reign as important for another reason. They suggest that within the vastness of its prosperity lay the beginnings of its decline. And the decline of the Qing was integral to the demise of China itself. In this view, China's shaming in the nineteenth century cannot be blamed solely on imperialist Western powers, but on a

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Chinese government that was unable or unwilling to respond to new challenges. The origins of that stultified posture are traced by some to the Qianlong reign, when many Qing ruling institutions reached maturity.

The man at the center of the Qianlong reign, Qianlong himself, has been the subject of intense interest. To most historians, he has appeared as a much more complex man than the Qing emperors who preceded him. Like them he was a Manchu, and one to whom his Manchu roots mattered tremendously. But he was also the first Qing emperor to be steeped in Han Chinese culture. These two different worlds tugged at him, made him more conflicted than his predecessors.

Finding the man at the center of the Qianlong reign is made more difficult because government itself was a much more complex affair in his time. Qianlong's two predecessors to the throne, Kangxi and Yongzheng, stood more fully in charge of their bureaucracies, and most official decrees promulgated under their imprimaturs appear to historians as direct expressions of their imperial will. Not so in the Qianlong reign, when a flood of paperwork seems to conceal an ever-disappearing monarch. How then do we find the man in all this complexity? How do we understand this important reign?

Specialists in Chinese history are likely to see in these issues the themes of two important works on the eighteenth century: Beatrice S. Bartlett's *Monarchs and Ministers: The Grand Council in Mid-Ch'ing China* (1991) and Philip A. Kuhn's *Soulstealers: The Chinese Sorcery Scare of 1768* (1990). Bartlett studies the development of the Grand Council, an inner court body of high ministers, which, during the reign of Qianlong, matured into an organization set between the emperor and his central government agencies that could effectively manage the increasing work load of the mid-Qing. This body, Bartlett argues, was neither fully autonomous nor completely dominated by the emperor, but could seize "the opportunities provided by both worlds" (Bartlett 1991, 7). One of Bartlett's important observations is that the Grand Council's acquisition of the power to supervise document traffic and nearly all the myriad concerns of the highest and innermost levels of government tended to reduce the monarch's independence and, ultimately, his power.

In contrast to Bartlett's institutional study, Philip Kuhn focuses on a series of events that occurred in 1768, which began with rumors spreading through east-central China of sorcerers stealing men's souls. The events quickly became associated with what Kuhn terms "political crime," by which he means offenses that, because of their seditious nature, are against the foundation of the Chinese system of government. Kuhn focuses on the relationship between Qianlong and his ministers, and shows how the monarch was able to embark on a sort of political campaign, in which an energetic prosecution of soulstealers allowed him to disturb the neat routine of bureaucratic power. By injecting his arbitrary power into the management of events, he could undermine stodgy bureaucratic routine and thereby increase the level of personal control he exercised over his top officials. Kuhn concludes with the suggestion that the business of government had grown so complex that the emperor could not control it in routine ways; he had to use political campaigns to assert power.

One difference between the accounts of Bartlett and Kuhn is in their approach to Qianlong. Bartlett's institutional approach leads her to focus less on the emperor's state of mind. Kuhn, in contrast, because he examines an episode in which the emperor injects himself with personalistic verve into the routine of bureaucratic life, explores the mind of Qianlong, though he does so with caution. In Kuhn's analysis, Qianlong is motivated by a fear of sedition that is coupled with a fear of assimilation, the loss of Manchu identity with all of its martial trappings.

An analysis of the scandal following the death of the Xiaoxian empress intersects neatly with the interpretations of Bartlett and Kuhn. Those events reveal the empowered central government described by Bartlett, but they also show Qianlong beginning to experiment—perhaps forced to experiment—with the kind of political campaign that Kuhn finds in a more developed form twenty years later.

Suggesting that the political campaign became a kind of routine is not meant to minimize the effect of the emperor's wrath on hapless individuals, or the very real terror that could accompany imperial disfavor. And yet what was the only real means of controlling the bureaucracy, if Kuhn is correct, must have become something of an established strategy—one that had its genesis in the events of the young emperor's life.

The events of 1748 might well have been a key moment in the evolution of the political campaign strategy. In part, this was because Qianlong at thirty-seven was still forming his ruling style; but critical here also is that these events followed the death of Qianlong's beloved wife, and a deeply insulting scandal that forced a shocking realization about the nature of his officials' loyalty to him. And because his perceptions of his wife were so closely tied to issues of Manchu identity, they show a crucial moment in the genesis of his fears of Manchu assimilation. They also show the emperor choosing among different models for the loyalty he expected from his officials.

The sections that follow analyze the events of 1748 in terms of the crises they presented for the emperor. They seemed to change how he managed government and how he looked at problems of identity. The year 1748, which saw the loss of his dear wife, ended by marring his faith in government as his father and grandfather had practiced it. We begin with an outline of events.

## Our Story

The girl who would become the Xiaoxian empress was born to an eminent Manchu family in 1712. Terming her family "eminent" indeed scarcely does justice to its long personal association with the Qing court. The future emperor was marrying a woman whose grandfather had persuaded his own grandfather, the Kangxi emperor, to go against the opinions of many at court and undertake an ambitious military campaign that would vastly increase the extent of Qing rule. Her grandfather's loyalty, and the ultimate success of that campaign—which would be dubbed the Suppression of the Rebellion of the Three Feudatories—earned the family a special relationship to the Qing ruling family. It is thus not surprising that one of its members was chosen to be empress to the future Qianlong emperor, who would come to the throne in 1736, at age twenty-five. When they married, husband and wife were each seventeen years old. By all accounts, the love they shared was powerful.<sup>1</sup>

In February of 1748, Xiaoxian set out with Qianlong and his mother on a trip to perform sacrifices at the Confucian temple in Shandong. The Manchu ruling family was, in accordance with precedents set early in the conquest, always anxious to

<sup>1</sup>Qianlong's extraordinary feelings for this wife are in part evidenced by his unwillingness to replace her. Tradition demanded that the post of empress not be vacant, and Qianlong's mother urged him to elevate the imperial honored consort to fill it. Subsequently, Qianlong asked Noqin to look into whether there were precedents for keeping the post vacant. In the end, Qianlong decided to follow his mother's wishes (Memorial of Noqin, September 14, 1748, LYZP #4).

demonstrate its Confucian virtues. For the young empress this was manifested both in her attendance on the trip and in the service she was obliged to offer her mother-in-law, as a dutiful wife and daughter-in-law. The trip was difficult, made through malarial regions of Shandong province, when the rainy season was well underway. On the return trip, in a place called Jinan, the empress caught a chill. The imperial party continued to Dezhou, a county seat in northeast Shandong, where they prepared to continue the trip over water. Just after boarding the boat, the empress died (GZSL 310.26b–27a, QCTD 62.dian 2477).

A period of state mourning (*guo xu, guo sang*), lasting one hundred days, was to be observed by officials throughout the empire, including governors-general, governors, and their subordinate officials. For the first twenty-seven days of the state mourning, officials were required to wear traditional hemp mourning garb and refrain from all manner of pleasure. For the balance of the hundred days they could return to normal court dress, with the red ornamentation removed (QCTD 62.dian 2477).

The imposition of state mourning for an empress was an anachronism; it had not been declared in almost a hundred years. The practice had been the norm in the Ming, but was changed by the Kangxi emperor in 1674, as he was undertaking the Three Feudatories campaigns. Reportedly, he did not want the leaders of these powerful regions to have the tactical advantage of knowing a death had occurred at court (DQHDSL 482.5b–6a). At the time the measure was seen as temporary, but was followed subsequently, and the practice was never revived. It took Qianlong's intense feelings for Xiaoxian for state mourning to be reintroduced.

Nowhere was it written that officials should refrain from shaving during the state mourning period. Qianlong would later claim it was not necessary to make that requirement explicit: everyone knew that a fundamental part of mourning was going unshaved. But word soon began to reach the Court that officials had shaved before the expiration of the hundred days. The first case to come to light was that of Jiang Xinghan, a first captain in the Shandong Green Standards. Qianlong issued an order to the Shandong governor-general Aligun, in which he said that Jiang should be taken to Peking, where the Board of Punishments could assess his guilt. He received a sentence of immediate decapitation, and was executed.

The second case to emerge was that of Jin Wenchun, from the prefect of Jinzhou, Hunan. Evidence in his case showed that a Manchu captain from that city had reminded all the officials there to refrain from shaving; it was this fact that made Jin's case so heinous. The Board of Rites, following the "Great Disrespect (*Da bujing*)" substatute, decided on immediate decapitation (QSG 11057). But once news began to reach Peking that many had in fact shaved their heads during the period of mourning, the sentence was changed to death pending review at the autumn assizes. Ultimately, Jin Wenchun was permitted to redeem himself through labor.

The most sensational case was that of Zhou Xuejian, a high official who occupied the post of Jiangnan director-general of the conservation of the Yellow River and the Grand Canal, and who had been awarded the prestigious title of junior guardian of the heir apparent. Qianlong learned of his violation during an audience with the Fuzhou General Xinzhu, who told the emperor that when he was on a tour to Nanjing he went to Huaian, to pay a call on Zhou Xuejian. Zhou learned of his impending visit, but had already shaved himself. Fearing discovery, he made a pretense of going to inspect a river, and scrambled into hiding (SYD September 8, 1748).

Zhou Xuejian was removed from his post, and Kaitai, the governor of Jiangsu, was ordered to proceed to his house and confiscate his belongings. There, Kaitai found letters implicating Zhou Xuejian in a bribery agreement. In a memorial dated

September 16, 1748, Gaobin, a Manchu official who was entrusted with assuming Zhou Xuejian's official duties, discovered a cache of 9,400 taels in Zhou's household—supposedly a treasury for river work (Memorial of Gaobin, September 16, 1748, LYZP 4). The Grand Council recommended a sentence of immediate decapitation, but Qianlong, out of leniency, permitted Zhou Xuejian to take his own life (SYD December 4, 1748).

The same fate was shared by Sailenge, an old and trusted Manchu official who had also shaved himself during the mourning period. News that he had shaved particularly infuriated Qianlong. An edict dated October 28, 1748, declared: "The guilt of Sailenge will not be assuaged for ten thousand years." His case was reviewed by the Board of Rites, which recommended immediate decapitation. Out of leniency, Qianlong conferred on him the right to take his own life (SYD October 28, 1748; QSG 11038).

### The Razor's Edge: The Unspoken Background to the Shaving Scandal

As word reached the court that many had in fact shaved themselves prematurely, excuses began to arrive. Some claimed ignorance of the rule. Others claimed misunderstanding: that they thought it was permissible to shave on the twenty-seventh day, when they changed from mourning clothes to unadorned court clothing—this was Zhou Xuejian's excuse. Some claimed to have simply "forgotten themselves," and shaved before they realized what had happened (see Memorial of Xinzhu, March 6, 1749, LYZP 16). But Qianlong saw through these weak excuses. Jin Wenchun had been a Bachelor in the Hanlin Academy, and had been reminded not to shave; how could he claim ignorance? Zhou Xuejian must have known he was committing a wrong, or why would he have gone into hiding when he heard that Xinzhu was coming? And how could Sailenge, a Manchu, claim ignorance of a custom that was *Manchu* in origin?<sup>2</sup>

The reason people were so anxious to shave is left unspoken in the documents, but was quite real. To understand this, some explanation is in order. Shaving was a Qing innovation, brought to China by its Manchu conquerors, who ordained that Chinese men adopt the Manchu hairstyle to demonstrate their surrender to Qing rule. Under the Ming, men had worn their hair and beards long. The Qing ordered that they shave their faces and most of their scalps, leaving a patch of hair in the back to be grown long and braided into what Westerners call the queue. The only time men could refrain from shaving was when they were in mourning. This exception was allowed because mourners were not permitted to groom themselves while in mourning, and shaving was viewed as grooming.

In the hundred years following the Manchu conquest, the unshaved scalp became the most marked feature of mourning. Traditional hemp mourning garb might be removed at will, or as was common, be worn only when performing death rituals. But to see a man with his scalp unshaved, with short hairs growing on his face and around his queue, was to know he was in mourning. And this mourning carried death

<sup>2</sup>Manchu mourning customs regarding the hair were complex, diverse, and syncretic—so the matter was not as clear as Qianlong suggests. See Suoning'an 1801.

pollution with it, which registered as a physical repulsion to the mourner.<sup>3</sup> So powerful was this feeling of repulsion that those in mourning would sometimes cheat and get themselves shaved immediately after the burial, before refraining from doing so for the hundred days (de Groot 1894, 2:603). Evidently, distaste for going unshaved was strong enough to make some officials risk imperial wrath, or at least risk discovery.

### The Shaving Scandal as Bureaucratic Crisis

The events of 1748 were most immediately a bureaucratic crisis for Qianlong. Initially, he decided to deal harshly with the offenders. He had already seen to it that Jiang Xinghan would be put to death, and was well on the way to disposing of Jin Wenchun, when news reached him that these were not isolated cases. And before he knew it he had Zhou Xuejian and Sailenge to deal with. Qianlong's problem was that he had stated firmly and publicly that this violation of state mourning was an intolerable offense that merited death. How could he simply forgive all those who had shaved themselves, without undermining his authority? Alternatively, if he decided to prosecute but be lenient with those who had shaved, by letting their cases surface he was necessarily publicizing how widespread the shaving was and the extent to which he was out of touch with the doings of his bureaucrats.

Slowly, a strategy evolved for maintaining imperial power and prestige. Qianlong's thorniest problem was the now deceased Jiang Xinghan, who had suffered immediate execution only because he had shaved. The emperor's first step was simply to omit discussion of Jiang Xinghan. Subsequent edicts make no mention of him by name, nor do they reveal the fact that someone had already been executed for shaving.

With Jiang Xinghan thus conveniently forgotten, Qianlong's task became circumscribing the guilty. And to complicate matters, this delimiting process had already begun while increasingly flagrant instances of violation were still being uncovered. Qianlong lamented:

In the beginning [sic!] there was the Xizhou Prefect Jin Wenchun, who because a Manchu official had issued a warning to him and he did not follow it, his guilt was judged to be heavy, and he has already been sentenced to decapitation. Who could know that among the ranks of governors and governors-general there would be a Zhou Xuejian, who would make Jin Wenchun seem guiltless? And who could know that among the Manchu officials there would be a Sailenge, who would make Zhou Xuejian seem guiltless?

(SYD September 13, 1748)

Qianlong thus had to formulate his criteria for delimiting the guilty while the parameters of what he considered to be indecent conduct were still widening.

In edicts dated September 1748, Qianlong's strategy began to unfold. The technique he chose for exculpating many offenders was one common to cases of popular rebellions. Those who had not acted of their own accord, but who simply had followed others, would be forgiven. This position suggests a definite change from arguments

<sup>3</sup>The phenomenon of death pollution in China has been noticed by many writers. See Watson 1982. It was present in both Qing and Manchu ritual. On the latter, see Suoning'an 1801 xu. 1, which held that animals and those in mourning were not permitted in areas where rituals to ancestors were being performed.



made in earlier edicts, which argued that the nonshaving requirement was so basic it should have been respected by all, regardless of the circumstances. But the new logic was used to lessen the punishments of Peng Shukui and Yang Xifu, two subordinates of Sailenge who, according to edicts, had followed their superior in choosing to shave their heads. “How,” Qianlong asked, “could there be such a diffusion of bad ideas with no one being aware of it? Uniformly they followed along and played the sycophant. Yet once Sailenge had cut his hair, how could one fault Peng Shukui and Yang Xifu?” The edict decreed that they would be cut from the official ranks, and out of mercy be permitted to stay at their posts (SYD September 13, 1748).

The shrewdness of Qianlong’s strategy—to delimit the guilty by lessening the punishment of those who had followed their superiors in shaving—becomes apparent when one realizes the extent to which it was actually fictitious. Thus, Yang Xifu memorialized pleading for leniency not because he had followed his superior in shaving, but because he had “forgotten himself,” and after the twenty-seven days, when it was permissible to remove his mourning clothes, he also had his head shaved (Memorial of Yang Xifu, August 29, 1748, LYZP 4). Similar excuses were made by Zhou Xuejian, who also shaved on the twenty-seventh day, when he put off his mourning clothes.

The order to exercise leniency in the case of those officials who had shaved when they saw superiors do so was used to cut off the irksome flow of shavers’ names to the court.

I have already sent down instructions to the governors and governors-general, saying that cases that have not already come to light should not be deeply looked into. The reason is that the numbers of those officials who have crowded along is great. Those who have transgressed the law have committed an aggravated offense (*zhong zui*). Once they have been investigated it is not easy to treat the case lightly and show mercy. It is for this reason that I have followed a policy of exemption. Much less have I wanted to involve Provincial Magnates.

(SYD September 8, 1748)

All lower-level officials who shaved were thus by extension presumed to have followed the example of their superiors and were therefore exempt from punishment. High level provincial officials, the “Provincial Magnates,” were also to be left “uninvolved.”

Qianlong’s next bit of strategy required justifying the severe punishments meted out to those officials who were now dead. The strategy here was to redefine the reasons for which they had been so harshly dealt with. Those who tried to conceal what they had done were declared to have been punished for their concealment, rather than for the wrong of shaving itself. An edict of October 28, 1748, differentiated the case of Sailenge, who was ordered to take his own life, from that of Yang Xifu.

Sailenge had wanted to cover up what he did. So, it can be seen that his ends were not the same as Yang Xifu’s, who of his own memorialized. Yang Xifu knew that his guilt was clear, and did not seek to cover it up.

(SYD October 28, 1748)

Similarly, Zhou Xuejian, whose shaving was originally called a “perverse and erroneous thing,” revealing his “rebelliousness” and “lack of heart,” was recharacterized as one who had committed bribery, extortion, and other official misconduct, in addition to concealing what he had done (compare SYD September 8, 1748, and December 4, 1748). But the kind of corruption Zhou was involved in was nothing

more than accepting the routine gifts for recommending an official. And the relatively small amount of the bribe (2,000 taels) illustrates that it had been taken long in the past, when Zhou was a minor official.

Through this very formidable damage control, Qianlong was able to maintain at least a veneer of power and prestige. And he could prove that he was not so out of touch with his bureaucracy as to be ignorant that so many had shaved. In a sense, though, this crisis was just the tip of a very large and deep iceberg, which the other crises make clear.

### The Shaving Scandal as Legal Crisis

From the very beginning of the scandal, edicts used legalistic language to describe what had transpired. Zhou Xuejian's action was described as a "violation of the laws (*fanfa*)," and "a breakdown of law and regulations (*jigang lingti*)" (SYD September 8, 1748). Violators were described as violating "settled rules (*dingzhi*)" or "ancestral rules (*zuzhi*)."

It is this dynasty's settled rule that when there is state mourning for a period of one hundred days one refrain from shaving the head. Violators of this provision who break the ancestral rules are immediately decapitated.

(SYD July 7, 1748)

And in the same edict Qianlong boasted that the case had "swiftly been reconciled by law."

Yet very early in the scandal it became apparent that the most obvious problem with treating the offenders as violators of the law was that there was no law or administrative regulation that said it was illegal to shave the scalp during a period of state mourning. Qianlong himself was forced to admit that "neither the *Collected Qing Institutions* nor the *Qing Legal Code* was clear on the matter." To Qianlong the reason for this omission was obvious. Before the Qing conquest Chinese men never shaved their heads. Hair on the head and face was grown long, and although people knew to refrain from grooming themselves when in mourning, they did not have to be told about not shaving. When the edition of the *Institutions* inherited from the Ming was being revised, the editors simply forgot to include the requirement about not shaving (SYD July 7, 1748).

Prosecuting people for breaking rules that did not exist in writing presented no insurmountable barrier. There were the catch-all provisions in the *Qing Code*, such as the statute against "Doing what ought not to be done," and the "Great disrespect" substatute that was used against Jin Wenchun. Qianlong retorted to those who claimed people should not be punished for breaking an unwritten law: "What our laws consider necessary need not be recorded in a simple list!" And what about the fact that edicts announcing mourning and board-level instructions failed to mention that officials should not shave? To this Qianlong said "They did not state the rule clearly because it was well known by the multitudes" (SYD July 7, 1748).

The problems associated with using law as a way of punishing the shavers were more subtle, and became apparent as the scandal unfolded. Having characterized the offenders as criminals who had violated a law, Qianlong found it fiercely difficult to treat different offenders differently. The force of the *Qing Code* was to make punishments consistent. And although it could countenance different punishments



for the same crime, it could do so only in carefully defined ways, according to such factors as the relationship between victim and criminal, and the status of the offender. But the various shavers whose names came to light angered Qianlong to different extents, and in different ways. He was furious with Sailenge because an old Manchu should have known better. He was furious with Zhou Xuejian because the director-general had been so deeply “bathed” in the emperor’s graces. Law became an even more awkward tool when Qianlong tried to stop the executions. Law pushed him to a level of consistency that became unbearable, until he was forced to order that no more names be put forward.

More difficult still for Qianlong became the problem of dealing with intent. Initially, he refrained from dealing with that question. Shaving the scalp was an abhorrent offense to which no one could claim ignorance (SYD September 13, 1748). As Qianlong searched for reasons to exculpate offenders, he had to use intent as a factor, but he would consider it only in the case of lower-level officials: this had the added advantage of not forcing him to exculpate Zhou Xuejian, whom he had decided, at an early state of the scandal, not to forgive.

My instructions that it was not necessary to inquire into cohorts referred originally to minor subordinate officials. I was afraid that they would have transgressed the laws without intent (*wuzhi fanfa*), and I cannot endure the guilt spreading to many people. . . . How can these be spoken of in the same way as Zhou Xuejian?

(SYD September 19, 1748)

In struggling with the problem of intent, Qianlong reiterated his incredulity that some could have been ignorant of the requirement. At the same time, by refusing to forgive Zhou Xuejian, he was revealing the deepest problem with the invocation of law to deal with the scandal: that the nature of his officials’ loyalty to him should be above considerations of law.

The law, and regulations like those in the *Collected Qing Institutions*, dealt with the outer parameters of what one was required to do—they regulated conduct. As the documents on the shaving scandal indicate, Qianlong expected an emotional, even familial, attachment from his officials. Just as a son knew how to behave towards his parents, a minister should know how to behave towards his emperor.

It has always been the case that sons and grandsons when performing the filial duties for their parents and grandparents, when it is appropriate to give them food, they give them food, and when it is appropriate to give them clothes they give them clothes. How can they wait for specific instructions before fulfilling filial duties? And who because a law is not written down follows an unfilial path to avoid [his responsibilities]?

(GZSL 316.16b–17a)

While Qianlong in all likelihood realized that going unshaved would be unpleasant for people, what he miscalculated was the nature of his officials’ loyalty to him—that the emotions they felt for him were not powerful enough to make them overcome the pollution of an unshaved scalp.

In the absence of a genuine bond with his officials, all that was left to Qianlong was law. And the insertion of a specific provision against shaving the scalp during a period of state mourning was made explicit in the *Complete Qing Rituals*.<sup>4</sup> And yet the

<sup>4</sup>Qianlong’s response was to make a shaving provision part of the *Collected Institutions* and the *Qing Code*. “Now” he wrote, “I wish to establish clearly the guilt of their violation, and the stupidity of those who in these circumstances violate the law” (GZSL 316.18a). See DQTL 52.9b.

scandal of 1748 was a legal crisis because in this moment of imperial outrage, the law proved itself an inadequate and awkward tool in regulating the conduct of some of China's highest officials.

### The Shaving Scandal as Ritual Crisis

Qianlong's demand for a higher form of devotion from his officials was not idiosyncratic. Instead, it hearkened to a model of official loyalty that I refer to as the "parallel conception of society." This model of official loyalty conceived a society held together by parallel bonds of mutual obligation, in which a minister's loyalty to his emperor paralleled a son's feelings for his parents. The parallel conception pervaded the Confucian canon and was signalled by the repetition of such classical phrases as "The emperor governs all-under-heaven with filial piety," "The loyal official comes from the filial home," and "filial piety at home is transferable to loyalty to the ruler."<sup>5</sup>

There is much in the documentation of the 1748 scandal that suggests Qianlong, the Qing emperor most indoctrinated in Confucianism up to this time, adhered to the parallel conception. This is clear in several of his statements, including his remark that officials would never have shaved while mourning their own parents, so neither could they do so when mourning the empress (SYD September 13, 1748). The scandal of 1748 showed decisively and dramatically that Qianlong did not enjoy this level of loyalty. This was the case despite the extravagantly emotional memorials that arrived in huge numbers at court. Yu Minzhong, for example, while he was still only an education commissioner, wrote "When your official heard the news [of the empress' death] he was overcome, howling with pain and grief" (Memorial of Yu Minzhong, April 28, 1748, LYZP 14).

The reality of the situation was that officials who had been deeply "bathed" in the emperor's personal graces believed that once they were out of sight of the court they could freely shave themselves. This was clearest in the case of Zhou Xuejian, who infuriated Qianlong precisely because someone whose contacts with the imperial family had been so personal and direct cared so little for the ritual that was a crucial sign of that relationship.

Zhou Xuejian's rise to prominence had been meteoric. He achieved the Jinshi degree in 1723, ranked sixth in the same exam in which Yinjishan had been ranked twenty-fourth (Zhu and Xie 1980, 614, 2230). Because of his particular promise, he was made a Bachelor in the Hanlin Academy, where in the Institute of Advanced Study (Shuchanguan) he received intense literary and classical training. At the end of three years, Bachelors were given special literary examinations. Zhou Xuejian performed with distinction on his examination, and so was "retained at the academy (*liuguan*)" and made a compiler of the second class (QSG 11058). Such honors were reserved for the most promising of Metropolitan graduates, and it was in this environment that Zhou Xuejian was supposed to be soaking up the details of Confucian morality.

After five quick promotions, Zhou Xuejian was appointed vice minister of the Board of Revenue. He was then ordered to Shandong, to work in disaster relief, and

<sup>5</sup>This doctrine and its changing meaning and application receive extensive treatment in my book, *Mourning in Late Imperial China: Filial Piety and the State* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). For an introduction to the issues see Kuwabara Jitsuzo 1977, 20–22, and Kang Xuewei 1991, 13–15.

then to the upper and lower Yangzi to assist governors and governors-general in similar work. He was then made acting governor of Fujian, and then was appointed governor-general of Zhemin. It was from this position that he was given the prestigious title Junior Guardian of the Heir Apparent, and was appointed one of the three directors-general of the Grand Canal.

Clearly there was something deeply wrong when a person of this caliber, who was supposed to be well educated and carefully indoctrinated into the ways in which officials serve their emperor, was knowingly breaking that relationship and scurrying off into hiding when he received word that someone from court was coming to pay a visit. Zhou Xuejian as an official was required to maintain a loyalty to the emperor that was reinforced by filial piety. As Qianlong lamented, "Our ancestors decreed that righteousness is the relation which should exist between the Prince and his ministers yet offenses so contemptible as this certainly may not be forgiven!" (QSG 11058). That filial piety was deteriorating into mere decorum was apparent to all, when top-level officials who were out of sight of the emperor were not willing to brave the death pollution of their unshaved scalps by putting aside the razor for the proper period.

### The Shaving Scandal as Racial Crisis

Before Qianlong learned that Manchus had shaved themselves, the scandal appeared to be one of Han insubordination to a Manchu custom. From his very first, impassioned edict on the scandal, Qianlong saw implicit connections between his ancestors' orders that Han Chinese shave their heads in the Manchu style as a sign of their submission, and the insubordination he now faced.

This has much to do with how in our times we ordered Han people to shave off their hair (*tifa*). For those who did not shave their scalps not one escaped the punishment of decapitation. This past hundred years people have all observed this without waiting for instructions and having to be later enlightened.

(SYD July 7, 1748)

To Qianlong, swift obedience to the original shaving rule was evidence of Manchu power, and its observance over the preceding hundred years was evidence of the degree to which the norms of the Manchu conquerors had been absorbed by Han Chinese: for a hundred years people had been faithfully getting themselves shaved, without having to be told to do so.

Now it seemed to him that Han officials were colluding to avoid a Manchu custom. "This matter" he said, "has been whispered about for a long time." How is it that "the great officials have neither heard nor seen anything of it and not even one has brought it forward? . . . The outer court and the nine chief ministers are rarely summoned to Court. But the Han officials in the Grand Council are often summoned, and I have not heard them memorialize nor have I heard from them in audience on this matter. They want nothing more than to hoodwink me, and to save themselves from a heavy reprimand. . . . To think, that I could be the victim of deception!" (SYD September 8, 1748).

Han officials were, in Qianlong's estimation, putting their loyalty to each other above their loyalty to him. Referring in the same edict to the classmate (*tongnian*), teacher (*shibeng*) and factional (*pengdang*) alliances, he said these "knit and glue them

tightly together” and result in “a situation where they cover the faults of each other, and keep silent and do not speak.” And the object of their attention was the protection of their own: the Han official Zhou Xuejian. Qianlong’s diagnosis of the struggle as Manchu versus Han explains why he first turned to trusted Manchus to investigate and resolve the scandal.<sup>6</sup>

The scandal changed fundamentally when it became known that Sailenge, a top Manchu official, had likewise shaved himself during the hundred-day period. “This is something,” Qianlong wrote, “that I find even more terrifying. Sailenge is a great Manchu official who has been a governor-general for years. Now this kind of maniacal loss of heart is inconceivable.” And Sailenge’s claim of ignorance was totally incredible: “Han people try to shirk responsibility by saying they did not know; can great Manchu officials also claim not to have known?” (SYD September 13, 1748).

Now the scandal was no longer one in which Han sided against Manchu. Instead, Manchu and Han were siding together against the emperor. The issue was lack of Manchu cohesion, and it raised the specter of assimilation. As such, the scandal now represented a threat to what had been an important source of power for the Qianlong emperor’s father and grandfather: Manchu distinctiveness. This was nowhere clearer than in Qianlong’s treatment of Yinjishan.

Yinjishan was a member of Qianlong’s top coterie of advisors. He was descended from an new illustrious Manchu clan and was a member of the Bordered Yellow Banner; his ancestors had been formative participants in the conquest. What greatly concerned Qianlong, however, was his own growing suspicion that Yinjishan had forsaken his Manchu roots and was siding with Han Chinese to cover up for those who had shaved. Qianlong sensed that Yinjishan’s having obtained office in the Chinese way—by examination—locked him into an essentially Han Chinese system of horizontal and vertical loyalties. Both Zhou Xuejian and Yinjishan had passed the Jinshi examination in 1723; this meant that they were *tongnian* and owed bonds of strict loyalty to each other. And although Yinjishan was Zhou Xuejian’s superior, he did not report his *tongnian*’s violation.

The evidence suggests that Yinjishan was indeed protecting Zhou Xuejian. An edict of September 19, 1748, details how Yinjishan tried to mollify Qianlong with sacrifices of lower-level officials who had shaved, while protecting his *tongnian* Zhou Xuejian. With hollow tones of gravity Yinjishan submitted details on relatively minor officials who had shaved. And yet, as Qianlong asked, “How can you not hold the director general of the Grand Canal guilty, and yet think it reasonable to treat [subordinate] river officials as guilty?” (SYD September 19, 1748).

Qianlong’s fears that this scion of an eminent Manchu clan was being assimilated were well founded. In an early edict on the case Qianlong noted that one factor in locking Yinjishan into the system of Chinese loyalties was the feeling of superiority Manchus got when they achieved office in the Han way—by examination (SYD September 8, 1748). Moreover, in 1736 Yinjishan submitted a memorial in which he gently suggested that although traditional Manchu customs were laudable for their purity and simplicity, they should be amended to conform to the Song Neo-Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi’s *Family Rituals*.<sup>7</sup> Yinjishan was demonstrating the extent to

<sup>6</sup>Aligun was sent to arrest Jiang Xinghan, Xinzhu was the trusted source of information on Zhou Xuejian, and Kaitai was sent to investigate and confiscate Zhou’s household.

<sup>7</sup>Interestingly, the emperor’s rescript on Yinjishan’s memorial was not critical of the idea; in fact, Qianlong, who at that time was in his first year of rule, embraced it. He had this to say: “The memorial is valid. But within it there are things that need to be discussed. [Your proposal] must be perfected, and then it can be put into effect” (Memorial of Yinjishan, June 16, 1736 LYZP 2). As is suggested below, Qianlong’s fears about Yinjishan’s assimilation were in part expressions of his fears about himself.

which he had become assimilated to the norms of elite Han society. This was a threat to the emperor as Manchu.

As Pamela Crossley has written, Manchus (and Mongols) “negotiated their relationship to the Qing emperors through the model of slaves and masters . . . the elements of dependency (on the part of the slave) and mercy (on the part of the master) were,” she argues, “manifestly as powerful as any that might be drawn from the Confucian traditions of ministerial service to a righteous sovereign” (Crossley 1989, 89). If the case of Han Chinese shaving revealed the breakdown of the parallel conception of society, (that officials should serve the emperor the way children served their parents) the case of Sailenge and Yinjishan revealed that assimilation was a threat to the Manchu slave-master model.

There were Manchus other than the emperor who saw this crisis of Manchu power. It was to these individuals that Qianlong retreated. Zhang Yunsui, member of the Bordered Yellow Banner and governor-general of Yungui, argued that bannermen of all races owed strict obedience to the emperor, and in their case there should be no application of legal standards, since they were under higher obligations: “How can they be spoken of as committing ‘unintentional offenses?’” The shaving requirement ought not to be treated as a legal requirement because it was tied not to their obligations, but to emotions. “This is not something people have been forced to do, it just is” (Memorial of Zhang Yunsui, August 9, 1748, LYZP 4). While Qianlong agreed with Zhang Yunsui, the bureaucratic elements of the scandal kept him from holding all officials to the high standards he would have preferred.

In their rhetoric, Manchus still adhered to the slave-master model of obedience. This was evident from the extravagant language they used in condoling the emperor on his loss. Jiqing memorialized seeking permission to come to the capital to pay a condolence visit. “I humbly beg your majesty’s grace,” he said, “that your slave be permitted to enter the capital, so that he may be able to follow at the end of the company of people who fall prostrate before the empress’ bier, to cry in pain and exhaust his grief; as one body to be wearing mourning” (Memorial of Jiqing, May 2, 1748, LYZP 14). Aligun, whose eminent Manchu family Qianlong had watched decline, wrote an even more florid condolence memorial. Qianlong’s rescript evidenced the frustration he felt with such maudlin displays, as well as his sensitivity to the fact that some people might use the empress’ death as an excuse to leave their posts.

This memorial is really too much. It is not necessary for you to come. What’s more, if you come then it will hurt your work in famine relief. Gaobin and others will remain to help you; how could you think it would be so easy to leave your post?

(Memorial of Aligun, Jun 21, 1748, LYZP 14)

As the bureaucratic crisis was slowly resolved at the expense of the racial crisis, with the rationalization of the harsh penalties given Sailenge and Zhou Xuejian, a sense of acceptance began to set in at Court. Qianlong all but gave up on the idea of harsher punishments for those who were supposed to be his slaves. Senior Manchus who had shaved before the expiration of the hundred days were merely to have their names “recorded and reported,” so that “although they will not be charged with an aggravated offense, still their names will be noted, so that their promotions may be delayed” (SYD September 13, 1748). He focused on the wrong of the deception, not the shaving itself. This new mood begins to suggest the personal dimensions of the 1748 scandal.

## The Shaving Scandal as Personal Crisis

In the documentation of the 1748 events it is easy to forget that what initiated them was the death of Xiaoxian, Qianlong's first wife. His grief over this very powerful personal loss affected almost every aspect of the case, but it is this area which is most difficult for the researcher to assess. A number of Qianlong's poems deal with the grief and sense of loss he felt at the death of the empress: they indicate that her absence left him plagued with bad dreams and disturbed sleep (YZS 4.11a). Certainly, this loss intensified the crises for Qianlong.

In the poems a fairly consistent picture emerges of the empress, and it is an image that is confirmed by her hagiographies. The poems depict her as fond of a brand of simplicity that kept her particularly close to her Manchu roots. In a poem titled only with a long preface, for example, the emperor reflects back nostalgically on the frugality and simplicity of his Manchu ancestors, and how these qualities were embodied in the empress. He described a domestic scene in which the imperial couple sat together, with the empress making traditional Manchu jewelry.

We have been reading collections of our ancestors' writings. These relate that Our ancient customs included taking various hairs of animals and making them into jewelry, to take the place of gold thread. At that time people lived beyond the Great Wall. Gold thread was extremely difficult to obtain, so instead, in the autumn they would go outside their frontiers to hunt for the animals whose hairs they used. We told this to the late empress, who had just been cutting out such materials to make garments as an offering for Us. Now We inspect these things, and how mournful they make Us feel.

How can a moment's grief come from such objects,  
 Fine silk skirts and silken clothes,  
 I have asked if these are traditional;  
 Earthen walls and lamps with coarse fibers,  
 Neither of these forgets the past;  
 Together with me, of the same heart,  
 Her thoughts manifested frugality;  
 Because of this I have known,  
 I have long wanted to name her "Virtuous;"  
 She hooking her silken cord,  
 Thus I remember her in her gilded cage;  
 Weaving and mending in her spare time,  
 With threads of many colors;  
 How can a moment's grief come from such objects,  
 Their traces fill my eyes with tears?

(YZS 4.1a–b)<sup>8</sup>

An unofficial palace source and the *Draft History of the Qing* both suggest that the emperor's affection for his wife came in part from the fact that she was closely associated with their shared Manchu roots (Xiao Heng Xiang Shi Zhu Ren 1959, 1.55; QSG 8916).

<sup>8</sup>"Virtuous" in line 8 refers to the awarding of the empress' posthumous name, Xiaoxian (lit., "filial" and "virtuous"), by which we know her.



That Xiaoxian was so closely associated with Manchu values for Qianlong makes clearer the personal dimensions of the crisis. The death of the empress, and then the scandal that followed, might well have brought about a crisis of Manchu identity for the emperor. All around him the strong simplicity of Manchu values was under attack. Manchus were submitting florid memorials to condole the emperor on his loss, at the same time that they (even Sailenge, an old and trusted official!) were violating mourning rules in an area—hairstyle—that had been closely associated with Manchu conquest.<sup>9</sup> Yinjishan, son of an eminent Manchu family, was bragging that he was better than other Manchus, was getting caught up in Han style allegiances that left the emperor out, and was suggesting that Manchu rituals were just too simple, and needed to be more like Zhu Xi's *Family Rituals*. Meanwhile, at the borders, campaigns that had always been signs of Manchu power were going poorly. As if to dramatize the notion that Manchus were betraying their ancestors, in 1749 Qianlong held a public ceremony in which he had the grand secretary Noqin, who had shown himself to be a coward and a liar in his campaign against the Sichuanese aboriginal rebels, beheaded with his brave grandfather Ebilun's sword (Hummel 1943, 45). And gone was a woman who, for the emperor, embodied Manchu values.

In Qianlong's defense of Manchu values it is not difficult to see his fear of his own drift from his Manchu roots. As was said above, Qianlong was the first Qing emperor to be steeped in Han Chinese culture. As a young man he had received a thorough Confucian indoctrination at the hands of his Han Chinese teachers. And once on the throne, he had greeted with warm enthusiasm Yinjishan's proposal to modify overly simple Manchu rituals to make them conform to Zhu Xi's *Family Rituals*.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, his great fascination with the arts, and the culture of east-central China in general, are well known—both of which were far from norms of Manchu simplicity. But the loss of his wife, who represented Manchu simplicity to him; and a scandal which threatened the loss of Manchu virtue as a matrix of power, sent him careening back to his heritage.

The fear of a loss of Manchu identity may offer insights into another mysterious aspect of the Qianlong reign, one frequently mentioned by historians as associated with its decline. More than twenty-five years after the death of Xiaoxian, Qianlong noticed an obscure imperial bodyguard named Heshen. Handsome and charismatic, Heshen was showered with imperial favor, and his meteoric rise to power ended only with Qianlong's death in 1799, by which time Heshen had amassed tremendous wealth and political power. Though scholars have not yet explained the hold this Manchu had on Qianlong, quite possibly in Heshen Qianlong found a partial antidote to his sense of Manchu malaise. Here perhaps was a Manchu whose oft-touted personal vitality helped restore a sense of Manchu virility to the aging emperor.

## Conclusion

At the start of 1748, as the Qianlong emperor sat on the throne, he had arrayed before him a panoply of powers, at least some of which derived from specific models of rule. He had the Manchu model of absolute loyalty, in which Manchu ruler was

<sup>9</sup>Memorials like these angered Qianlong. He responded to one from Tuerbinga with the rescript: "This memorial does not get to the essence, and is not sincere" (Memorial of Tuerbinga, July 24, 1748, LYZP 15).

<sup>10</sup>See note 7, above.

tied to Manchu follower via the relationship of master and slave. For the non-Manchu, obedience here was through conquest, and associated notions of Manchu distinctiveness. The most marked feature of that conquest, the sign of obedience, was the shaved forehead and scalp.

Qianlong also had before him the Han Chinese model of loyalty, which was based on the Confucian notion that the loyalty of the minister to the emperor originated in, and was essentially identical to, a son's devotion to his father. Integral to this were rituals that were not mere empty forms, but that were genuine manifestations of what was supposed to be an emotional attachment.

These two models of loyalty were the most elegant, because they were the most all-encompassing. They required not minimum standards of behavior, but one form or another of encompassing obedience. And they demanded that officials act even when there was no check on their behavior. But Qianlong also had law available to him. It was a more awkward tool, because it governed only the outer bounds of behavior, presumed no emotional bond between emperor and official, and could work to limit the emperor's actions. Finally, Qianlong had available pure coercion and intimidation. This was in a sense the most inelegant of tools because it had no eloquent formulation and no Confucian justification. To the contrary, arbitrariness in rule was classically considered the mark of a tyrant.

Could Qianlong ever have really believed his Manchu officials felt the bonds of their enslavement to him? Could he ever have thought his ministers would be loyal to him, as sons are loyal to their fathers? His actions during 1748 indicate that both these questions should be answered in the affirmative. Had Qianlong known the shallow extent of his officials' loyalty, he would not have undertaken a campaign that would quickly become an embarrassment to him. What is unleashed in 1748, following the death of his wife, is genuine shock and surprise that his coterie of officials did not share in his grief.

In the events of 1748, Qianlong picks up models of loyalty in rapid succession, only to have them crumble in his hands. The Confucian model fails when he discovers that top Chinese officials have shaved themselves when they are supposed to be in Confucian mourning for the "mother" of the state. That their violation has to do with hair, the most salient feature of conquest, only makes their actions—as Qianlong himself states—the more insulting. He then retreats to Manchus, and a Manchu model of loyalty, only to find that they are no different, and that they are involved in collusion with Han officials. And this was an insult to a wife whose life had stood for what it meant to be a Manchu. When he tries to use law to resolve the scandal, he only gets more frustrated because he wants more from his officials than the level of loyalty law affords, and because the laws limit him as much as they limit his officials.

Qianlong leaves 1748 a cynical emperor, one who has discovered something new about the limitations of his power. In the years that followed, he would find the political campaign, based as it was on a model of coercion and arbitrary power, an increasingly if not exclusively attractive option.

## Glossary

Aligun 阿里袞	Noqin 訥親
Da bujing 大不敬	Peng Shukui 彭樹葵
Dezhou 德州	pengdang 朋黨
dingzhi 定制	Qianlong 乾隆
Ebilun 遏必隆	Sailenge 塞楞額
fan fa 犯法	shisheng 師生
Fuca 富察	Shuchanguan 庶常館
Gaobin 高斌	tifa 薙髮
guo sang 國喪	tongnian 同年
guo xu 國恤	wuzhi fanfa 無知犯法
Heshen 和坤	Xiaoxian 孝賢
Huaian 淮安	Xinzhu 新柱
Jiang Xinghan 江興漢	Yang Xifu 楊錫紱
jigang lingti 紀綱陵替	Yinjishan 尹繼善
Jin Wenchun 金文醇	Yu Minzhong 于敏中
Jinan 濟南	Zhang Yunsui 張允隨
Jinzhou 錦州	zhong zui 重罪
Jiqing 吉慶	Zhou Xuejian 周學健
Kaitai 開泰	Zhu Xi 朱熹
liuguan 留館	zuzhi 祖制

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