

Taking Off the Emperor's Clothes: Concubinage in Autocracies*

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Abstract

How do sexualized elite-autocrat ties shape autocratic rule? Though ubiquitous throughout historical autocracies, political science scholarship has yet to investigate the institution of concubinage. We argue that concubinage can foster powersharing between an autocrat and elites by providing a two-way credible commitment device that ties both parties' hands. Concubines also act as lobbying agents for their families through their close proximity to the monarch. Royal children between an autocrat and his concubine further entangle him with his elites. We evaluate these arguments using the empirical case of nineteenth-century Imperial Vietnam and five novel datasets: royal concubines, royal-elite kinship networks on 400 elite families, elite bureaucratic appointments, imperial-approved infrastructure projects, and elite rebellions. Preliminary results show that elite families with royal concubines received 2.4 times more appointments than those without one. Our findings highlight women as strategic actors who facilitate political stability and accumulate wealth and political status for their families.

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