

The powerful eunuchs of china history essay



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Their stories are almost completely shrouded in mystery. These people are mentioned only as minute details in historical accounts, their lives often kept in seclusion from the world, probably even from history itself. These people play major roles in the unfolding of significant historical events, yet they are rarely even mentioned. From the shadows, they exercise their power. From behind the scenes, they carefully manipulate the government to their own interests. These “incomplete men” are very powerful. Yet, at the same time, they are pitiful. Their seemingly quick rise to power comes at a price, a price almost as valuable as their very lives. These people are called eunuchs.

Eunuchs: An Introduction

A eunuch, in general, is a term given to castrated men. However, for the purpose of this paper, the term “eunuchs” will be used to refer to Chinese eunuchs; more specifically, those that were in imperial service during the era of China’s dynastic rule. Eunuchs served the primary function as guards and servants in women’s quarters and to the emperors. But in time they gained power and control as they gained functions as advisers to the emperors of China (Encyclopædia Britannica Online 2010). In fact, in certain time periods, the eunuchs grew to be more powerful than the emperor. Indeed, the role of eunuchs in the Ming Dynasty has become an important portrayal of political society of that era (Hammond 2002).

Castration started out as a form of punishment, particularly for the crime of rape. But as eunuchs became more and more popular and rich, poor families opted to have their sons castrated for a chance at a better life in the Imperial Court (Scholz 2001). From the definition itself, one becomes a eunuch by undergoing the process of castration. While castration is usually viewed as a

gruesome and horrific procedure, there are some accounts that have actually romanticized it. In Piotr Scholz's *Eunuchs and Castrati*, there is a cultural account left by "the emperor's last eunuch," Sun Yao-ting pertaining to the delicate procedure of castration. In his account, he explains that the process starts by setting a date when the castration will be performed. He narrated that they would notify the person to be castrated that he must quickly urinate after the procedure so that his urethra would not be blocked and not get infected. The person, consequently then drinks lots of water to prepare for the urination.

Then the castrator takes a rope and ties the one to be castrated in "such a way that he was unable to move his hands or feet," (Scholz 2001, 137). After that, he prays for guidance with incense sticks. Then he moves on with the slicing of the organ. The mutilation is vividly described as "fountains of red, white and yellow liquid" gushing from the wound (Scholz 2001, 137). Then the castrator inserts a goose quill into the urethra of the castrated so as to retain the opening formed by the slit. Then finally, the castrator treats the wounds with tampons dipped in wax, sesame oil and paper.

A few days later, after the castrated man urinates, and in essence his excretory system is functioning well again, he is checked if he is already cleared to go to the palace. Once all the preparations are complete, before he leaves for the palace, the castrator gives the castrated a package wrapped in oilpaper and instructs him on what to do with the package. The castrator says that for everything to go well, he must follow that set of instructions: "When you're in the palace, put it in a bushel of grain, hang the bushel on the beam supporting the ceiling of your room and raise it a little

higher each year. Then it will protect you and ensure you that you will grow every year. And remember one more thing: when you are near death, it must be with you in the grave or the six lines of your ancestors will be incomplete. Those who are neither man nor woman cannot be reborn!"(Scholz 2001, 138). So basically, even after the castration process, there is a routine to be followed by the castrated. The responsibility of the eunuch to the part that has been separated from his has not been lost but must carry on till his death.

Castration leads to several physical and supposedly emotional and mental changes among castrates. Depending on the age in which castration took place, eunuchs vary in characteristics. Often, males who are castrated earlier in boyhood generally do not obtain the male characteristics obtained during puberty. Facial hair and pubic hair do not grow and their voice remains high pitched and unchanged. Males, who are castrated well after their puberty, will still grow pubic hair despite the absence of facial hair. The pubic hair will however, be much more diminished. A common characteristic among eunuchs though is the characteristic of never going bald. (Wilson and Roehrborn) As such, eunuchs were unable to have heirs and were thus seen to be more trusted as it would prevent dynastic overthrows by their heirs. In fact, it was this very reason why the Chinese dynasties sought to utilize eunuchs as servants and attendants to the emperor and his family, and even other high-ranking officials in the government.

Essentially, the main reason why people aspired to become eunuchs was the having the honor of working as an imperial attendant, which more often than not meant an improvement of economic status. On numerous occasions,

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fathers would have their sons castrated as early as seven years old in order for their sons to leave for the imperial palace as soon as they recover from the castration. Especially among poorer families, having someone from the family become a eunuch meant honor, and economic improvement. For the eunuch himself, becoming a eunuch meant indirect access to power and relationships with the higher officials.

History of Eunuchs

Historical anthropologic evidence proves that the earliest eunuchs emerged from the Shang Dynasty. According to Piotr Scholz *Eunuchs and Castrati*, “ In 1976 little figurines of servants (c. 9 cm in height) were discovered in the grave of Fu Hao, wife of Emperor Wu-ting (Wu-ding); they are the oldest known representations of palace eunuchs,” (Scholz 2001, 129). This is proven by statues excavated in Lingjiatan. The statues excavated “ show no distinct sexual characteristics.”

Originally, “ castration was used very early as a form of punishment both for criminals among one’s own population and for prisoners taken in war,” (Scholz 2001, 131). Here it is clear that castration was not intended to be beneficial to the castrated as what has later turned out in the course of history. What is fascinating is how the paradigm shifted from the eunuchs being looked down upon, to them almost assuming most of the imperial powers. Such series of events will lead to famous “ rise” of the eunuchs to their subtle fading.

Sun Yao-ting (1902-1996), the last eunuch of Emperor Pu-I, tells of how he was insulted by a Chinese Republican officer with the line: “ Since time

immemorial, you eunuchs have been the ruin of China!" (Scholz 2001, 131). This was because, with regards to castration as punishment, it is most likely assumed that it was " used early on as a substitute for the death penalty in cases involving political crimes," (Scholz 2001, 133). With this, as Piotr Scholz further writes: " This allows us that eunuchs represented a political intelligentsia that did not conform to the notions of the dominant Confucian bureaucracy which was constantly trying to shape the empire in its own image..." (Scholz 2001, 133). The way it really was is therefore contradictory to the previous claim of the Chinese Republican who looked down on eunuchs when the fact that the reason for their castration was the fear of their intellect and political prowess comes into play.

The eunuch Ts'ao Ts'ao (144-220 C. E.), son of eunuch Ts'ao Sung and grandson of eunuch Ts'ao T'eng, even became the grand counselor and was a victorious general. Ts'ao T'eng, the grandfather, have already been influential enough because he had already owned a large land and has served four emperors, but Ts'ao Ts'ao became " part of the circle that helped Emperor Huan-Ti (r. 146-167 C. E.) to ascend the throne, following the murder of Huan's predecessor, Liang Chi." (Scholz 2001, 143). Furthermore, when child emperor An-ti (106-125 C. E.) was enthroned, he was involved in " every conceivable kind of intrigue at court." (Scholz 2001, 143). Because of this and through Empress Dowager Teng's help, he also gained favor and influence over the prince and next emperor Shun, such that during the reign of Emperor Shun (126-144 C. E.) of the Han Dynasty, the eunuchs reached the peak of their powers when they were allowed to adopt sons to succeed them and go to even greater heights. " They even became personal

secretaries (shang-shu) to the emperor," (Scholz 2001, 143). Ultimately, Ts'ao Ts'ao's son, Ts'ao P'ei (188-227) soon ruled as emperor himself.

However, " with great power comes great responsibility," such that during the reign of Emperor Yuan Shao (189 C. E.) during the Han Dynasty, " thousands of them [eunuchs] were slaughtered... in an attempt to curtail their influence," (Scholz 2001, 135). It is clear then that eunuchs got the point when they were feared even by the strongest imperial power, the emperor. But because Emperor Yuan Shao never succeeded in finishing the eunuchs off, their intellect was, rather than countered, utilized once more, thus marking the rebirth of the eunuchs' shaping of the kingdom. " By 800 C. E., the situation had reached a point where eunuchs have become a determining factor in choosing who was to accede to the imperial throne," (Scholz 2001, 146).

Eunuchs had the preference of Buddhism over Confucianism because they found it congenial to their life. But in the course of the 9th century, as old doctrines were revived, " Buddhist doctrine and practice was decreed as un-Chinese," (Scholz 2001, 148). " In 903, eunuchs who had accompanied the emperor to their last day were killed in a bloody massacre led by Chu Ch'uan-chung (Zhu Wen, 907-923), the founder of the later Liang Dynasty," (Scholz 2001, 149).

With the collapse of the Ming Dynasty, the eunuchs collapsed as well. Due to the high level of corruption in government, it was running out of capital. Inflation compounded the impact of dwindling resources. As local administrative costs rose, the imperial government levied irregular taxes to

meet pressing financial obligations (Atwell 1988). With this, the decline of the influence of eunuchs started as a “ new era ensued in which the court no longer regarded the aristocratic ideas of status and ritual, espoused by many eunuchs, as vital to maintaining the interests of the state. These ideas, in fact, degenerated into a seemingly ineffectual court etiquette,” (Scholz 2001, 149). But it’s not as if though they were stripped of all their “ power” in the court, they were still assigned positions and sent to expeditions. The difference is that they no longer directly affected the decisions of the emperor.

Eunuchs were perceived as very corrupt officials. Despite having only meager salaries, upon their deaths, their massive fortunes were discovered. An example is the eunuch Li Yung-chen (1583-1628). When he was executed in 1628, his confiscated properties were said to have been worth 270, 000 taels of silver. Ming historians contrast this to the annual wage for some manual workers in

Beijing at the turn of the sixteenth century, was approximately 4. 2 taels (Atwell 1988). This was due to the fact that they were known to misappropriate funds. Such practices were extremely common, to claim military supplies for 100, 000 named soldiers when there were in fact only 50, 000 troops, and only have less than half of the 50, 000 needing the supplies. The court thus pays for four solders for one soldier (Atwell 1988). Such is only one example of the great corruption the eunuchs made. Eunuch influence in economic activities was made possible because they fulfilled the capricious demands of their emperors despite the growing financial needs of the state. Their positions allowed the eunuchs to build a base, which in turn

strengthened their positions in the economic as well as political and military worlds. The power over labor, land and taxes made it impossible not to cooperate with eunuchs. This brought them to great power. Using such privileges, they were able to exploit the system further to increase power and wealth (Crawford 1961).

By 1644, it is estimated that there were 70, 000 eunuchs in the palace alone and 100, 000 in the entire empire (Crawford 1961). At this point, castration became widespread and despite the emperor's decrees against such, castration still became common for poorer families who could not afford to send their children to school (Crawford 1961). Compounded by the fact that the emperor was not consistent, eunuchization became very rampant as a means to get rich and powerful easily. The Chinese imperial eunuchs ended with Sun Yao-ting as the "last of the emperor's eunuchs." He left an account that though it is embellished, it is "of interest as an example of cultural history," (Scholz 2001, 136). It is important to note that what ended was the Chinese and imperial element of eunuchism. Eunuchism itself has existed far out through time into today's era and now has a new connotation depending on the culture and surrounding society of the eunuch.

The Roles of Eunuchs in Government

Eunuchs had been used as servants in the imperial palace since the late fourteenth century, and from the early fifteenth century, their functions, numbers, and power increased. By the mid-fifteenth century, eunuchs were a well-established element of the Ming bureaucracy, serving in the capital and in the provinces in both military and civil posts. Numbers fluctuated, but

early in the sixteenth century, there are said to have been over 12, 000 palace eunuchs in Beijing alone (Robinson 2010).

The Ming government was divided among six ministries in the 1390s, Personnel, Revenues, War, Punishment, Rites, and Public Works (Tsai 1995). While each ministry had its own minister, they were really under direct control of the emperor, who frequently used his eunuchs to run the state. Constantly locked in adversary positions with the eunuchs, the scholars despised and hated the eunuchs, blaming them for the ills of society (Tsai 1995).

Eunuch influence was greatest in periods of weak emperors. During the Ming Dynasty, where the eunuch abuses were most rampant, there were some periods of history where the eunuchs were practically running the empire. As emperors felt that eunuchs represented the best interests of the imperial family at heart, the contact between emperor and bureaucracy was carried entirely through eunuchs (Crawford 1961). Eunuchs were first organized into a Directorate of Palace Servants. But as their functions expanded beyond the inner court and their number increased, they were repeatedly reorganized until after 1400, they were finally organized into twenty-four offices. At this point, they had ceased to be entirely personal tools used at imperial discretion and became instead an institutionalized bureaucracy with its own inner development and history (Crawford 1961). In the final organization, there were twelve Directorates, four Offices, and eight Bureaus. Each Directorate had one Director with the rank of 4a; a senior and junior Vice-director each with the rank of 4b; a senior and junior Assistant director with the rank of 5a; one Recorder with the rank of 6a; and a varying

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number of lesser officials. The Directorates had charge of such matters as staff supervision, imperial provisions and food, seals, ancient and modern archives, metal tokens given to meritorious statesmen, credentials, instructions, construction of storehouses, weddings, gunpowder, construction of temples, the imperial insignia and tent, the imperial stables, military tallies and other such items. Some of these Directorates were thus closely associated with the Ministry of War (Crawford 1961).

The main contribution of eunuchs was in the field of military and secret service. Emperors used eunuchs as emissaries to foreign countries. In fact, by the end of the Ming Dynasty, what existed of the central military arm was largely in the hands of eunuchs (Crawford 1961).

In the end, the eunuchs were less like household servants meddling in state affairs and more like an administrative hierarchy who exercised powers in all areas of government (Tsai 1995).

Famous Eunuchs of Ancient China

Eunuchs were often seen as the antagonist to the Confucian court officials. Differing in priorities, they had different agendas. While most eunuchs have been depicted negatively and in an antagonistic manner, there were some eunuchs that rose above and became important figures in Chinese history, and there is no other greater eunuch than Zheng He (also Cheng Ho). Zheng He was from the early Ming dynasty and was both a Muslim and a Eunuch. He had won the reputation as a great diplomat and military strategist. Unlike most eunuchs, he was a delegated in the military, in charge of seven official oceanic expeditions, a first in Chinese history. With an armada of 63 ships,

Zheng He traveled around the world, first primarily to South East Asia, then eventually to the Middle East and Africa (Willetts 1964). In fact, he was even known to have brought back some African animals such as giraffes, lions, and tigers from the fifth expedition (Willetts 1964). Zheng He died in extreme old age in 1444. Despite numerous voyages that brought China closer to the world, scholars agree that the voyages actually had no practical results, essentially meaning that it was a waste of money and that from the perspective of the Ming dynasty, it was an absolute waste of resources given that they were not empire builders, Ming did not have a sense of mission (Willetts 1964). This then provides an answer as to why after Zheng He's final voyage of 1431, there no on longer any naval excursions by the Chinese. But while there were no longer any naval operations afterwards, in the time that Zheng He lived, he was by no means the only eunuch in the high seas (Willetts 1964).

In contrast to Zheng He who had the best intentions are the four infamous tyrannical eunuch dictators, Wei ZhongXian in the late Ming, Wang Zhen in the 1440s, Wang Zhi in the 1470s, and Liu Jin in the 1500s (Dillon 1998). Wang Zhen was voluntarily castrated as a youth and entered palace eunuch school. Wang was made Director of Ceremonial when Emperor Ying-tsung ascended. He was killed by an army on its retreat (Crawford 1961). Liu Jin was also voluntarily castrated. He attached himself to a higher eunuch in order to advance, then subsequently took the position. He was put in charge of the Bureau of Cymbals and Gongs. But more than that, he controlled the secret police Eastern Depot. He is considered to be one of the " eight tigers" (Crawford 1961). Wei is often compared to Yang Lian, a Confucian adviser

who later becomes an adversary. Their tales are often contrasted as they both experienced hardship in becoming high officials in the court. Yang Lian had to study and take many licensure exams in order to receive what is equivalent to the doctorate, while Wei Zhongxian had to live castrated and maneuvers his way in the eunuch system (Tsai 1995). As a child, Wei chose castration as a way out of his gambling debt (Crawford 1961). Because of his cunning nature, he was able to work his way into the system and become a grand eunuch in the Ceremonial Directorate of the Ming court. As a palace eunuch, he cheated his superiors and gained advantages by swindling them. But amidst that cruel life, his path into becoming a eunuch was a turbulent one, scarred emotionally, physically, and psychologically. Physically, his hormone levels caused wrinkled skin, stiffened joints, and weak muscles. Eventually, he became evidently more feminine than masculine (Tsai 1995). In order to rise above the ranks, Wei aligned himself only with the most powerful eunuchs and palace women. He worked first in the imperial stable, moving his way up until he became assigned to be the cook for Emperor Wanli's grandson, who later became Emperor Tianqi (Tsai 1995). It was this connection that gained him much of the fame and fortune. It was cooking for Tianqi as well that he met Ke, Tianqi's mistress. The teenage Tianqi felt a deep, more than childlike devotion to Mistress Ke. In fact it was Ke who recommended Wei in 1622 to become the grand eunuch in the most powerful Ceremonial Directorate (Tsai 1995). Together with Ke, Wei had an improper and unhealthy influence on the young emperor. Wei received the emperor's approval to train a eunuch army, and he was also made director of a secret police establishment called the Eastern Depot (Tsai 1995). He used his position to remove people he deemed undesirable and began a

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reign of terror by demoting and then murdering his former patron. As Tianqi lived a life of luxury, Wei killed countless number of people, dismissed honorable officials, stole jewelry from the imperial treasure, and acquired riches for his family (Tsai 1995). It was then that Yang Lian, now a censor, decided to impeach Wei. While 100 other officials sided with yang in denouncing Wei, Tianqi stood by Wei and ordered the high ranking officials including Yang to be flogged to death (Tsai 1995). It was only upon Tianqi's death at the age of 23 that the reign of terror ended. Wei left Beijing with a guard of 800 eunuchs, 1000 horses, 40 wagonloads of jewelry. On his way to a prison outside Nanjing, he took his only and his copse was dismembered and displayed in his hometown as a warning to the public (Tsai 1995).

Modern Eunuchs

The word “ modern eunuchs” may refer to either of two things: one, a modern eunuch may refer, in literal sense, to people who have been castrated, and two, it may also refer to people who are not the highest ruling body but play a big role in forming the decisions of the said ruling body through their political influence.

With regards to the first meaning, it is not surprising that eunuchs still exist today since castration has not been fully ruled out as a punishment for heavy crimes. Reports about the activities and movements of eunuchs are spread out on the news all over the world, and cliché enough, the world has some “ good news” and “ bad news” about eunuchs. Starting off with bad news so as not to break spirits after lifting them with the good news, news from BBC News South Asia reports that in India, eunuchs actually “ cut off man's penis.” This is according to BBC correspondent in Himachal Pradesh, India, <https://assignbuster.com/the-powerful-eunuchs-of-china-history-essay/>

Baldev Chaunan. According to the report, the victim, Sonu, “ has been working as a drummer with a group of eunuchs,” because apparently, dalits in India live “ by turning up uninvited at weddings, births and other major family events and singing until they are paid enough to go away.” The said report also says that the reason why the eunuchs cut off the man’s penis was unclear. It is just known fact that “ Eunuchs in India generally live in self-contained communities, ostracized [sic] by the rest of society.”

Countering this ruling fact is a news report by Reuters India dated November 10, 2006 that reports: “ Dancing and singing eunuchs are knocking on doors in the Indian City of Patna in a bid to embarrass shopkeepers into paying their taxes.” It is further said in the news article that they were hired by the government as a new “ shock strategy” to make tax evaders pay their lot. It has been proven in the report that this strategy has worked, and who knows? It might just be the solution to the tax evasion that has been going on in India for some time. The eunuchs don’t go home penniless either, they were promised by the taxmen 4% of the total commission. So the strategy was indeed a win-win case for both parties. It would be pleasing to hear that there still are good news like these once in a while where even the “ ostracized” get to contribute to the betterment of the country.

Now the meaning of eunuchs as “ castrated individuals” may, in itself, take a figurative form with the meaning anyone who has lost their “ balls” or sense of manliness. To be straightforward about it, the third sex, especially gays who have “ lost their balls” when they decided that they were “ women trapped in a man’s body,” and transsexuals, who have had reconstructions of certain body parts, fall under this classification of “ modern eunuchs.” This

is because not only should the physical aspect of a human be considered, what is important to the person should also be considered, for what is a part if its meaning is empty? A man's genital would be just another part of the body if he does not give value to it nor take care of it. From this angle, it could be said that those who belong to the third sex and transsexuals are also eunuchs.

Finally, eunuchs have always been known to have influential powers over the ruling forces, so ultimately, for the researchers of this topic, people who are influential enough to make the slightest differences in the decision of the higher authorities are also to be considered as eunuchs. People such as Chiz Escudero who, though he is part of the opposition, which is even the counter force of the administration, makes an impact on the decision that the authorities make and on the moves they execute next. A lot of forces outside the administration are actually making slightest effects on the decrees that the president makes. For example, rich and powerful clans like the Lopezes and Cojuangcos are always taken into consideration in the making of policies although they are not necessarily part of the ruling force itself. They are eunuchs not by appearance, but by essence.

Insights and Learnings

So in the course of writing this paper about Chinese eunuchs, we, the researchers, have learned a lot and have acquired a lot of insights in relation with eunuchs. And with that, we contest with the thought that the eunuchs "rose" to power. There can be no rise of they were at the top to begin with. "How can I say that they were already at the top when castration was a grave punishment to begin with?" and "Shouldn't it be that they started from

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humble beginnings and rose from the ranks?” are some of the questions that might grapple with us in this matter. Here we reiterate the point mentioned in the history part of this paper; the part that says that eunuchs were castrated in exchange for death penalty. It also said that they were castrated because of political crimes. There is logic as to why this assumption could be drawn. If what the person has done has been completely barbaric and criminal like stealing and killing, then the government might as well do off without them, but in this case, the government didn't kill the “ criminals.” Why? Because the crimes they have committed were political crimes. They were crimes against the ruling political view, Confucianism. In short, the soon-to-be-eunuchs were actually “ political analysts” in the sense that they were able to find flaws and possibly solutions to the flaws in the government. This is why instead of disposing them; the government was able to use them as “ political advisors” of some sort in the form of what would soon be called “ eunuchs.”

They already had this richness in them to begin with, the richness of knowledge of what to do, of what's wrong and how to correct that wrong. They were already powerful in that whatever the emperor couldn't solve, they already had a plan of action in their minds. Ranking was of no relevance. After all, there is no way to measure knowledge in its most raw form. What could be measured is the ratio of intelligence to age or IQ, but that isn't knowledge in itself.

More than this insight, we were able to learn a few things in relation with eunuchs. People can't have everything. This is a chip from the cliché: “ nobody's perfect.” People can't be rich, famous, intelligent, influential and

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still have no flaws. We just realized that one way or another, no matter how high up they are, there will always be one thing they lack. Well, in the case of eunuchs, the readers should know by now what the rich, intelligent and influential eunuchs lack. That's right. Facial hair... and more. Also, what goes up, must come down, is another learning from this topic about eunuchs. When there is too much yang, yin must sink in. Meaning, there must always be balance. Things will always return to their normal state. They will always try to equalize themselves out. A ball launched high into the sky, no matter the peak height, will always go back to the ground right after. The closer you are to something, the harder it is to see it. The emperors really had a hard time solving their problems. It was because they were in too deep that they forgot to look at the bigger picture and how to move the puzzle pieces in that picture. They needed an outsider's perspective to assess and evaluate the situation because they are the ones who are able to see clearly. It is important sometimes to look at the thing as a whole to see what is wrong with it from a different and easier-to-handle angle.