

Main | Other Chinese Web Sites

Chinese Cultural Studies:

The Death of the Last Emperor's Last Eunuch, 1996

New York Times, December 20, 1996

BY. SETH, FAISON

SHANGHAI, Dec. 19 - Over the centuries, the most secretive and grotesque corner of China's extensive imperial court belonged to the fraternity of special guardians, the eunuchs, whose high voices, and soft demeanors often cloaked the viciousness of their back alley politicking and custody of the Forbidden City's magnificent exotica.

When the last emperor's last eunuch died this week he closed the final page in a bizarre chapter of Chinese imperial history, even though the last dynasty and its ancient system of governing were overthrown in 1911.

The eunuch Sun Yaoting was just shy of 94 years old when he died in his home in a Beijing temple on Tuesday evening.

Like the thousands who preceded him through Chinese history, Mr. Sun was emasculated as a young boy, in a crude and risky operation that was arranged by his family, who were looking for a way out of poverty and into the private domain of China's highest rulers.

Aside from the emperor, eunuchs were generally the only men trusted to enter the inner courtyards of the palace, where the women of the imperial family and harem lived. Other men, including officials, military guards and even the emperor's male relatives, were often required to leave the palace grounds at night.

Using only hot chill sauce as a local anesthetic, the people who performed this fateful operation typically did so in one swoop, using a small, curved knife. In exchange for a lifetime of humiliation marked by incontinence and sexual frustration, a few eunuchs were able to achieve tremendous influence and wealth.

Only months after Mr. Sun's family forced him through the ordeal in 1911, the Manchu Dynasty, which had ruled China since the early 1660's was overthrown bringing an end to this system.

Yet Mr. Sun continued to serve Pu-Yi, the puppet monarch depicted in the film "The Last Emperor", during the ensuing decade, when the former emperor was allowed to continue to live in the Forbidden City, occasionally playing tennis in its spacious courtyards.

Mr. Sun's biographer, Jia Yinghua, said that the last eunuch was memorialized in a traditional ceremony at the Guanghua Temple in Beijing, where his family laid a gold cloth across his face put rings on his fingers, and shrouded him in white silk embroidered with the dragon and phoenix emblems of China's imperial tradition.

"He was a man of rare intelligence", Mr. Jia told Reuters, recounting how Mr. Sun had revisited the Forbidden City in 1993 for the first time in more than 70 years and had pointed out inaccuracies in the historical displays. '

In one corner of the outer square of the palace, a granite block still marks the spot where some of Mr. Sun's fellow eunuchs were said to have lost their "three precious," as the organs were called in court parlance of the day. Traditionally, a eunuch preserved his genitals in a jar to insure that they would eventually be buried with him, in the belief that this would guarantee his reincarnation as a "full" man.

Yet Mr. Sun was not so fortunate. During the Cultural Revolution, a decade of intense political and social upheaval that began in 1966 - coincidentally the year that the former Emperor Pu Yi died - Mr. Sun's family destroyed his jar. They were afraid of being punished by marauding Red Guards if such a symbol of China's feudal past were discovered.

"He used to joke about it," said Mr. Jia, who recorded Mr. Sun's story in a book titled, "The Secrets of the Last Eunuch."''

"He said, 'When I die I will come back as a cat or a dog'"

Mr. Sun passed his later years tending Beijing's temples, and Mr. Jia said that the eunuch's adopted son and grandson would now take his remains to a home village, near the northern city of Tianjin, for further ceremonies before having them cremated in Beijing. . '

The practice of using castrated men as guardians of the emperor's inner court began more than 2,000 years ago.

According to Jonathan D. Spence, a China historian at Yale University, the practice reached its zenith during the reign of Emperor Wanli in the late 1500's during the Ming Dynasty, when the ruler authorized the hiring of a large number of eunuchs and withdrew himself from the day-to-day running of

the court.

"Since the emperor would not come out from the inner recesses of the Forbidden City - an area closed to all save the Imperial family and their personal attendants," Mr. Spence wrote in his book "The Search for Modern China," "the eunuchs became crucial intermediaries between the outer bureaucratic world and the inner Imperial one.

"Any senior official with business that demanded the emperor's attention had to persuade a eunuch to carry the message for him; the eunuchs, naturally enough, asked for fees in return for such service, and soon the more powerful ones were flattered and bribed by ambitious officials.

A ruling principle of Chinese history emerged: whenever the authority of an emperor receded, so the influence of eunuchs grew: as a court yielded to the web of corruption, a hallmark of a declining dynasty ripe to be overthrown.

A generation before Mr. Sun was born, Li Lianyang accumulated vast influence as the favorite eunuch of the Empress Dowager Cixi, one of the greatest purveyors of Imperial politics. She climbed from a concubine third-grade to become ruler of China for 40 years in the 19th century, and relentlessly played off her courtiers against one another.

Li headed an Imperial staff of thousands of cooks, gardeners, laundrymen, cleaners, painters and other eunuchs, who were classified in a complex hierarchy of 48 separate grades.

"Each eunuch was apprenticed to a master," wrote Marina Warner in "The Dragon Empress," a biography of Empress Dowager Cixi, "and his eventual success or promotion depended on the favor in which his master was held. On his master's death, a young eunuch might be forgotten in the sluices until the day he himself died, but if he was apprenticed to the chief eunuch he might rapidly acquire influence."

Though eunuchs were generally illiterate, some, like Li Lianying, could read enough of the stylized court language to wield influence over officials bearing documents.

Mr. Jia, the biographer, said China's last eunuch had never stopped lamenting the fall of the Imperial system he had aspired to serve.

"That was the regret of his whole life," Mr. Jia said.