

## **EUNUCHISM OF IMPERIAL CHINA FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF WORLD HISTORY**

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**ABSTRACT:** Eunuchism is socially constructed, the corporeal materializing of a dominant discourse that is written onto and into the body. The original justification for eunuchism is offered by religion. Another earlier association with eunuchism is slave trade. Lacking in advanced religion and slavery, imperial China witnessed palace eunuch-making as the main function of castration. As a rule, orthodox Chinese ideological abettors singled out the eunuchs as the scapegoats for the derailment of the politics of the sage-kings and the imperial system, reflecting the tension between two groups of court officials, the bearded and eunuchs in imperial China. Compared with the Confucian-trained civil service, the genderless eunuch was conferred the privilege of being able to occupy simultaneously the public world of male politics and the private world of female power, the battleground of the empire. Different from the alien eunuchs in Roman or Islamic court system, homegrown eunuchs in China could develop some nepotistic attitudes towards their relatives, especially when they were permitted to adopt sons, and established their own family. Therefore, potentially and gradually in reality, Chinese eunuchs would gain the capacity to challenge or subvert sovereign, while, at the same time, they had much less to lose in the risks involved in the power rivalry with the Confucian-trained officials.

**KEY WORDS:** eunuchism; castration; scapegoat; herem; feminization

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Eunuchism is the product of the procedure of castration. All ancient descriptions of the castration of priests of eastern Mediterranean goddesses specify that it was done with a flint knife, clearly indicating a Stone Age origin for the ritual. The geography and chronology of the early distribution of eunuchs overlap, to a remarkable degree, with the pattern of animal domestication and mounted conquest, radiating outward from an area bounded by India to the east, the Mediterranean to the west, and the Persian Gulf to the south. The cult of the goddess first associated with eunuchs, Innin/Inanna/Ishtar, originated in, and afterwards centered upon, Uruk, the largest city in Sumer and the world's first urban society. The range of dates for the probable origin of human castration in fact coincides almost exactly with the early Uruk period (variously dated between 4500 and 3750 B.C.E.), when writing also apparently originated in Uruk. Symbolic marks were impressed in wet clay by a sharp stylus, just as the symbolic mark of castration could be made in the wet clay of human flesh. Eunuchism is, in an obvious literal sense, 'socially constructed', the corporeal materializing of a dominant discourse that is written onto and into the body.

It is no coincidence that religion serves as the original justification for eunuchism. In the religious text, god-man relationship is inevitably encoded in gendered language. Purity, the sacred moral imposed upon the followers of religion, represents a rejection of corporeal desire and experience; while in the spiritual procreation inherent in any religion, god is imagined as the potent male who actively sows his seed in the receptive, feminized human soul. Hence a tension between a rejection of sexuality in a social sense and the reinscription of gender categories on a cosmic level. It is by means of this permeability of gender categories that the language of human religious experience can be fashioned. Therefore, a male follower must navigate a double transformation in order to develop a feminized and passive relationship to the divine, while still safeguarding his male identity. In other words, he must imagine his soul as a receptive and passive virgin impregnated by god's divine seed, while, at the same time, shedding his female corporeal aspect. Obviously, the gender indeterminacy of the eunuch, his status as 'neither male nor female', represents an alternative strategy for this crisis of embodiment. Castration generates an ambivalent being, desexed, yet spiritually sexual, non-reproductive, yet associated with fertility cults. Typical of such ambivalence is the Hindu sects associated with Vaishnavism. Vaishnavism held that only the Godhead, Krishna, was truly male, and every other creature in the world was female and subject to the pleasure of Krishna. Many made themselves eunuchs, and all were supposed to permit the sexual act on their person (playing the part of women) as an act of devotion. Similarly, the male members of the hijra sect cross-dress as women, live as women, and are often castrated. Symbolically, every circumcised Jewish man is, as it were, a sacred castrate. It is to a world of castrated Christians, that Nietzsche offered his vision of the Superman, the Anti-Christ, the High Priest of Power.

Another earlier association with castration is slavery. Many slaves were castrated since a castrated slave was more expensive, partly because it was believed they were easier to control; and there was no particular reason for the males not to be castrated unless there were other tasks, such as fighting in the arena, which gave non-castrated males more value. Although a high death rate was involved with the procedure, the added profit was sufficient to make castration a regular feature of the slave trade. Castration creates a human equivalent of the drones in social insects, a category of worker that does not breed, but work.

In imperial China, lacking in advanced (or formal) religion and slavery, castration was done mainly for palace eunuch-making, except for as a judicial or extrajudicial punishment. The Chinese ideogram for castration meant, literally, 'palace punishment'. Like other punishments—beheading; amputation or mutilation of the leg, nose, or ear; piercing of an eye; tattooing or branding of the face—castration both marked and altered the criminal body. Apparently, the logic that combines social marking with biological disempowerment places eunuchs in humiliation. Sima Qian, the noted historian and so-called 'father of Chinese Historians', once confessed that he was motivated by the humiliation of such penalty imposed upon himself to compile his famous *Shiji*, The Complete History of China.

The study of Chinese eunuchs has been dominated by a negative image of these men, reflecting the 'eunuchophobic' point of view found in almost all the Chinese writers. According to Physiognomy, which claims to interpret the traits of the soul from physical characteristics, the bodily corruption engendered by castration involved the soul's corruption. As a result of losing their virility, eunuchs lost all the qualities which made the masculine character: temperance, courage, fidelity, sense of justice, moral sense, altruism. In fact, since eunuchs are androgynous, their traits are close to the characteristics assigned to women in a male-dominant society; feminine aspects mean, in the case of eunuchs, vice and weakness.

Another possible explanation can also be derived from physiognomy, though coming to adverse conclusion. The handsome eunuch, whose physical beauty reflects the beauty of his soul, is a common subject in writings from the early Byzantine period. The vision of the luminous beauty of eunuchs, associated with purity and the soul's beauty, finds an important development in relation to angels, resulting in eunuchophilia. Eunuchs and angels are both royal messengers and they both introduce dignitaries to the sovereign. A dream-interpreting work, dated from the ninth to the eleventh centuries, indicates that if one dreams of a gracious and tall eunuch, the eunuch should be considered an angel, because a eunuch resembles an angel in being pure and does not feel carnal desire (Drexel 1925:10).

However, the lack of religious perspective in orthodox Chinese ideological abettors led to a failure in giving eunuchism a more balanced treatment. Most of the stories about Chinese eunuchs come from the twenty-four standard Chinese Dynastic Histories, which were long a monopoly of Confucian historiographers. These historical literati subjected their monopolistic writings to promote the politics of the sage-kings and the imperial system. And, if the system derailed, they felt that they were responsible for correcting it. Unfortunately, cruel political realities often defeated such idealism, and ultimately, by a special mechanism of imputation, they attributed all evils to the despised and hateful eunuchs, when in fact the cause of the ills of their society was the very imperial system that the Chinese intelligentsia gleefully served. Consequently, Chinese historians rarely openly and persistently refuted the autocratic political system and the tyranny generated by it. Instead, they singled out the eunuchs as the scapegoats and refused to treat the group of courtiers as a social and political complex, refused to present Chinese eunuchism in the context of imperial despotism, court politics, and the eunuch institutions the emperor created and which received their power from him. Attacks on eunuchism, paradoxically, do not result in the questioning of the system or the context, instead the excusing of it.

By Confucius' time (551-479 BC), a decidedly negative image of the eunuchs had already been established in Chinese society. Confucius was said to have been so irked by the evil example of a prominent eunuch named Yong Qu of the state of Wei that, after staying for only a month, he decided not to serve the duke of Wei. Confucius' hatred toward eunuchism prelude and symbolized the tension between two groups of court officials, the bearded and eunuchs in imperial China. As a political balance strategy, the emperor often utilized eunuchs to undercut the Confucian-trained civil service, in other words, eunuchs were often employed as a 'lubricant' to neutralize over-ambitious aristocrats. The strategy is manifested in the fact that Emperor Xuande of the Ming dynasty established a classroom known as *Neishutang*, or Inner Court School, and appointed four scholars from the *Hanlin Academy* to teach some 200 to 300 young eunuchs whose average age was about ten (Zhang Tingyu. 1974: vol.16, 245). As the eunuchs were becoming literate, they became a dominant group to be reckoned with, and were pervasively engaged in espionage and internal security, military and foreign affairs, judiciary review, tax and tribute collection, the operation of imperial monopolies, and so on. They acted as the trusted minions of the throne, and by extension, the state.

It has to be mentioned that, except for during the Qing dynasty, the last of China's imperial dynasties, when severe restrictions was imposed upon eunuchs, the bearded was not the match for eunuch in the power rivalry. The despotic monarchy was, essentially, a family affair. This does not mean that this family-orientated system was non-political; the royal family, self-contained within the inner domestic quarters of a palace, the 'harem', was in fact the heart of political decision-making. It is the royal harem that became the battleground of the empire, where great men rose and fall, manipulated, however, by women and eunuchs. A typical example is the last Emperor of Chen dynasty (582-9), during the Northern and Southern Dynasties, who lived in seclusion in his harem and seldom received his officials. He authorized his chief eunuchs Cai Tuoer and Li Shanchang to deliberate on state documents. Frequently, when he discussed state affairs with eunuchs Cai and Li and gave the imperial sanctions, his favorite concubine Zhang was sitting on his lap (Yao Shilian 1980: vol.7, 132). While the idea of 'meddling women' as well as 'meddling eunuchs' is often put forward as a genuine reason for the decline of the empire, only the genderless eunuch was conferred the privilege of being able to occupy simultaneously the public world of male politics and the private world of female power and became the vital connection that the Chinese monarch could utilize in communicating with his womenfolk who were valuable sources of information on court intrigue and power struggles. Eunuch, once feminized as being emotional, wily, subservient, luxurious, and emasculated, embodies simultaneously all the various threads in the fabric of Chinese imperial political discourse. In China, palace eunuchs were called *huanguan*, which was a recognized official title during the Shang dynasty (1765-1223 BC), appearing on the Shang oracle bones. Since then, both the Chinese words *huan* and *guan* mean officials or officialdom. This derivation encapsulates the essential feminization of imperial apparatus.

The palace eunuchism is not peculiar to Chinese monarchism. The role of the eunuch in the late Roman (c. fourth to sixth centuries AD) court system, in which eunuchs could rise to the heady political and social heights—not the judicial height, of course—offered by the post of grand chamberlain, has been analyzed in a classical article by Keith Hopkins, seeking an answer as to

why eunuchs became so valued an instrument of the late Roman emperors. Part of the answer for Hopkins (1978: 172-96) was the outsider element of eunuchs; the royal decree that they should be, as they were, imported from non-Roman territory made them outsiders in Roman society, forcing them into a dependent mutually-vital relationship with their master the emperor. The factor of the court eunuch as an ethnic outsider is also an essential constant in the case of many Islamic countries. According to Ayalon (1979:69), “the overwhelming majority of the eunuchs...had been brought over from outside the borders of the Muslim lands.”

In a society bound and made meaningful by kinship relationships, the eunuch epitomizes the anti-kin. Isolated from the outside society, and constrained in the Inner Court, an alien castrate cannot mold a new kinship identity for himself within the society of his masters. Castration does not simply deprive castrates of their capacity of biological reproduction; it also deprives them of access to the social rewards of kinship. Such mechanism ensures that the eunuch group remains permanently alienated: defamilied, depersonalized, desexed, decivilized. In a sum, castration disempowers its victim, stopping their genetic line, and thereby ensuring that the future belongs to someone else. The eunuch substitutes chosen affiliations for that unchosen spiderweb of kinship into which we are thrust at birth and into which in turn we thrust our own helpless squalling offspring. Such eunuchs owe no allegiance to their parents and siblings or their offspring; they depend upon, and serve, an assigned master. Therefore, such arrangement of alien eunuch denied the opportunity for eunuch to subvert his master, while investing him with derivative power.

However, in Byzantium, especially in China, where homegrown eunuchs seem to have become the norm, eunuchs have very strong local roots. Ayalon (1979: 70) remarks, “nepotistic attitudes of eunuchs towards their relatives were quite common in Byzantium and China”, while for the eunuch within the Islamic and Roman system “there was nothing to divert his exclusive devotion from his patron”. Earlier in 135, during the Eastern Han dynasty, the eunuchs were authorized to adopt sons (Fan Ye et al. 1979: vol.78, 2518), thereby establishing their own family within the Inner Court, the base for the collection of their power as well as wealth. Potentially and gradually in reality, the eunuchs would gain the capacity to parallel, challenge or rival sovereign, like the chief eunuch Zhang Rang hijacking the teenaged Emperor Shao at the end of the Eastern Han dynasty, Gao Lishi being invested as the Duke of Qi and literally became the *de facto* ruler of the Tang court during the decade of 745-55, like Wang Zhen manipulating power in the 1440s, Wang Zhi making decisions in the name of emperor in the 1470s, Liu Jin appointing all-level officials in the early 1500s, and Wei Zhongxian controlling imperial apparatus near the end of the Ming dynasty. Symbolically or allegorically, the strong man named Cao Cao who actually ended the Eastern Han dynasty, was an adopted grandson of a court eunuch.

However, the family formed by adoption is not equivalent to the genuine family, valued by the Confucian-trained officials. Having been castrated, the eunuch was forced to reject a culturally inherited and enforced understanding of time. As anthropologists since E.R. Leach and Claude Levi-Strauss have argued, the ancient concept of cyclical temporality, or the mundane order of circular agricultural time, reduces the unique to the representative; this individual moment, this momentary individual, becomes one of the innumerable interchangeable parts in a fixed and unchanging order; time does not pass, its evanescence is irrelevant. By contrast, the moment of castration deliberately differentiates and alienates a eunuch from his progenitors in his fathering

no descendants. By refusing to link a past generation to a future one, by insisting on the sovereign agency of his own present instant, the castrate breaks the circle of generations and the circle of time. He ends a world. Compared with the Confucian officials, eunuchs have much less to lose in the risks involved in the power struggles. And because there were so many court intrigues and bloody coup d'états, a handful of daring eunuchs, by siding with the winners, could receive rewards and were subsequently entrusted with more power. A case in point was also Gao Lishi, who in 713 helped Emperor Ming Huang get rid of his great aunt, the Grand Princess Taiping, effectively removing a real threat to Ming Huang's regime. The death of the Grand Princess signaled not only the end of half a century of women's domination of the Tang court, but also the rise of the eunuch powers. Moreover, his intimacy with the monarch, and his access to the harem mean that he is more qualified to act as the ender of the empire, such as Zhao Gao murdering the Second Emperor Hu-hai of Qing dynasty during the early autumn of 206 BC.

Expostulating on the perverseness of these un-gendered creatures was a regular feature of travel writing, dramas, and romantic or erotic novels by western authors of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, therefore creating a popular eunuch-harem fantasy. In fact, the influence of the eunuchs was so pervasive that one might even call every imperial government a government of half-men. Such a designation of imperial China will assuredly irritate male chauvinist Chinese scholars. But, when the peasant rebels, led by Li Zicheng, entered the Forbidden City through its back door during the late spring of 1644, and after almost all of the officials had fled their posts, it was the eunuch commandant Wang Chengen who stayed with the last Ming Emperor Chongzhen, helping His Majesty to commit suicide in the Coal Hill. Afterwards, the eunuch Wang took his own life.

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