

Chinese Palace Eunuchs: Shadows of the Emperor.

By Christine Doran

Palace eunuchs have become one of the popular icons of Old China, along with the Great Wall, the terracotta warriors and the blood-thirsty dowager empress, Cixi. Most people have heard of the eunuch admiral Zheng He (1373-1433), whose achievements in exploration, leading seven naval expeditions of mammoth wooden ships, have recently become well-known because of the notoriety of Gavin Menzies' *1421: The Year China Discovered the World* and its similarly titled American edition (Menzies 2002; Menzies 2003). Perhaps some also know of Sima Qian (c.145-86 BCE), the so-called father of Chinese historiography, who was castrated by order of the emperor Han Wudi as punishment for disagreeing with him, but who went on to complete his famous and innovative *Records of the Grand Historian*. In spite of these well-known examples of outstanding achievement by Chinese eunuchs, in general assessments of the eunuch system, by both Western and Asian commentators, have been uniformly critical.

Western perceptions of Chinese eunuchs have long been intertwined with the concept of "Oriental Despotism," the idea that Eastern political systems were characteristically dictatorial, oppressive and corrupt. In this view, palace eunuchs were regarded as a sign of brutality and degeneracy. As Loshitzky and Meyuhav have commented, "eunuchs are perceived by the modern Western audience as grotesque rarities of the past that are associated with the 'otherness' of exotic cultures" (1992: 31). They are most often regarded as a "barbaric, archaic, and uncivilized phenomenon and therefore as an anachronism" (*ibid*: 34).

Despite evidence of the employment of eunuchs in China over a period of more than 3,000 years, during more than twenty-five dynasties, their reputation in Chinese history and literature has been no more positive. Throughout Chinese history the mythology surrounding eunuchs has been highly uncomplimentary. They have been seen as objects of pity and scorn, guilty of being greedy, temperamental and cowardly and, like women, incapable of discipline or self-restraint (Louie 1991: 176). Chinese historians have attributed to their baneful influence the decline and fall of dynasties, as well as innumerable examples of excess, decadence and corruption at court. In Chinese thinking on the subject, eunuchs have never been regarded as more than a necessary evil.

Perhaps surprisingly, the literature available in English on Chinese eunuchs is not well-developed, with the exception of a number of detailed specialist studies dealing with particular periods or issues (for example, Tsai 1996; Robinson 2001). The aim of this article is to provide a broad overview of the eunuch system as it developed in China from ancient times. It covers the different types of eunuchs; some notable customs relating to them; the genealogy of the eunuch system; their numbers in various dynasties; and the diverse roles they performed. For these sections, a noteworthy source is the work of a first-hand observer, George Carter Stent, an English customs officer who worked in China. Stent's sometimes colourful account of the operation of the eunuch system in the 1860s and 1870s has been mined by many subsequent historians.

Whereas most recent publications on Chinese eunuchs have approached the subject from the perspective of gender, this article focuses instead on an analysis of the eunuch system in terms of its role and significance in the Chinese political system. It is argued that the negative representation of eunuchs throughout Chinese historiography is attributable to the influence of Confucian state ideology, which elevated the emperor to the role of the Son of Heaven. By attributing dynastic degeneration and failure to eunuchs, it was possible for Chinese historians, most of whom were in official employ, to preserve intact the divine status of the emperor.

Typology

Basically there were two types of Chinese eunuchs: (1) those who had been subjected to forced castration; and (2) those who had chosen voluntary castration. It is impossible to say what proportion of eunuchs fell into each of these categories, but it is clear that the second type became more common later in Chinese history.

As far as anyone can know, the earliest examples of the creation of eunuchs arose out of warfare. Defeated enemies were castrated as punishment or for revenge, or as a result of the belief that castration made men more easily controllable. To castrate one's captives was a potent symbol of military supremacy and an enhancement of the prestige of the conqueror. There were occasions when the mass castration of a conquered tribe was tantamount to a policy of genocide (Mitamura 1970: 54). Other examples of castration occurred within Chinese society out of a desire to inflict punishment, revenge or humiliation on servants or less powerful rivals. A comparable form of punishment was also inflicted on women, who

endured the removal of part of their internal organs or a sharp blow to the abdomen intended to damage their reproductive capacity (*ibid*: 56).

There was a long-held belief that castration should not be inflicted upon members of one's own ethnic group; it was seen as appropriate only for "outsiders." However, this precept appears to have been honoured more in the breach than in the observance. Or, perhaps one might say instead that the meaning of "outsiders" was flexibly defined. As the boundaries of the Chinese empire waxed and waned over time, some regions outside of the central heartland became established as catchment areas of eunuch supply. Prominent examples included Tibet, Korea, Manchuria, Yunnan, Fujian, Guangdong and Guangxi. The last three southern provinces of China supplied large numbers of eunuchs during the Tang and Ming dynasties. One reason for this was the extreme poverty of these regions. Another was the belief that employing eunuchs from outlying regions minimised the possibility of treacherous alliances developing between palace servants and the surrounding populace. Zheng He was a good example of the eunuch as outsider: he came from the Yunnan region and as well as that was a member of the Muslim minority.

The second basic category of eunuchs chose castration voluntarily. Sima Qian, the distinguished eunuch historian, who himself had suffered forced castration for political reasons, stated in his major work, the *Shiji*, that the practice of voluntary castration was of ancient origin. However, this type of eunuch became more common after the institution had already been firmly established on the military basis outlined above. Many saw it as a path to gainful employment, and perhaps even political influence and the excitement and luxury of court life. Some chose castration as a way of avoiding the distractions occasioned by sexual desire. For some of these it was a step on a religious path. However, the last two reasons appear to have been rare in China. Most often it was a career choice, sometimes a desperate choice conditioned by extreme poverty and the grim lack of other prospects. During the Ming period self-castration was legally prohibited, punishable by death. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that it was often resorted to; ironically, indeed, this period witnessed the high point of the eunuch system and the creation of voluntary eunuchs. When eunuchs presented themselves at the palace seeking employment, excuses were accepted, such as a riding accident or childhood disease. Within the category of self-castration, there was a further distinction between those who willingly chose castration but left it to others to carry out the operation, and those who literally castrated themselves.

There was also a distinction between those who were made eunuchs as boys, and those who became eunuchs after sexual maturity. Some sources suggest that all eunuchs had high-pitched feminine voices, but in fact men castrated after reaching maturity retained the lower bass voice. According to Stent, all eunuchs were considered pure, but boys who were castrated when under ten years of age were regarded as especially pure and were highly prized, being employed by the palace ladies to perform intimate duties, on the nature of which Stent did not elaborate (Stent 1877: 173).

Totem and Taboo

Several interesting customs surrounded the practice of voluntary castration, especially when it became more organised and institutionalised during the Ming and Qing dynasties. The operations took place in a small shed just outside one of the palace gates in Beijing. When the operation had been completed, the newly-made eunuch was entitled to retain the severed body parts. In early Chinese history these had generally consisted of the penis, scrotum and testicles. However, because of the high rate of mortality associated with this radical form of the operation, the trend over time was for castration to be reduced in severity, so that in later centuries only the testicles were sometimes removed. Nevertheless, in the majority of cases all of the external genitalia were amputated using a knife with a curved blade.

The detached body parts were known as the *pao*, or “treasure.” This treasure was kept in a sealed container with alcohol as a preservative fluid. This was usually retained by the eunuch; but if he did not want to have it or forgot to collect it, the specialist who performed the operation, known as the “knifer,” would keep it. Whoever retained the *pao*, it was stored in a special way, always placed on a high shelf (Stent 1877: 26). This was believed to symbolise the high position that would be attained by the original owner, in part as a result of the operation itself. This custom underscored the connection in Chinese thinking between voluntary castration and worldly advancement. The name given to the severed parts, *pao* or treasure, also emphasised this association.

There were two reasons why the *pao* was carefully preserved. First, in order to obtain employment and promotion, eunuchs had to produce their *pao* for inspection by the chief eunuch. Secondly, the *pao* was considered necessary for burial with the eunuch’s body after his death. The Chinese believed that in the next world bodily integrity would be restored,

provided that all the parts were available; it was for this reason that Chinese facing execution preferred strangulation to beheading, fearing that the head might be lost. Eunuchs often went to great lengths to retain possession of their severed organs so that their bodies could be restored to wholeness in death (Brownell & Wasserstrom 2002: 27).

For both these reasons, a lively trade developed in the *pao*. The surgeons who performed the operation always held a number of *pao* that had not been collected by their owners. These were made available for sale or rent. There were cases when a eunuch either lost his *pao* or had it stolen; in addition, there always seem to have been a proportion of “eunuchs” at court who had never actually been castrated. For purposes of advancement through the ranks, it was necessary in these cases to buy or rent *pao* for examination by the head eunuch. Also, for burial purposes after the death of a eunuch, it was believed that a stranger’s *pao* would do just as well. Again, the grieving relatives were often willing to pay a high price to buy someone else’s *pao* to place in the grave.

Despite the wealth and influence often associated with the careers of eunuchs, the removal of the sexual organs was generally regarded as a serious loss and a personal deficiency. For this reason it was customary to avoid in everyday conversation any reference to the operation or the eunuch’s condition. Stent related the fact that in the presence of a eunuch Chinese avoided all reference to broken objects, such as a teapot with a broken spout. They even tried to avoid using the word for “cut,” since it would be a reminder of the ordeal that the eunuch had endured (Stent 1877: 33). To have made reference to such matters would have been considered an insult to the eunuch. The other side of the coin was that much latitude was customarily given to eunuchs in their everyday conduct:

A great freedom of speech and manner is allowed to eunuchs, on account of their deprivation; language and conduct that would not be tolerated in others being overlooked in them with the remark, “he is only a eunuch” (*ibid*).

Sima Qian, who was castrated after he disagreed with the emperor by defending a defeated military commander, has left us a harrowing account of his experience of emasculation and life as a eunuch in his letter to Ren An in 93 BCE. He writes that there is

no defilement so great as castration. One who has undergone that punishment nowhere counts as a man. This is not just a modern attitude; it has always been so...Even an ordinary fellow never fails to be offended when he has business with a eunuch – how much the more a gentleman of spirit...Even after a hundred generations

my shame will but be the more. This is what makes my bowels burn within me nine times a day, so that at home I sit in a daze and lost, abroad I know not where I am going. Whenever I think of this shame the sweat drenches the clothes on my back. I am fit only to be a slave guarding the women's apartments: better that I should hide away in the farthest depth of the mountains (Birch 1965:95-102).

Genealogy

The origins of the use of eunuchs in Chinese court life are not known for certain, the beginnings of the institution shrouded in the mists of Chinese prehistory. The practice has been traced back to at least the Zhou dynasty (1050-221 BCE). Eunuchs are mentioned in the *Zhouli*, an ancient text on law and manners dating from the beginning of the dynasty. In the eighth century BCE attacks by western nomads forced the Zhou rulers, who themselves had originated in north-west China, to shift their capital to the east, from Xian to Luoyang, thus beginning what is known as the Eastern Zhou period. During this period there are records of the employment of eunuchs by local warlords. The eunuchs of this time engaged in politics and there were cases of eunuchs who either killed or were responsible for the deaths of their rulers and employers.

There have been some reports of evidence of even earlier adoption of the practice (for example, Mitamura 1970: 28; Anderson 1990: 21). During the era of the Shang dynasty, about 1,200 years BCE, pictographs were etched onto bones, asking the ancestral gods whether it would be appropriate to castrate an enemy captive. The victorious petitioner was Wu Ding, the ruler of Shang, and the vanquished was one of the Qiang people, ancestors of the present-day Tibetans. The Shang dynasty (c.1500-1050 BCE) was a theocracy in which the kings played the role of agents of the gods, whose revelations were sought by means of oracle bones. The oracle bone inscriptions of the Shang dynasty are the oldest available written evidence of Chinese history and use of the Chinese script. It appears that the answer the gods gave by means of the oracle bones was positive. Some of the Qiang captives were made eunuchs to serve at the court of the king, and some became sacrificial victims in a ceremony offering prisoners of war to the gods in thanks for martial victory. The oracle bones were unearthed among the ruins of Wu Ding's capital at Yinxu. This important archaeological discovery suggests that castration was used as a form of punishment of defeated enemies as long ago as 3,200 years BP (Before the Present).

Putting the Chinese institution of eunuchism into a broader historical context, historians have traced the practice back to ancient Assyria, and in particular to the queen, Semiramis, who ruled in the ninth century BCE and was the founder of Babylon. Herodotus, the Greek historian writing in the fifth century BCE, identified the use of eunuchs as a Persian (Iranian) custom, explaining that the Persians prized their loyalty and subservience. The Greeks themselves took an active part in an international market in eunuchs, performing the operation and then selling the eunuchs on, at a great profit, in established market places in Ephesus and Sardis in present-day Turkey. By the beginning of the Roman empire, the practice of employing and having sexual relations with eunuchs was widespread among the wealthy ruling classes of the Mediterranean.

Numbers and Roles

Estimates of the extent of eunuch employment at the Chinese royal courts indicate that the numbers ranged between 3,000 and 70,000 at various times during China's long dynastic history. The system reached a peak during the later Ming dynasty (1368-1644), when there were an estimated 70,000 eunuchs working at the capital in Beijing and a total of about 100,000 including the provinces (Hucker 1961: 56). This was the era of such notoriously powerful eunuchs as Wang Zhen in the 1440s, Wang Zhi in the 1470s, Liu Jin in the early 1500s and Wei Zhongxian in the 1620s (Tsai 1996: 7). One in particular, Liu Jin, accumulated a vast fortune with masses of gold, silver, precious gems and jewellery. The rise of eunuch power during the Ming dynasty fostered serious political instability. In his in-depth study of the widespread rebellion in 1510, Robinson shows how political rivalry among palace eunuchs in the capital created the conditions leading to a massive revolt (Robinson 2001: 20).

During the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), China's last dynasty, the number of eunuchs declined considerably from its high point under the Ming. During the reign of the emperor Kangxi (r.1661-1772) there were 400-500 eunuchs. However, the numbers grew again under subsequent Qing emperors. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, during the Tongzhi (r.1862-1874) and Guangxu (r.1875-1908) eras, for example, there were approximately 2,000 eunuchs employed at court (Stent 1877: 165).

The *coup de grace* of the eunuch system came in November 1924. Following the fall of the Qing dynasty as a result of the revolution in 1912, the last emperor, Xuantong (r.1908-1911),

was allowed to continue in residence at the Zijin palace in the Forbidden City, along with a staff of eunuchs. In 1924 there was a military coup led by the warlord General Feng Yuxiang and the deposed emperor was forced to leave the palace. The remaining staff of eunuchs who vacated the palace on that historic day numbered 470. The last Chinese eunuch, Sun Yaoting, died in 1996 at the age of 93; he had been castrated in 1911, at the age of 8, just months before the collapse of the Qing dynasty (*New York Times*, 20 December 1996).

One unusual feature of the system of eunuchs in China, compared to other countries where the practice was widely adopted, was that in China, at least during the Qing dynasty, the right to employ eunuchs was strictly limited to the imperial family and the families of certain high-ranking hereditary princes whose predecessors had assisted in the establishment of the dynasty. As Stent put it, “eunuchs, to all intents and purposes, are, in China, an appanage of royalty only” (1877: 148). There were rules laying down how many eunuchs members of the royal family were entitled to keep. The emperor was permitted to have 3,000 eunuchs; his sons and daughters could have 30 each; his grandsons could employ ten; and so on. The hereditary princes were entitled to have 20. This was in the nature of a sumptuary law, which indicated both the prestige and the relative social standing of the holders of eunuchs. Those entitled to employ eunuchs were also compelled to do so, or they were liable to be reported to the emperor and to lose rank for failing to maintain the dignity of their station.

The duties undertaken by the eunuchs in the palace were wide-ranging. Outdoor employments included those of water-carriers, watchmen, chair-bearers and gardeners. Their indoor work could include that of cooks and chamber, parlour and scullery maids. Some acted as priests ministering to the court ladies, and some were responsible for offering theatrical performances and court entertainment. As Stent commented, “in short, they do everything in the palace” (1877: 26). During the Qing dynasty the work of the eunuch labour force was divided into forty-eight official departments, covering the gardens, courtyards, kitchens, armoury, furniture, and so on (*ibid*: 172). The most prestigious of the eunuch agencies was the Directorate of Ceremonial, whose director was the chief superintendent of the palace staff. At times in Chinese history eunuchs also played significant military roles. During the Jin dynasty (1115-1234), for instance, a eunuch, Tong Guan, had command of 800,000 troops of the Chinese army. During the Ming dynasty, only eunuchs were permitted to produce firearms (Mitamura 1970: 108).

Apart from all of these relatively menial tasks, undoubtedly the most well-known duties of the eunuchs were guarding the royal harem and attending upon the emperor's many wives and concubines, who could number in the hundreds or even thousands depending on the reigning emperor. Eunuchs suited the needs of a polygamous society in which a powerful male ruler required safe and reliable protectors for both his women and himself. The ambiguous gender category that the eunuchs occupied made it possible for them to cross freely between the worlds of men and women. There is considerable evidence of sexual relations between eunuchs and members of the harem or other court ladies. From the point of view of the women, eunuch attendants could offer sexual gratification without the threat of pregnancy, an important consideration in an era lacking reliable contraception. It has even been suggested that in some cases ruling emperors and other court authorities were well aware that such sexual relationships developed. Their first priority was to ensure that any offspring were unquestionably of the emperor's line of descent, rather than to control any sexual dalliance that might occur within the seraglio (Tougher 2002). Perhaps surprisingly, David Hester has argued forcefully that "eunuchs were universally characterized by the frequency, ease of and adeptness with which they performed sex acts with both men and women" (Hester 2005: 18). As well as engaging in sex in the seraglio, some Chinese eunuchs married, adopted children and themselves kept concubines (Jay 1993: 459-478).

Significance in the Chinese Political System

In China the monarch, known as the emperor, was believed to have a close relationship with divinity, or with heaven (*tian*). To the Chinese *tian* was neither a place nor the equivalent of a god as creator of the universe; instead *tian* referred to moral forces which determine how the universe operates. Rulers were expected to act in harmony with these universal forces; if they failed to do so, it would be their downfall. Followers of Confucianism, the official state ideology, called the emperor the Son of Heaven, emphasising his special relationship to the powers of the universe. The emperor was seen as the special agent of heaven on earth, entrusted with the responsibility of carrying out certain rites and ceremonies to harmonise earthly matters with those of heaven, as well as ruling justly. As mediator between heaven and earth, the role of the emperor was to maintain the harmony, the cosmic balance, that was considered essential to ensure the well-being of humankind. From the earliest times Confucianism had stressed that good rulers would prosper while evil ones would be punished. These ideas were summed up in the concept of the Mandate of Heaven. Sima Qian's influential histories, with their moral vision of historical processes, contributed a great deal to

the entrenchment of this doctrine. As the founder of an historiographical tradition – comparable to the role of Herodotus in Western historiography – his influence continued for centuries.

Because of the close link between the emperor and divinity in his role as the agent of heaven on earth, a wide gulf separated the emperor from his subjects. As Hegel memorably put it, in China only the one, the emperor, was a free subject; everyone else was under his command and “all are equal before the emperor – that is, all are alike degraded” (Hegel 1952: 216). The gulf between emperor and subject, the Chinese believed, was as wide as that between heaven and humankind. As a being linked to the divine, it was accepted that the emperor could never reveal his true self, his personality as an ordinary human being, to those he ruled. In the eyes of the people, an aura of great mystery always surrounded the being of the emperor. In one of his short stories, Franz Kafka eloquently highlighted this mysterious aspect of the authority of the emperor in the Chinese political system. The people revered the emperor, or rather the position of the emperor, despite – or perhaps because of – not knowing anything about the human individual who currently occupied the Dragon Throne:

we think only about the Emperor. But not about the present one; or rather we would think about the present one if we knew who he was or knew anything definite about him. True – and it is the sole curiosity that fills us – we are always trying to get information on this subject, but, strange as it may sound, it is almost impossible to discover anything...One hears a great many things, true, but can gather nothing definite (Kafka 1946: 163-164).

The Greek historian Herodotus pointed out how the institution of eunuchs could help to preserve the required distance between ruler and ruled, and thus to maintain an aura of sanctity around the figure of the monarch (Mitamura 1970: 49).

Consequently, in order to preserve the mystery of absolutism, the human side of the emperor was shown only behind closed doors. It would have been difficult to allow ordinary common people into the inner sanctum of the emperor’s domestic life. To have shared his private life with a commoner, even as a servant, would have entailed for the emperor a loss of mystery, prestige and thus control. So instead eunuchs were employed in domestic roles. Drawn from remote regions and cut off from ordinary family life, eunuchs were permitted to share the private life of the emperor. They provided him with human contact, and kept his private affairs confidential. They were able to define and defend a sacred space around the emperor.

Eunuchs also served to provide a connection between the emperor's exalted space and the outside everyday world, a conduit for information about his subjects.

Notwithstanding the Confucian state ideology centred on the Son of Heaven and Mandate of Heaven, and *pace* Hegel, the reality of the structure of Chinese imperial government was that it was composite rather than monolithic. In addition to the emperor himself, the main centres of power in the inner court included, but were not limited to: the emperor's favourite consort and members of her family; members of the clan of the emperor's mother, the empress dowager; the emperor's designated heir and his supporters; military leaders; scholar officials who were close advisors of the emperor; and the palace eunuchs, who were often divided into several factions in alliance with other contenders. The relative power of these competing groups varied in different periods of China's history. The real power of the emperor, whether he ruled or merely reigned, depended on many factors, including his own personal weaknesses or incompetence. Nevertheless, whatever the actual control exerted by a particular emperor, the position of emperor remained, in Confucian theory, the source of all authority and prestige. This was one of the main reasons why Chinese historians have tended to put the blame for dynastic decline and fall not upon emperors but on other political players, notably, in many cases, the palace eunuchs. Castigating eunuchs became a useful way of absolving emperors.

There was a strong current running through virtually all of Chinese historiography of condemnation of the role of eunuchs at court. Many of the most eminent Chinese historians, excluding Sima Qian for obvious reasons, were intensely critical of eunuchs. Just to cite a few outstanding examples, there was Cai Yong (132-192) of the Eastern Han dynasty; Quyang Xiu (1007-1072) of the Song dynasty; and Wang Shizhen, Gu Yanwu and Huang Zongxi during the Ming dynasty. Indeed such scholar officials directly attributed the fall of the Qin, Han, Tang and Ming dynasties to the excesses of eunuchs. Virtually never did they make the point that if eunuchs sometimes acquired excessive power, it was the emperor who allowed this to happen, since eunuchs, like everyone else, were dependent upon his favour. The official histories, composed mainly by historians appointed as state functionaries, represented eunuchs as irredeemably contemptible and corrupt. "Everyone has known for thousands of years that eunuchs are like poison and wild beasts," wrote Huang Zongxi.

Within palace politics, eunuchs were often at loggerheads with the Confucian literati, who in turn despised them and resented their influence. One notable example of this was court politics during the reign of Zhu Di, the emperor who initiated the remarkable voyages of Zheng He. The Confucian scholar officials at court did not support Zhu Di's outward-looking, expansionist policies, whereas the eunuchs as a faction backed the emperor's approach. When a young new emperor, Yingzong, came to the Dragon Throne after Zhu Di's death, these policies were overturned and many of the records of the voyages destroyed by court officials. But later when Yingzong also developed expansionist ambitions in Mongolia, the scholar officials again opposed him and blamed his subsequent disastrous military defeats on the pernicious influence of eunuchs, in particular the eunuch commander, Wang Zhen (Mote 1974). The literati officials were generally able to take advantage of their position as record-keepers and chroniclers to have the last word in such palace conflicts.

This is not to deny that there were times when eunuchs were able to amass significant power in court politics. But the centuries-long refrain of Chinese historians concerning the iniquity of palace eunuchs went well beyond this. For the scholar-official writers of the traditional histories, eunuchs were convenient scapegoats who could be blamed for the problems of Chinese government. In this way they could explain political instability without jeopardising the divine aura surrounding the position of emperor, or offending the current incumbent. Ironically, it was the relative political weakness of eunuchs as a group that left them vulnerable to defamation in the traditional historiography. Often of humble origins, frequently brought to the capital from marginalised regions, working their way up from dire poverty, and usually without offspring to protest against the slanders of historians, even those eunuchs who rose to power through the ranks were relatively easy targets for the official historians. To the injury of castration, state-sponsored historiography added insult, shielding the brilliance of the emperor and the imperial system by casting the palace eunuchs always as their abject shadows.

ILLUSTRATIONS



George Carter Stent



A Chinese Eunuch

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