

# **Unveiling China's Relinquished Marital Mode: A Study of Yuan Shikai's Polygamous Household**

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates one of the last polygamous families in modern China, the household of Yuan Shikai, the first president of the Republic of China (1912-1916). Before serving as the national leader, Yuan was a prominent reformer and high-ranking official of the late Qing Empire. Although he implemented numerous influential progressive reforms to promote China's modernization, he led a traditional private life within his own home, as he married ten women, built a large harem just for himself, and begot thirty-two children. This paper explores Yuan's polygamous marriages by revealing the characteristics of his marital life, probing the styles of his nuptial experience, and examining his approach in managing his gigantic family. Through this study, we can gain an unblemished picture of China's transformation from tradition to modernity, along with its national transformation from empire to republic. Therefore, this study not only helps us explore the long relinquished old-style marriage system and uncover the forgotten spousal unions, but also unmask the role of polygamy in shaping of the lives of Chinese social and political elites before its final abolition in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Keywords:** Yuan Shikai, social elite, polygamous family, marital mode, household management, women's liberation

## **Introduction**

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Chinese eradicated polygamy through legal action – purporting to embrace the global trend for modernity, intending to extend belated respect to women, and aiming to adopt a new marital system. In the monogamous world since, the Chinese have forgotten the practice of polygamous marriage that had been a traditional social norm in their long civilization. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, liberal values have fortified this monogamous life so much so that they become oblivious of the old history of polygamy. Needless to say, the abolition of polygamy was a barometer of social advancement and a yardstick of political progress in modern China. Yet, a few questions concerning this old matrimonial system naturally pop up: What kind of marital mode was polygamy in traditional China? What characteristics did it retain? What marital styles did this kind of family espouse? In what ways did a man marry a number of women? How did the huge family reside together? How did the husband manage his large household? From the current empirical recollections, nobody today can easily respond to these questions. To offer satisfactory answers, a careful study of polygamous families is needed. Here, the family of Yuan Shikai (1859-1916), the first president of the Republic of China in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, is employed as a case study to reveal China's bygone polygamous life before its ultimate abolition.

Yuan Shikai is selected for examination for multiple reasons. First, he was a prominent historical figure of the Qing Empire and later served as the first president of the Republic of China, provisionally from 1912 to 1913 and then formally from 1913 to 1916. Second, Yuan's family consisted one wife and nine concubines, in total ten women. The inner workings of such a huge family can allow us to evaluate the mechanism of polygamy. Third, Yuan was a transitional figure from empire to republic and from tradition to modernity. In this transition, Yuan's family was one of the last polygamous families before polygamy was discouraged after the establishment of the republic in 1912 and was abolished by a civil law in 1930. An inquiry into this family renders

insights into China's familial revolution from polygamy to monogamy. Fourth, as time has passed by, more sources, particularly primary sources, became available, offering an opportunity of studying Yuan's marriages and his private life. In particular, Yuan's daughter's testimony along with other personal memoirs and *Yuan Shikai quanji* [The Complete Works of Yuan Shikai] were published recently, which provide valuable yet relevant information.

Yuan Shikai went through personal turbulence as a prominent politician during the late Qing Dynasty and as president during the early Republican era. He was a foremost reformer of the late Qing Empire, trained the first modern army, conducted progressive reforms, built the first police force, supported the first municipal election, adopted the Western educational system, encouraged economic modernization, abolished the Civil Service Examination [*keju*], and so forth.<sup>1</sup> Although he was dismissed by the Manchu nobles in 1909, the revolution in 1911 enabled him to step out of his reclusive "retirement" to be the first president of the newly established republic. His monarchical endeavors to restore the imperial system with himself as emperor in 1916 discredited him as a heinous historical villain and branded him a counterrevolutionary against republicanism.<sup>2</sup> Sadly enough, he died in the turbulent civil war against his monarchism. Ever since, his image had been negative. Only in the recent decades have the Chinese scholars started to offer a positive assessment of Yuan's role in the shaping of modern China by affirming his contributions to modernization.<sup>3</sup> Being such an important yet controversial figure, Yuan's private life has naturally

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<sup>1</sup> Su Quanyou and He Kewei, *Yuan Shikai zhuan* [Biography of Yuan Shikai], (Hangzhou: Zhejiang University Press, 2013), 149-209.

<sup>2</sup> Luo Baoshan, *Luo Baoshan pingdiao Yuan Shikai handu* [Luo Baoshan's Comments on Yuan Shikai's Correspondence], (Changsha: Yuelushushe, 2005), 1-3.

<sup>3</sup> Patrick Fuliang Shan, *Yuan Shikai: A Reappraisal*, (Vancouver: The University of British Columbia University Press, 2018), 1.

become a focus of public curiosity. Henceforth, it is necessary to study his private life, in particular, his marriages with ten women, in order to uncover one aspect of China's social shift from tradition to modernity.

Although Yuan was a public figure and a modernizer who embraced the modern way, he still led a traditional life in his own household, just like the other social elites of his time. Yet, his family followed the national transformation from tradition to modernity and was deeply impacted by new social, economic, and cultural vogues. After he became the first president, his family stories and some related anecdotes became jokes. Nevertheless, serious scholarly investigation into his family is scanty, while the existing literature is only restricted to story-telling narratives. A close examination of the existing literature about his family reveals two prevailing views. The moralist view condemned Yuan as a lascivious and lustful man who possessed an insatiable libidinous hunger and had no sense of shame for building such a large polygamous family. Another view, the revolutionary perspective, denounced Yuan's family as a typical feudalistic and antiquated one, deeming it outdated and viewing it as a remnant fossil in the modern time. His family was seen as backward, old-fashioned, and archaic.<sup>4</sup>

The above two views derive from the same fact that Yuan had practiced polygamy, marrying ten women into his family. This multiple marital partnership is appalling to the global citizens in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but it was a social norm during Yuan's times, while many other wealthy and powerful men practiced it so long as they were able to sustain a large family. A survey of the

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<sup>4</sup> Yuan Jingxue, *Nu er yan zhong ling mian Yuan Shikai* [Seeing Yuan Shikai from Daughter's Eyes] (Beijing: Zhongguo Wenshi Chubanshe, 2012), 62 (this book will be abbreviated NEYZLMYSK). Hou Yijie, *Yuan Shikai quanzhuan* [The Complete Biography of Yuan Shikai] (Beijing: Qunzhong Chubanshe, 2013), 451.

history of polygamy shows that it was a by-product of China's social life, as the Chinese predominantly lived in an agrarian society for which the purpose of marriage was to promote fertility and to beget more males to carry on the family pedigree. This social and cultural need gave rise to polygamy under which multiple spouses cohabited with one husband. Of course, it is patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal to accentuate the indispensable status of the one husband. Among all spouses, however, only the first one was the wife and the rest were but concubines. Because of this particular arrangement, this marriage system is termed by Chinese scholars as the One-Husband-One-Wife-and-Multiple-Concubine System [*yifuyiqiduoqiezhi*].<sup>5</sup> The dynamics among those females created a distinctive marital system to serve the traditional cultural values. The possession of concubines symbolized a man's wealth, power, prestige, and social standing. Nevertheless, the existence of such a polygamous system did not mean that all Chinese men practiced it; rather, overwhelming majority of them still led a monogamous life due to the lack of financial resources. In other words, only a small number of social and political elites were able to practice polygamy, and Yuan was one of them. Consequently, he married ten women in his own lifespan of fifty-seven years.

### **I. The Characteristics of Yuan Shikai's Family**

Like all other Chinese families, Yuan Shikai's family promoted high fertility rates with the goal of a large family. It was this very notion that urged affordable wealthy and powerful men including Yuan himself to adopt polygamy. This idea was deeply ingrained in the rural-agrarian social milieu

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<sup>5</sup> Shang Xuzhi, "Zhongguo gudaishehui 'yifuyiqizhi naqiezhi' bingcun yuanyin tanxi" [An exploration into the reasons why the one-husband-one-wife system coexisted with the concubine system in the ancient Chinese society], *Zhongzhouxuekan* [Journal of Central China] (Vol. 159, No. 3, May 2007), 176-178. He Chuan, "Guanyu Zhongguo gudai hunyinzhidu de fansi" [Reflecting over the ancient marriage system in China], *Fazhi yu shehui* [Law and Society] (No. 1, 2011), 296.

and was carried out by officials, merchants, and other professionals until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. To Yuan Shikai's satisfaction, this goal was reached, as his spouses produced thirty-two children: seventeen sons and fifteen daughters. Yet, sustaining such a large family required him to work diligently and earn more to sustain its routine operations. As Yuan's women were all confined into his home and did not engage in any outside jobs, their sole responsibilities were to bear more children, take care of them, and raise them up. It was Yuan who had to meet his family needs by earning more income; it was Yuan who had the obligation as the only bread-winner to feed so many mouths. This naturally put pressure on him, prompting him to be diligent in official duties, lucrative in business, profitable in manufacture, successful in mining enterprises, and fruitful in industries.

Like all other families, Yuan Shikai's home was his place of relaxation, his source of pride, and his hope for the future. He spent his time, more or less, with his family on a daily basis, sharing meals with some or all of them, conversing with his spouses, and interacting with his children. Inside this family, his identity was multiple: a husband, a father, and a supervisor. This one male-centered family turned Yuan into a supreme foreman and an absolute ruler. Naturally, his children were treasured, because they could help him forge new political alliances through arranged marriages. Indeed, his on-going career benefited from his children's marriages in begetting new allies. In a particular way, Yuan's family became an important web linking the late imperial political and social networks.

One of the main features of Yuan Shikai's family was its spectacularly mammoth size. Although traditional marriage did not limit the number of concubines, most of those polygamous men had taken an additional woman besides the wife, or some more concubines in some rare cases. For example, Liang Qichao (1873-1929) had a wife and a concubine. Yan Fu (1854-1921) had two

concubines besides his wife. In contrast, Yuan Shikai created a gigantic family. One wife and nine concubines lived together with himself as the shared husband in one residential compound, although not necessarily under one roof. Few polygamous families during his time could match the size of his family, which should be seen as one of the largest polygamous families in modern Chinese history. Perhaps only the former emperors could best him, although the last two emperors of the Qing Dynasty might have to concede their failures in front of Yuan Shikai.

In terms of class background, almost all of Yuan Shikai's spouses came from humble backgrounds or lower class statuses. His first wife, Lady Yu, the daughter of a landlord family, was seen as a match to Yuan's own family. Yet, none of his nine concubines were of high social upbringings. According to Yuan Shikai's second son, Yuan Kewen, the three Korean concubines came from "prominent family" [*wangzu*].<sup>6</sup> Recent scholarship, however, reveals quite it differently. It shows that Yuan Kewen romanticized his own mother's background and two other Korean step-mothers' upbringings, just as he did to glorify his other step-mothers' superior qualities. Today, however, many scholars believe that the three Korean concubines were Yuan Shikai's purchased maids as Korean society permitted it at that time. His marriages to the rest of his concubines likewise did not show any strong desire to woo influential families or to seek patronage of a powerful clan, unlike what he did to marry out his children to forge political allies. Perhaps, he did not want to be controlled by powerful families; rather, he wanted to regenerate the Yuans. Thus, he did not care about his concubines' backgrounds. Among the nine concubines, as

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<sup>6</sup> Yuan Kewen, *Huanshang sicheng* [Private Records of Huanshang] (Shanghai: Dadong Shuju, 1926; Reprinted in Taipei: Wenhai Chubanshe, 1966), 10-11.

one scholar straightforwardly claims, four were female servants, three were prostitutes, and only two came from relatively stable “small households” [*xiaohu*].<sup>7</sup>

Much more impressive is the fact that Yuan Shikai’s spouses came from faraway provinces and even from a foreign land. Besides the second, third, and fourth concubines’ Korean ethnicity, the birth places of other spouses deserve our special attention. Usually, a polygamous family was restricted to one province, but Yuan’s family poses a striking contrast. His wife Lady Yu came from his native Henan, as would be expected. His first concubine came from Shanghai, his fifth and ninth concubines from Tianjin, his sixth concubine from Jiangsu, his seventh concubine from Shandong, and his eighth concubine from Zhejiang. The diverse provincial cultures brought in by those concubines might have enormously enriched Yuan’s private life, as the various dialects and distinctive accents made their communications a spectacular scene. Needless to say, the three Korean spouses truly turned Yuan’s large family into the mini-United Nations.

It is worthy to note that Yuan Shikai’s huge family was not shaped in a short timespan as were many others. Instead, Yuan’s family expanded over more than thirty years. On one hand, it reveals Yuan’s on-going robust sexual life; on the other hand, it demonstrates his steadily expanding political power and his growing personal wealth. From 1876, when he first married his wife, to 1909, when he procured his last concubines, it took Yuan more than three decades to finalize his large family. This marital process of incremental acquisition meant that his thirty-two children were born in different places and that a large age gap existed among them. For instance, the age disparity between his first child and his last one was about forty years. Despite how his family was

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<sup>7</sup> Zhang Yan, *Yuanlai Yuan Shikai* [The True Yuan Shikai] (Chongqing: Chongqing Chubanshe, 2006), 45.



created over time, it was so colossal that it occasionally posed a hurdle even for Yuan himself to make a clear distinction among his concubines, his daughters, and his daughters-in-law.

What really amazed Yuan Shikai's contemporaries was the fact that his gigantic family did not suffer from querulous instability as other polygamous families constantly encountered, even if they were much smaller than Yuan's. The Yuan family did not experience any divorces while he was in charge. Nor did any notorious scandals ever occur. Traditional values of virtue, piety, obedience, and submission were emphatically upheld. Each individual member of his family lived up to dutiful expectations and bore responsibility. It was understood that everyone must be loyal to Yuan, that any suspiciously disloyal moves would be warned, and any such unfaithful actions penalized. In contrast, many other polygamous families, although much smaller, experienced wobbly relationships and routine disruption. The stability of the Yuans demonstrates his ability to run his family, just like he was a competent commander in training his soldiers and a governor-general in handling his administrators.<sup>8</sup>

Because Yuan Shikai's family retained old values, many Chinese (including his daughter Yuan Jingxue) simply term it traditionally feudalistic.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, his family took shape during the late imperial era between the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which is regarded by Chinese scholars as part of China's feudalist age; however, this timespan was also a transitional historical period during which dramatic changes took place. Inevitably, the Yuan family was impacted by modern fashions. In such a historical milieu, the Yuan family became unique with particular features, as the Yuan family was closely interlocked with capital investment in new industries and mining enterprises. In order to sustain his family, Yuan actively engaged in coal mining and

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<sup>8</sup> Zhang Yan, *Yuanlai Yuan Shikai*, *ibid*, 54.

<sup>9</sup> Yuan Jingxue, *NEYZLMYSK*, *ibid*, 62.

cement production in Tianjin. Later on, he initiated the building of the Western style waterworks in Beijing. Some of those businesses were joint ventures, from which Yuan reaped his share of profits. His intimate tie with capital and his link with market distinguished his family from other traditionally feudalist families. In this regard, the Yuan family should not be seen as totally feudalistic; rather, it was an industrially and commercially connected household.

With its economic bond with modern industries, Yuan Shikai's family maintained a direct connection with the urban setting rather than with the rural milieu as other traditional families, including those polygamous ones, did. Besides his first residence in his hometown in Henan Province, Yuan's family always lived in the urban areas or the suburb of a city as he did in Zhangde [Anyang], Henan Province. The urban life required all of his family members to be commercial consumers, economic investors, business managers, house purchasers, managers of hired hands, patrons of modern facilities, and more. The urban life turned this large unit from a traditional family into a quasi-modern one which was situated in a new social and economic setting and was far different from those countryside based and rustically dependent families.

The rurally located traditional families deeply attached themselves to land, but the Yuan family was not such a case. For the Yuans, the land was not the only source of income, and not even a major source, different from the overwhelming majority of Chinese families. In other words, Yuan's family did not rely much on land for their economic life. Rather, the Yuans' engagement in land tended to be an act of speculation with which they turned their land into capitalist endeavors. Of course, Yuan owned land and hired farmers to till it. Their agricultural products were not consumed solely by his family members but sold to the market. More importantly, Yuan's engagement with land only constituted a minor part of his family business. His tie with land differs

from most Chinese, demonstrating the fact that his family was a special unit in the transition from tradition to modernity.

Without a strong attachment to land, the Yuan family became a migrating company. Whenever Yuan Shikai was assigned a new official post, with rare exceptions, the whole family simply moved along with him. Whenever and wherever the family migrated, Yuan was always the centripetal force uniting the whole group together. During Yuan's political career, his family moved almost ten times – from one urban district to another, from one province to another, and even from one country to another. Naturally, each migration was auspicious, as he was offered a better job with a higher rank. In fact, each migration offered Yuan a new chance to reach his political goals and to establish a new social and political network for his administrative maneuver. The numerous migrations might have caused identity confusion to his children, as it was hard for them to claim a single location as their hometown, which may be the reason why Yuan Keding, Yuan Kewen, and other Yuan children declared their father's Xiangcheng as their own hometowns.<sup>10</sup> Later, most of Yuan's children recognized Tianjin as their residential city, because the whole family lived there for a long time.

It must note that Yuan Shikai's family retained a tie with the overseas world, a particular phenomenon during the late Qing and early republican era. Besides the fact that Yuan resided in Korea for over a decade, married three Korean women, and had a few children there, Yuan always encouraged his sons, but not daughters, to study abroad. He had no faith in the traditional Civil Service Examination System and did not urge his children to participate in it. Instead, he sent his sons to Germany and Britain to pursue Western-style education. Yuan Keding, his eldest son,

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<sup>10</sup> Yuan Kewen, *Huanshang sicheng*, *ibid*, 9.

should have had a chance to take part in the traditional examination before its abolition in 1905. However, Yuan Keding was sent to Germany to study foreign language, culture, and military affairs. In the next years, Yuan continued to sponsor his other sons to pursue Western education in Britain and some sons later went to the United States to obtain higher education.

Yuan Shikai took care of his huge family carefully, but he might have been too egoistic to pay respects to the relatives from his wife and concubines' families. This was a weird phenomenon, as most Chinese maintained close ties with their spouses' relatives. For Yuan's family, this is not the case. Yuan termed those relatives of his wife and concubines as the "low people" [*xiaren*], did not allow them to freely intermingle with the Yuan family members, and did not recognize them as close relations as they should have been.<sup>11</sup> One reason for this might be the vast disparity between Yuan's rising official status and those relatives' humble backgrounds. Whatever reason it might be, the icy relationship may be seen as a bizarre exception in traditional blood ties. In other words, Yuan deliberately severed the natural bond between his huge family and the relatives of his own spouses.

## II. The Marital Types

An examination of Yuan Shikai's marital history indicates that he adopted a variety of marriage types at various times in different localities. A study of his marital experience enables us not only to fathom his private life but also to deepen our understanding of modern China's social transformation. In fact, Yuan did not register with the government for his marital unions; nevertheless, he institutionalized his nuptial companions so well that an orderly hierarchy took shape. According to Yuan Kewen, his second son, all children must call his wife "*niang*" [real

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<sup>11</sup> Yuan Jingxue, *NEYZLMYSK*, *ibid*, 91.

mother], a term from his native dialect, their own mother as “*ma*” [birth mother], and other concubines “*ma*” [mothers] but with their cardinal numbers, such as *san ma* [the third mother]. In the literally numerical terminology, Yuan’s first wife was the matriarch [*dimu*], the child’s own mother as birth mother [*shengmu*], and other concubines as secondary mothers [*shumu*].<sup>12</sup> In this way, Yuan Shikai established a matrimonial hierarchy among all his spouses who were dominated by his patriarchal power.

**Table 1: Yuan Shikai’s Wife, Nine Concubines, and Thirty-two Children**

<b>Name of the spouse</b>	<b>Native place</b>	<b>Children</b>
Wife: Lady Yu	Shenqiu County, Henan Province	1 <sup>st</sup> son: Yuan Keding
1 <sup>st</sup> concubine: Lady Shen	Chongming County, Jiangsu Province (now the city of Shanghai)	No children
2 <sup>nd</sup> concubine: Lady Li	Korea	5 <sup>th</sup> son: Yuan Kequan 7 <sup>th</sup> son: Yuan Keqi 10 <sup>th</sup> son: Yuan Kejian 12 <sup>th</sup> son: Yuan Kedu 1 <sup>st</sup> daughter: Yuan Bozhen 6 <sup>th</sup> daughter: Yuan Luzhen
3 <sup>rd</sup> concubine: Lady Jin	Korea	2 <sup>nd</sup> son: Yuan Kewen 3 <sup>rd</sup> son: Yuan Keliang 3 <sup>rd</sup> daughter: Yuan Shuzhen 8 <sup>th</sup> daughter: Yuan Huanzhen 10 <sup>th</sup> daughter: Yuan Congzhen
4 <sup>th</sup> concubine: Lady Wu	Korea	4 <sup>th</sup> son: Yuan Keduan 2 <sup>nd</sup> daughter: Yuan Zhongzhen 4 <sup>th</sup> daughter: Yuan Cizhen 7 <sup>th</sup> daughter: Yuan Qizhen
5 <sup>th</sup> concubine: Lady Yang	The city of Tianjin	6 <sup>th</sup> son: Yuan Kehuan 8 <sup>th</sup> son: Yuan Kezhen 9 <sup>th</sup> son: Yuan Kejiu 11 <sup>th</sup> son: Yuan Ke’an 5 <sup>th</sup> daughter: Yuan Jizhen 15 <sup>th</sup> daughter: Yuan Lingzhen

<sup>12</sup> Yuan Kewen, *Huanshang sicheng*, *ibid*, 9-11.

6 <sup>th</sup> concubine: Lady Ye	Dantu County (now the city of Zhenjiang), Jiangsu Province	14 <sup>th</sup> son: Yuan Kejie 17 <sup>th</sup> son: Yuan Keyou 9 <sup>th</sup> daughter: Yuan Jiuzhen 11 <sup>th</sup> daughter: Yuan Xuanzhen 12 <sup>th</sup> daughter: Yuan Jizhen
7 <sup>th</sup> concubine: Lady Shao	Wei County (now the city of Weifang), Shandong Province	No children
8 <sup>th</sup> concubine: Lady Guo	Gui'an County (now the city of Huzhou), Zhejiang Province	13 <sup>th</sup> son: Yuan Kexiang 15 <sup>th</sup> son: Yuan Kehe 14 <sup>th</sup> daughter: Yuan Xunzhen
9 <sup>th</sup> concubine: Lady Liu	The city of Tianjin	16 <sup>th</sup> son: Yuan Kefan 13 <sup>th</sup> daughter: Yuan Huizhen

(Hou Yijie, *Yuan Shikai quanzhuan*, 459-460; also, Yuan Kewen, *Huanshang sicheng*, 36)

The first type of Yuan Shikai's marriage is the traditional arranged union between him and his first spouse, his wife. That was an old fashioned marriage as it involved bi-familial agreement, expensive dowry, gift exchanges, and joyful ceremonies. This first marriage was a social match as his wife Lady Yu came from a relatively rich landlord family in Shenqiu County, adjacent to his Xiangcheng County in his home province of Henan. This union occurred in late 1876, when Yuan was a seventeen year-old youth and his wife one year senior. According to Yuan's daughter Yuan Jingxue, the couple enjoyed their time together, had a son in 1878, and arranged family plans together. Yet, an accidentally discordant joke shattered this relationship. Yuan ridiculed his wife as a prostitute, which deeply infuriated her. To fight back, his wife mocked him for his inferior birth status from a concubine rather than a principal mother as she herself was. This vulgar prank abruptly ended their sexual relationship.<sup>13</sup> For more than a decade, Yuan was away from Xiangcheng, leaving Lady Yu to take care of his family members at home. Later on, Yuan allowed her to join his big family but they never shared a bed with her again. Nevertheless, Lady Yu was

<sup>13</sup> Yuan Jingxue, *NEYZLMYSK*, *ibid*, 63.

still the wife, and even became the First Lady of the Republic of China after 1912. Yet, she did not have any authority over the big family and often complained about her powerlessness over this huge family.<sup>14</sup>

Lady Yu, in the eyes of Yuan Shikai's children, was a kind, virtuous, modest, and frugal woman.<sup>15</sup> However, she was not educated. Her relationship with Yuan was rocky, as he called her “an unwanted trouble” in his private correspondences to voice his dissatisfaction.<sup>16</sup> In another letter, he accused her of being “unreasonable,” “ill-tempered,” and “irrational.”<sup>17</sup> He blamed her for begging for luxurious jewelry and asking for expensive ornaments.<sup>18</sup> Once, he angrily declined her request to join him for a brief visit under the pretext of the high cost of her travel.<sup>19</sup> Yuan, however, did not divorce her and continued to bring her along with his big family during those before-mentioned migrations. One obvious reason might be the fact that Lady Yu was the mother of Yuan's first son, Yuan Keding, who was a promising successor. When Yuan became president of the Republic of China, Lady Yu easily obtained the resplendent title of the First Lady of the Chinese Republic. In such a capacity, she was brought by Yuan to attend national celebrations, but unfortunately she often caused embarrassments. For example, once on a holiday occasion, a

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<sup>14</sup> Zhang Yan, *Yuanlai Yuan Shikai*, *ibid*, 45.

<sup>15</sup> Yuan Kewen, *Huanshang sicheng*, *ibid*, 9.

<sup>16</sup> Yuan Shikai, “Zhi er zi han” [Letter to the second eldest sister] (December 31, 1889) (*Yuan Shikai quanji* [The Complete Works of Yuan Shikai], (Kaifeng: Henan University Press, 2013), Vol. 2, 216. (It will be abbreviated into YSKQJ).

<sup>17</sup> Yuan Shikai, “Zhi er zi han” [Letter to the second eldest sister] (May 21, 1890) (YSKQJ, Vol. 2), 288.

<sup>18</sup> Yuan Shikai, “Zhi er zi han” [Letter to the second eldest sister] (July 14, 1888) (YSKQJ, Vol. 1), 511-512. Also see: Luo Baoshan, *Luo Baoshan pingdian Yuan Shikai handu* [Luo Baoshan's Comments on Yuan Shikai's Correspondence] (Changsha: Yuelu Shushe, 2005), 66-67.

<sup>19</sup> Yuan Shikai, “Zhi er zi han” [Letter to the second eldest sister] (August 30, 1890) (YSKQJ, Vol. 2), 335.

foreign diplomat went up to shake hands with her. Because the Chinese tradition did not allow women to have physical contact with other men, she was so scared that she suddenly withdrew her hands behind her back. After this occasion, Yuan arranged her presence on important occasions with meticulous preparations in order to avoid similar occurrence.<sup>20</sup> From the early 1880s to her death in 1919, Lady Yu was but a nominal wife and a conjugal tragedy.

The second type of Yuan Shikai's marital arrangement could be termed as the self-chosen quixotic romance. This happened between him and his first concubine Lady Shen. According to the widely circulated stories, she came from Chongming County, the third largest island of China, historically belonged to Jiangsu but is now a part of the Shanghai Municipality. Her poor and rural family became more miserable when her parents passed away while she was young. She had to rely on her eldest sister and migrated with her to the City of Shanghai to seek survival. Quite a few versions about her life after her departure from her hometown are rendered. According to the most widely accepted account, Lady Shen became a prostitute in a brothel, where Yuan met her and fell in love with her. This might have happened in Suzhou as she was known as a Suzhou prostitute, or in Shanghai, or Tianjin, although many authors claim that she and Yuan met in Shanghai. According to Yuan Kewen, Yuan Shikai purchased her freedom from a brothel in Tianjin, because he admired her brave resistance to the sale of her virtue.<sup>21</sup> Whatever happened, according to legendary stories, Lady Shen helped Yuan Shikai join the army with her savings and promised to be his loyal woman. In return, Yuan promised to return and marry her. The outcome was a happy union, as Yuan always treated Lady Shen with respect. During his Korean years in the 1880s and the early 1890s, she was his "wife" (as Lady Yu was in Yuan's hometown) and the adopted mother

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<sup>20</sup> Hou Yijie, *Yuan Shikai quanzhuan*, *ibid*, 452.

<sup>21</sup> Yuan Kewen, *Huanshang sicheng*, *ibid*, 10.



of Yuan's second son Yuan Kewen, because she did not have her own children.<sup>22</sup> During the time when Yuan was the president, Lady Shen often accompanied Yuan on diplomatic occasions and "charmed many foreign officials."<sup>23</sup> Throughout his life, she had been one of his favorite concubines and their romance was adapted into romantic tales and fascinating movies.

The third type of Yuan Shikai's marital tie could be interpreted as "the exotic arrangement" in the foreign land. Of course, Yuan's mission to Korea was not a truly diplomatic assignment; rather, it was to defend China's traditional tributary relationship with Korea. Yet, from today's perspective, his marriage to three Korean women could be seen as international unions. The identities of the three ladies, the second, third, and fourth concubines, remain an issue as different sources offer contradictory information. The surnames of the three women are even recorded differently. Yuan Jingxue claims that the three surnames are Li, Jin, and Wu respectively.<sup>24</sup> Yuan Kewen states that the three are Bai, Jin and Ji.<sup>25</sup> Yuan biographers also offer different combinations, such as Min, Jin and Wu.<sup>26</sup> The more complicated are their family and personal backgrounds. One claims that those three women were Yuan's nurses, who offered him health care but became his concubines. Another asserts that the three women were talented courtesans

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<sup>22</sup> Lady Shen was pregnant once in Seoul, Korea in 1886, but probably suffered a miscarriage. Yuan Shikai, "Zhi er zi han" [Letter to the second eldest sister] (Summer 1886) (YSKQJ, Vol. 1), 201.

<sup>23</sup> Kachuen Yuan Gee and Janey Sheau Yueh Chao, *Early Life of Yuan Shikai and the Formation of Yuan Family* (manuscript), Lehman College and Baruch College, CUNY. Kachuen Yuan Gee is the granddaughter of Yuan Shikai. (WCILCOS 2012: Paper at the 5<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Institutes and Libraries for Chinese Overseas Studies, 2012), 21.

<sup>24</sup> Yuan Jingxue, *NEYZLMYSK*, *ibid*, 67.

<sup>25</sup> Yuan Kewen, *Huanshang sicheng*, *ibid*, 9-10

<sup>26</sup> Zhou Yan, *Minguo diyijiating·Yuan Shikai jiazu* [The First Family of the Republic of China: Yuan Shikai's Family] (Beijing: Wenhua Yishu Chubanshe, 2012), 107.

dispatched by the Korean king to entertain Yuan Shikai, due to his high status as the imperial commissioner of the Qing Empire in Korea.<sup>27</sup> Yuan's son Yuan Kewen maintains that his three Korean mothers all came from Korea's "prominent families" and therefore they were "noble women" [*guizunu*].<sup>28</sup> However, primary documents show that these three women were female servants [*binu*] purchased by Yuan Shikai. They served Yuan as maids, but his close intimacy turned them into concubines.<sup>29</sup> These unions occurred when Yuan was in his late twenties and early thirties, which reveals the reason why the three Korean women gave birth to fifteen children, seven sons and eight daughters who altogether counted for nearly half of all Yuan children. Those three particular marriages in a foreign land, in a particular sense, made the Yuans an international family.

The fourth type of Yuan Shikai's marriage was out of his need for a family manager, in addition to his appetite for a new concubine. This resulted in the union between him and his fifth concubine, Lady Yang. She proved herself as a trusted, able, and reliable manager of the Yuan household. As for her family background, most scholars follow Yuan Jingxue's claim that she came from an average small household in Tianjin.<sup>30</sup> Lady Yang was not very pretty, but she was intelligent, resolute, eloquent, and cautious. She fit the need for a manager of the expanding Yuan family. However, two conflicting assertions narrate this marital tie. One memoirist claims that Yuan married Lady Yang when he was the governor of Shandong. Yang's father owned a warehouse in Jinan where he got to know Yuan well and married his daughter to Yuan "in order to seek a

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<sup>27</sup> Zhou Yan, *Minguo diyijiating: Yuan Shikai jiazhu*, *ibid*, 107.

<sup>28</sup> Yuan Kewen, *Huanshang sicheng*, *ibid*, 10.

<sup>29</sup> Luo Baoshan, *Luo Baoshan pingdian Yuan Shikai handu*, 72.

<sup>30</sup> Yuan Jingxue, *NEYZLMYSK*, *ibid*, 67.

protective umbrella.”<sup>31</sup> Lady Yang’s family, according to recent research, was quite well-off in Tianjin, because her father owned factories and retained commercial networks throughout North China. The business relations between Yuan Shikai and Yang’s father enabled them to know each other well. Thus, Lady Yang was taken in as a concubine in 1896, when she was seventeen and he was thirty-seven.<sup>32</sup> This happened when Yuan was the military commander to train the new army near Tianjin. If Lady Yang became a concubine in 1896, the first claim is not accurate as Yuan became the governor of Shandong in 1899. The fact that Yuan Kehuan, the first son of Lady Yang was born in 1898 supports the second claim.<sup>33</sup> Of course, Lady Yang accompanied Yuan in Jinan, Shandong a few years later. Throughout her union with Yuan, Lady Yang gave birth to six children: four sons and two daughters. She was one of Yuan’s most favored concubines. Because of this preference, Lady Yang became the most powerful executive in the Yuan household.

The fifth type of Yuan Shikai’s marriage might be interpreted as accidental acquisition. According to one interesting tale, Yuan’s sixth concubine was his second son Yuan Kewen’s lover. When Yuan Shikai was the governor-general of Zhili, he dispatched Yuan Kewen to Nanjing for a special errand. It was in a Nanjing brothel where Yuan Kewen met Lady Ye, a recognized and beautiful prostitute from Dantu (today’s Zhenjiang) in Jiangsu Province. Lady Ye gave Yuan Kewen her photo as a token of love, but unfortunately the photo slipped out his pocket and was found by the father during his report about his trip. Pressed for an answer, Yuan Kewen, barely a young teenager, told Old Yuan that he had obtained a beauty for his father as a new concubine.

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<sup>31</sup> Zhang Wuji, “Guanyu Yuan Shikai de yixie jiyi” [Memorabilia about Yuan Shikai], *Wenshi jinghua* [Quintessence of Literature and History], (Vol. 204, No. 5, 2007), 51.

<sup>32</sup> Wang Birong, *Bainian Yuanjia* [One Hundred Years’ History of the Yuan Family] (Guilin: Guangxi Shida Chubanshe, 2013), 42.

<sup>33</sup> Wang Birong, *Bainian Yuanjia*, *ibid*, 59.

Lady Ye, according to the pre-arranged agreement, went to Beijing to marry her lover, and only then found out that the groom was a white-haired old man instead of her handsome young paramour. It was in this particular way, Lady Ye became Yuan Shikai's sixth concubine. In fact, Lady Ye was very much favored by Old Yuan. In a short time period, she gave birth to five children, two sons and three daughters.

The six type of Yuan Shikai's marital ties could be seen as inner promotion within the framework of his own household. As Yuan became more powerful and wealthier, he was capable of obtaining more concubines. Two of the former maids of his concubines were promoted to be his new concubines. The two were the seventh and ninth concubines. The seventh concubine, Lady Shao, a native of Wei County (today's Weifang), Shandong Province, originally served Lady Shen as a maid.<sup>34</sup> Another source claims that Lady Shao came from Henan Province and her real surname was Lady Zhang. Yuan Kewen, however, stated that she was Lady Shao. She did not give birth to any children and unfortunately died at the young age of twenty in Jixian, Henan, soon after Yuan was dismissed from his official post from Beijing in 1909. The reason why she died so young was interpreted differently. One was Yuan's family's announcement that Lady Shao suffered from Yuan's dismissal and passed away in Jixian due to fright and illness. However, another unverified rumor asserts that she flirted with a worker at the Yuan house, and was shamed by the Yuans so much so that she committed suicide.<sup>35</sup> The ninth concubine, Lady Liu, a native of Tianjin, was the youngest woman among Yuan's spouses. She became a maid for Lady Yang when young. She was promoted to be a concubine after Lady Yang agreed to please Yuan during the hard time of

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<sup>34</sup> Hou Yijie, *Yuan Shikai quanzhuan*, ibid, 455.

<sup>35</sup> Zhang Shesheng, *Jueban Yuan Shikai* [The Unique Version of Yuan Shikai] (Shanghai: Wenhui Chubanshe, 2010), 165.

dismissal. Lady Liu gave birth to two children, one son and one daughter. To declare his love to his youngest concubine, Yuan built a new house in Anyang as a gift to her.

The last type of Yuan Shikai's marital union could be termed as the psychological healer, which involved the eighth concubine, Lady Guo, a native of Gui'an (today's Huzhou), Zhejiang Province. Her mother, a rich man's concubine, became a prostitute after her husband's death. According to Yuan Kewen's statement, Lady Guo followed her mother's profession and went to Tianjin. She, however, deeply hated the life at the brothel. After Yuan Shikai's dismissal from his post from Beijing, he had suffered from a miserable depression. Lady Shen and Yuan Kewen purchased Lady Guo's freedom and presented her to Old Yuan as a new concubine. Thus, this new concubine was "to please" him as a psychological healer.<sup>36</sup> Because he was depressed, the arrival of a beauty as a new concubine, as it is said, released him from his grief. Consequently, Lady Guo gave birth to three children, two sons and one daughter, in a short period during which Yuan rose to be president of the newly established republic.

### **III. Household Management**

In any such a gargantuan polygamous family, the routine life could be divisive, feuding, and contentious. However, the Yuan family, according to insiders' testimonies, maintained its own orderly harmony while Yuan Shikai was alive. The reasons for this peace were multiple, but Yuan's ability to manage his family affairs, his strict measures to regulate familial relations, and his strict discipline for all members to abide by should be seen as major causes. In a particular sense, Yuan established his own paternalistic solar system, with himself as the magnetic sun, his

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<sup>36</sup> Kachuen Yuan Gee and Janey Sheau Yueh Chao, *ibid*, 22.

spouses as centripetal planets, and his children as rotating stars. As he built his own constellation system, he endeavored to avoid familial instability and sidestepped possible malfunctions.

First of all, Yuan Shikai brought his military command skills to his family, with which he was the supreme commander issuing orders to all his family members. Discipline was the way of coping with any domestic issues, to which all must be obedient, submissive, and accountable. His rules must be faithfully implemented and his authority duly respected. In a particular sense, his family members were soldiers without uniforms, fighters without weapons, and warriors without swords. According to his rules, his sons must bow down in front of him to display their respect to him on the daily basis. His daughters must learn womanly values as he advised them. In this way, his family members lost their individual identities, as they were an insignificant part of his big machine. Whatever and whenever he ordered, everyone must obey. For example, to differentiate females, Yuan ordered all of his female members beyond his spouses to wear red-colored trousers. Yuan stated clearly to his sons that any violations of his rules would result in punishment, including whipping and clubbing.<sup>37</sup>

Besides rules and disciplines, Yuan Shikai constructed an orderly hierarchy among his family members, particularly his spouses. At the apex was his wife, Lady Yu, who was to be respected, at least nominally, as the matriarch of the family. Below her, an organizational structure enabled Yuan to effectively dominate his family. He used cardinal numbers to label his concubines and ordered the latecomers to respect the older ones. This hierarchy was reinforced when Yuan endeavored to build his Hongxian Dynasty around the New Year Day of 1916. His wife, Lady Yu, naturally became the empress [*huanghou*], his earlier concubines became imperial consorts [*fei*],

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<sup>37</sup> Zhang Yan, *Yuanlai Yuan Shikai*, *ibid*, 53.

and the last four became imperial concubines [*pin*].<sup>38</sup> Ironically, this seemingly hallowed hierarchy does not mean that the higher one was necessarily more powerful, as Lady Yu was the powerless first lady. In order to maintain stability, Yuan's hierarchal pyramid just served as a tool to ensure solidarity and to guarantee equilibrium.

It is wrong to assume that Yuan Shikai managed his family affairs and handled trivial matters in person. On the contrary, he adopted an indirect managerial approach. He partitioned his concubines into two groups and assigned one within each as a group leader. The team-building method could be viewed as Yuan's inner colonization to promote accountability and to set discipline-based criteria. Consequently, Lady Shen took the charge of the three Korean women, and Lady Yang controlled the rest of Yuan's concubines. This arrangement effectively prevented any possible direct conflicts between Yuan himself and his concubines and more importantly, it further made himself a judge over possible wrangling cases among his spouses. This mini-group manipulation benefited him enormously, as it saved him a lot of headaches. Yet, those two appointees might abuse their power due to jealousy, favoritism, and other issues. Indeed, domestic violence did occur although rarely. The culprit each time when it occurred was not Yuan but one of the two chief concubines. Lady Shen once tied Lady Jin to a table and beat her ferociously. Consequently, Lady Jin had a lingering pain on her leg until her death.<sup>39</sup> Lady Yang not only beat her maids but also abused the younger concubines. Once, Lady Yang broke Lady Liu's scalp, causing temporary bleeding.<sup>40</sup> Because both chiefs were empowered by Yuan, the rest of the

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<sup>38</sup> Yuan Jingxue, *NEYZLMYSK*, *ibid*, 53.

<sup>39</sup> Yuan Jingxue, *NEYZLMYSK*, *ibid*, 70.

<sup>40</sup> Zhang Yan, *Yuanlai Yuan Shikai*, *ibid*, 50.

concubines had to suffer and refrain from any impulsive moves in order to avoid retaliation. Therefore, the superficial harmony was accompanied by numerous underlying serious issues.

Yuan Shikai's indirect management seems to have created internal harshness and disguised terror. Nevertheless, his skillful control over his concubines and his "egalitarian" treatment of all of them served as their comforter. In terms of his mating habit, Yuan only had one sexual partner each night. He equally gave a week of his time to one spouse in order to flaunt his fairness. In this way, none of his concubines would feel marginalized, prejudiced, or oppressed by their shared husband. Indeed, this approach created satisfaction. It should note that Yuan never slept with his wife, Lady Yu, ever since their psychological breakup a few decades ago. The marriage of a concubine's son made her a mother-in-law, which at the same time disqualified her to share the bed with Yuan. Henceforth, during his last decade, Yuan's sexual partners included his fifth, sixth, eighth, and ninth concubines, as his seventh concubine had passed away. Each concubine on duty moved into the master's room and lived there for a week.<sup>41</sup> Since Yuan's home was partitioned into several independent units, each concubine was a supervisor over her own children and even grandchildren in her own unit. In each of those beehives, the unit actually turned to be a self-functioning family. To show his impartiality, Yuan ordered to distribute a monthly subsidy equally among his spouses, ranging from eighty to a hundred dollars, a big sum for the ordinary people as a worker's annual salary might be only one to two hundred dollars. Having an additional newborn child means an extra three to six dollars added on that sum.<sup>42</sup> Of course, all these were for his spouses to keep, because food, clothes, housing, and others were all provided at no cost to the women.

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<sup>41</sup> Yuan Jingxue, *NEYZLMYSK*, *ibid*, 80.

<sup>42</sup> Yuan Jingxue, *NEYZLMYSK*, *ibid*, 94.



Yuan Shikai's promotion of chastity, virtue, and morality confined his female family members inside a cage without much freedom. He loved to see his concubines in bound feet, which traditionally symbolized servility and epitomized submissiveness. Even the three Korean women who did not have their feet bound previously had to employ a device used by the Peking Opera performers to make their feet smaller in order to follow the Chinese tradition. After his death, the two remaining Korean concubines (one died before his death) lost their ability to walk, even after the removal of that device.<sup>43</sup> His daughters were required to stay inside the beehives and could not go outside without his permission or adult escorts. Yuan indoctrinated his concubines with strict ethics so that they went through a sort of brain-washing. This may interpret the reasons why some of his concubines planned to sacrifice their lives for him immediately after his death in 1916.<sup>44</sup> His ninth concubine, the youngest of all, intended to sacrifice her life after she heard her husband's death. She was persuaded not to because of her pregnancy. Nevertheless, she ruined her beautiful face to declare her loyalty to her deceased husband.<sup>45</sup>

Yuan Shikai arranged his children's marriages to foster his political alliances, strengthen his political influence, and show off his culminating prominence. In doing so, Yuan seldom cared for his children's feelings as he showed little concern over their marital happiness. Their connubiality became his political tool, as they did not have a say in personal love, pursuit of happiness, or individual freedom. Marital satisfaction is not on his agenda, as the issues of liberty, independence, and autonomy were out of the question. Usually, Yuan reached a betrothal commitment with his political ally or a social elite without first consulting his child. Perhaps, he assumed that his

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<sup>43</sup> Yuan Jingxue, *NEYZLMYSK*, *ibid*, 86.

<sup>44</sup> Zhang Shesheng, *Jueban Yuan Shikai*, *ibid*, 6.

<sup>45</sup> Yuan Kewen, *Huangshan sicheng*, *ibid*, 13.

children would be happy to marry the children of those elite families. For example, his eldest son Yuan Keding married the daughter of late Qing general Wu Dacheng (1835-1902). His eldest daughter Yuan Bozhen married the son of Zhang Renjun (1846-1927) who was the governor-general of Liangjiang. His ninth son married the daughter of Li Yuanhong (1864-1928), the second president of the Republic of China. Almost all of his other children married with or into prominent and powerful families.<sup>46</sup> These arranged marriages led to numerous problems after Yuan's death, as several of his children experienced divorces or nuptial breakups. The most shocking one occurred between his daughter Yuan Guzhen and Cao Shiyue, the son of Cao Kun (1862-1938) who was the president of the Republic of China in the early 1920s. Yuan Guzhen was shot in her arm by her husband with a pistol. The court finally decided to grant a divorce upon her unrelenting insistence, even if her husband apologized.<sup>47</sup> These divorce cases, in many ways, mirrored modern China's social transformation for which women started to pursue their own happiness.

It seems that Yuan Shikai's management over his family tends to be quite outdated and feudalistic, as some have claimed. However, Yuan did not neglect the strong impact of modernization. As soon as he was promoted to be the governor-general of Zhili, he started to build private schools, one for males and another for females, within his own home. The students were his children and his concubines. Yuan hired male teachers for the Boy's School [*nanguan*], and female teachers for the Girl's School [*nuguan*]. He even employed two foreigners, one man and one woman respectively from the English speaking world, to teach English in those two schools. The curriculum was comprehensive as Western style courses were offered, including English,

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<sup>46</sup> Zhou Yan, *Minguo diyijiating: Yuan Shikai jiazhu*, *ibid*, 119-129.

<sup>47</sup> Zhang Yongjiu, *Mingguo diyijia: Yuan Shikai jiazhu* [The First Family of the Republic: the Clan of Yuan Shikai] (Vol. 2), (Chongqing: Chongqing Chubanshe, 2010), 48.

mathematics, history, geography, language, and physical education.<sup>48</sup> Some of the Chinese teachers were well-known educators, such as Yan Xiu, Fang Dishan, and Yang Yunzhong. For the convenience of teacher-student interaction, Yuan coined stylish given names for his young concubines, such as Zhixue [aspirational learner] for Lady Yang, Mianxue [progressive learner] for Lady Ye, Qianxue [silent learner] for Lady Guo, and Qinxue [diligent learner] for Lady Liu.<sup>49</sup> According to Yuan Kewen's observations, Lady Ye "was very smart. Within a year, she was able to compose essays" and Lady Shao "was not that intelligent but was determined to learn with her tenacious efforts. Soon, she was able to write letters and even compose short essays."<sup>50</sup> Since Yuan had no faith in the Civil Service Examination System, he sent his sons to study abroad in Germany and Britain, and later on his other sons went to the United States to pursue higher learning.

In front of his large family, Yuan Shikai always displayed strictness and sternness. He seldom smiled and only laughed when he listened to an extremely ridiculous tale or heard about a fascinating story. He was not talkative and never repeated what he had already said. He liked to smoke cigars, however. He had a big appetite for food, yet always ate the same foods all year round. His favorite foods included roasted duck, Korean pickles, Henan style porridge, fish, and chicken. He was serious over his formal military attire, even wearing it during his mealtimes. He dressed his uniform while eating in front of his entire family. Because of this habit, he occasionally stained his uniform with food and oil. He seldom drank alcohol and hated opium throughout his life. Nevertheless, he was fond of traditionally known aphrodisiacs, including ginseng and deer

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<sup>48</sup> Yuan Jingxue, *NEYZLMYSK*, *ibid*, 96-98.

<sup>49</sup> Yuan Jingxue, *NEYZLMYSK*, *ibid*, 99.

<sup>50</sup> Yuan Kewen, *Huanshang sicheng*, *ibid*, 12.

antlers. In his hand, he always carried an iron-clad cane with which he knocked on the ground or bumped the floor to indicate his presence as the true master of the house.<sup>51</sup>

While Yuan Shikai was alive, this large family retained its colossal structure and functioned well. However, his sudden death in 1916 led to the breakup into many smaller families. His sons became the main inheritors of his fortune and his remaining spouses had to rely on their children, particularly sons. Of course, it is worthwhile to introduce briefly some of his descendants. The existing literature shows that Yuan's first generation descendants became the declining "aristocracy" as many of them relied on Yuan's fortune for a parasitic life. Yet, a careful reading of sources reveals that those descendants stepped onto different paths. The eldest son, Yuan Keding, was a politician who played a key role in his father's imperial restoration. After Yuan Shikai's death, Yuan Keding lived on his father's fortune, but at the same time continued to manage affairs. He tried to handle the Yuan family issues, traveling to different places, mediating conflicts, and solving problems among the former Yuan family members. He refused to get involved in any political activities, however. In his later years, he led a homosexual life, squandered his money, and died in poverty in Beijing in 1956.<sup>52</sup> Yuan Shikai's second son Yuan Kewen led a carefree life, womanizing in brothels, indulging in luxury, and participating in the underground society. His prodigality squandered his own fortune and curtailed his promising life. Yet, he was a talented poet, a gifted calligrapher, and a skillful theater performer. In 1931, he died in Tianjin at the age of forty-one. The most successful son of Yuan Shikai was Yuan Kehuan (1898-1956) who became a nationally famous entrepreneur. He invested in cement production,

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<sup>51</sup> Yuan Jingxue, *NEYZLMYSK*, *ibid*, 75-85.

<sup>52</sup> Yuan Jiabin, "Wode dabofu Yuan Keding" [My Eldest Uncle Yuan Keding] (1), *Zongheng* [Verticality and Horizons], (No. 1, 1995), 53. Yuan Jiabin, "Wode dabofu Yuan Keding" [My Eldest Uncle Yuan Keding] (No. 2), *Zongheng* [Verticality and Horizons], (No. 2, 1995), 64.

mining business, and other enterprises. While working diligently, he succeeded in his projects. It is said that he was respected by Mao Zedong's government as a famous national capitalist. He cooperated with Mao's regime and surrendered his fortune to be nationalized in the so-called socialist reconstruction during the early 1950s and was praised by the government for his deeds. It is said that he was considered as a candidate by the Maoist government as the vice mayor of Tianjin.<sup>53</sup>

Among the next generation, Yuan's grandchildren, the most well-known is the son of Yuan Kewen, Yuan Jialiu (Luke Chia-Liu Yuan, 1912-2003), who turned to be a famous Chinese-American scientist. He earned his graduate education at University of California Berkeley, and got his PhD from California Institute of Technology. He worked at Princeton, RCA Laboratories, and Brookhaven National Laboratory in New York City. His wife, Wu Jianxiong (Chien-Shiung Wu, 1912-1997) was also a well-known Chinese-American scientist. Both were brilliant physicists and prominently achieved in their own fields. Their first visit back to Mainland China in 1973, and then many times later, was popular news in the then on-going improving US-China relations.<sup>54</sup> Among the fourth generation descendants, the most famed should be Li-Yong Lee, whose mother Yuan Jiaying was Yuan Shikai's granddaughter. Lee is now an American poet, has won national literary awards, and enjoys an international reputation for his creativity and accomplishments.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Wang Birong, *Bainian Yuanjia*, *ibid*, 102.

<sup>54</sup> When Zhou Enlai met Yuan Jialiu (Luke Chia-Liu Yuan) in 1973, the former Chinese premier made a joke with Luke Chia-Liu Yuan that his family produced three experts: Yuan Shikai as a political expert (politician), Yuan Kewen as a literal expert (literati), and Luke Chia-Liu Yuan as a science expert (scientist). Li Zongtao, "Yuan Shikai jiazhu de chenfu" [The Vicissitude of Yuan Shikai's family], *Jinqiu* [Golden Autumn], (No. 9, 2011), 43-44. Also, see Zhou Yan, *Minguo diyijiating: Yuan Shikai jiazhu*, *ibid*, 181-188.

<sup>55</sup> Li-Yong Lee, *The Winged Seed: A Remembrance* (Rochester NY: BOA Editions, Ltd., 2013), 188.

Overall, it is fair to argue that Yuan Shikai's descendants in different countries now all rely on their own expertise for their own independent life just like all other citizens.

## **Conclusion**

Yuan Shikai's family was an integral part of his private life; yet it could be seen as a model to study traditional Chinese life and to trace China's transition to modernity. Yuan's familial expansion over three long decades shadowed his steady promotion in officialdom and his ability to sustain such a large group of family members. Inside this community, he was an absolute ruler—all other members had to obey him. In a particular sense, his family was a replica of the royal court, a representative of China's traditional marital system, and one of the last polygamous families in modern China. Yet, Yuan's large family inevitably connected to modernity, as it was organized during China's national march toward social, political, and cultural changes. Along with the national progress, Yuan's family underwent the transition from tradition to modernity, from empire to republic, and from one man's dominance to multiple independent smaller units. Its stability, durability, and cohesiveness relied on Yuan's masterful management; once he passed away, this family would unavoidably fall apart.

Indeed, Yuan Shikai's family took a sharp turn after his abrupt yet tragic death in 1916. His family did not devolve to the lowest social echelon thanks to his personal wealth, which enabled those smaller units to survive for a while. However, each smaller unit had to seek its own way of survival and to experience the vicissitude of oscillating regional, national, and international political and social changes. The splitting of his family in 1916 was a rejection of the old way, as one of the last polygamous families in modern China came to an end. After the partition, none of his sons or grandsons inherited his professions, neither as soldiers nor as politicians. Perhaps, Yuan's failure in restoring the imperial system has taught his descendants a serious lesson and

driven them away from capricious political games. His descendants – in multiple ways, in diverse professions, and after a few lengthy decades – all become self-sustaining, self-sufficient, and self-determined citizens in a number of Chinese provinces and even in other countries including the United States.

Yuan Shikai's polygamous family was a typical one among his counterparts of social elites in the traditional Chinese society before the founding of the Republic of China. After the national transformation to republic, polygamous marriage was discouraged and then declared illegal. Because of this abolition, polygamy is an unfamiliar term for the Chinese in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Yet, it did exist for so long that it was a social norm among social and political elites. The workings of Yuan's family disclose the functions of that forgotten practice of human life. The discourse above demonstrates the unique features of polygamy by underscoring Yuan's familial life. Although this family might be similar to other polygamous families at that time, as the analysis above shows, it retained its special characteristics, developed its own special marital types, and adopted a unique management system for marital ties and familial management. While Yuan's polygamous family worked well when he was alive, it collapsed after his death. In a number of ways, his family mirrored China's transition from old customs to new trends, functioning as a serviceable case to uncover the innermost mechanism of the forgotten episode of modern Chinese history during which the abolition of polygamy was truly one of the great progresses the Chinese people had made towards their own modernization.